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Teacher Work Sample

Standard VII – Reflection & Self Evaluation

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### Abstract

During the course of student teacher Jessica Haight's practicum at Xavier High School, she reflects on the many ways her instructional methods and performance as a teacher has shaped and ultimately affected the learning process of her students. Through an exploration of instructional activities centered on T.H. White's novel, *The Once & Future King*, Ms. Haight is able to determine which activities led students toward effective learning; likewise, the experience qualifies Ms. Haight to reflect on barriers to the learning process, and how/if she was able to overcome them for the purposes of student achievement. In addition, Ms. Haight discusses the relation of state- and district-aligned learning goals to her own professional knowledge, skills, and disposition, and any implications on her future teaching and learning development that it poses.

## Teacher Work Sample

## Standard VII: Reflection &amp; Self Evaluation

***Instruction***

The young woman surveys Master Teacher's Michelle Wehrman-Flores' Period 1 class from her borrowed "student teacher desk" in the back of the room. Mrs. Flores is not there; rather, a prim-looking, bespectacled woman stands ineffectively at the front of the room, awkwardly reading from a list of pre-prepared directions. Mrs. Flores' sophomores have started a speech unit, and should be dutifully preparing for the latest in a string of related assignments; instead, they talk idly amongst themselves, hardly interested in whatever orders from above Mrs. Flores' substitute might have for them.

"They usually aren't this disruptive," the substitute remarks later to the young woman. Nodding politely, Ms. Haight smiles to herself; this class hardly ever acted up while she was in charge. Having segued control back to Mrs. Flores and/or any teachers who may be filling in for her on a given day, Ms. Haight feels a small surge of satisfaction in the knowledge that her students recognize her as more of an authority figure than the latest substitute du jour. She has learned how to command a classroom presence; how to merge textbook know-how with the intricacies of effective instruction and assessment; has experimented with her own instructional methods and lived to tell the tale. In the ensuing sections, she will expound on these facets of her student teaching experience, drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of her methods, and what she takes out of her three-month practicum.

### *Interpretation of student learning*

In Standard VI of Ms. Haight's Teacher Work Sample, she draws several conclusions about the nature of her students' progress during a nine-week unit centered on *The Once & Future King*. The first five weeks of the unit concern the reading of the novel itself (Goal A), with the latter four weeks concerning each student writing a research paper on the topic of their choice (Goal B). In addition, students composed blog responses on various aspects of the novel, and were introduced to a number of library resources, both nods to the burgeoning need for technological savvy in schools (Goal C).

Ms. Haight's sophomore students were assessed on the novel content with three, 25-point quizzes, each corresponding with Book I-III of *The Once & Future King*, and a 100-point, cumulative exam encompassing but not limited to content from Book IV of the novel. The research paper, conversely, spanned four weeks, culminating in an individual grade out of 183 possible points; students were expected not only to adhere to specific MLA formatting directions, but also to utilize specific types of resources effectively to prove their respective thesis statements. Several patterns emerged from these assessments: Students in Ms. Haight's Period 1 (morning) class generally performed higher on both quizzes and the research paper than those in the Period 5 (afternoon) class. Similarly, female students tended to outperform males, while students of both genders tended to do better on the Book I and IV quizzes rather than those on Book II and III. In addition, formatting errors on the research paper were less common than stylistic errors. The majority of students tended to receive grades in the "B" and "C" range on their research papers, with more females earning Bs, and more males earning Cs.

One possible reason for the difference between Period 1 and 5 achievements could be that students perform better in the morning than the afternoon, just before/after lunch. O'Brien (2006) describes a study by Northwestern University in which high school students were found to "perform best later in the day than early in the morning", which led some districts to push the start of instruction time back further than 8:00 AM. O'Brien also notes that high school students, on average, attend school for 6.6 hours per day, and that early morning instruction interferes with this age group's tendency towards a "sleep-wake cycle"; that is, a tendency to "fall asleep later and wake up later" (2006).

In contrast, Xavier students begin morning prayer at 7:50 AM, and are released from school at 2:45. Their lunch cycles throughout the school year on either an A, B, or C schedule, which pits them as either waiting for their meal during Period 5 (B and C), or just finished eating before the same class (A). In addition, Xavier students are rarely idle - as noted in Standard I of Ms. Haight's Teacher Work Sample, the school's nearly 800 students can choose from one of 88 extracurricular activities offered; during Period 1's aforementioned speech unit, for example, it was not uncommon to hear a student discuss anywhere from 3-5 extracurricular activities that they are involved in throughout the school year. Indeed, the statistics make sense - 98 percent of the Class of 2007 went on to some sort of postsecondary education, Xavier's Web site notes ("Facts" section, 2009). The school also boasts of a 100 percent graduation rate. In this sense, students may spend 5-6 hours after initial instructional time at school each night; though a 'normal' sleep-wake cycle may entail the student staying up later, perhaps this consistently busy school day (and night) lends itself to more fit sleep and productive morning hours.

In terms of the gender gap, Sara Mead explains the worry that schools are not particularly "boy friendly": With some exception, Mead notes, "American boys are scoring higher and

achieving more than they ever have before. But girls have just improved their performance on measures even faster. As a result, girls have narrowed or even closed some academic gaps that previously favored boys, while other long-standing gaps that favored girls have widened, leading to the belief that boys are falling behind" (2006). Adding leverage to this, Mead reports that 12th grade boys' reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2002 were significantly lower than data collected in both 1992 and 1998. In general, younger boys seem to outperform older boys, and minority scores versus white scores are significant; also, though "academic performance for minority boys is often shockingly low, it's not getting worse" (2006). In the same vein, male students begin to achieve higher in math and lower in reading than their female counterparts, beginning in third grade. As Pytel notes, this gap widens as both genders continue through their respective educations. In addition, female students tend to learn best from female teachers, who dominate subjects such as reading - as Pytel points out, 80 percent of middle school reading teachers are female (2006). This is yet another potential factor skewering the results of Ms. Haight's reading unit in such a way.

On the other hand, in Ms. Haight's analysis of two individual students (both males, one from Period 1, one from Period 5), neither boy performed worse on the Book II and III novel exams, nor was there a significant guarantee that consistent achievement on the book quizzes would determine a student's research paper grade - in essence, the Period 1 student who scored the entire two classes' single 100 percent had nearly a 20 percent variance on his book quiz scores; in contrast, the Period 5 student had consistently high scores, all within 4 percent of one another, but scored an 83 percent on his research paper. On the other hand, the Period 5 students' paper did align with the assumption that students earned fewer errors in paper formatting than they did stylistically. Naturally, Ms. Haight's instruction of MLA formatting and such took

greater precedence over stylistic functions (though lessons were not devoid of either). In essence, Ms. Haight has her work cut out for her in terms of bridging any of the aforementioned achievement gaps for future units.

### *Insights on effective instruction and assessment*

At the end of her instructional practice, Ms. Haight is able to reflect on the most successful and unsuccessful activities and assessments within her nine-week King Arthur-centric unit, and considers plausible reasons for their success or lack thereof. Naturally, the points where she faltered offer the most obvious insight. In Standard V of Ms. Haight's Teacher Work Sample, she isolates lesson plans that did not go as planned, for one reason or another, and how best to alter them to achieve desired learning goals.

One such plan was Ms. Haight's tendency to engage students thematically, and then cycle around to hit other important facets of the lesson, such as a chronological discussion of events. For example, Ms. Haight asks students to reflect on which animal transformation they would prefer, before discussing Arthur's own animal transformations by the wizard Merlyn in the novel. In general, students enjoyed the creative bent of these lessons, but ultimately found it difficult to organize themselves against the odd intervals of the lessons. As Ms. Haight writes in her TWS V, "class discussions were strained. The student teacher found herself consistently rephrasing questions, and often coaxing students to participate [...] the thematic approach left them confused as to which part of the previous night's reading assignment they were discussing". Ms. Haight responded by focusing more entirely and pointedly on students' study guide question packets; the result was significantly more productive classroom discussions.

Ms. Haight also learned to cope with the unexpected during her practicum. On the eve of students' taking their cumulative novel exam, it was relayed to Xavier's collective faculty that a sophomore student (though not a student of Ms. Haight's) committed suicide. Ms. Haight and her Master Teacher agreed to push back the exam date, though students went ahead with being introduced to library materials throughout the week, which seemed to unexpectedly ease them into the next part of the unit. Though this was an extreme situation, in general, Ms. Haight found that she grew used to 'expecting the unexpected', or at least tolerating the inconveniences of last-minute meetings, scheduling conflicts, early release days that cut into instructional time, and other ways that the 'normal' school day can be expected.

In general, Ms. Haight finds that her most effective instructional activities centered on the reading of the novel, the portion of the unit that she had the most creative liberty in shaping – as the research paper is a school-mandated assignment, Ms. Haight nominally taught it using previously tested methods and timelines. For the novel itself, Ms. Haight attempted to pair aforementioned chronological instruction with assignments that asked students to focus on character motivation and personality, which White's novel lends itself well to and which would encompass many research paper topics. In Standard IV of her Teacher Work Sample, Ms. Haight details a handful of her favorite assignments in this vein. One example is personal ads, wherein each student is assigned a character from Book I of the novel, for whom they will construct a personal ad for some medium of dating or friendship. Ms. Haight prepared her own anachronistic example using Cully, a disgruntled bird living on Arthur's adopted father's property, who apparently registered a dating profile on the faux Web site, QuestForLove.com. In addition, Ms. Haight set specific parameters for the assignment - for example, students were required to

describe where the character lived; what they were looking for in a mate; when they were available; and how to contact them.

Likewise, the aforementioned assessments for the novel combined details gleaned from a close reading of the text, as well as an extensive discussion of expanded plot points character motivations, and cultural/historical factors within the book. In Standard III of her Teacher Work Sample, Ms. Haight offers examples of each of the four self-created exams for the novel. Questions range from Book One's asking students to "Name two animals Arthur is transformed into by Merlyn, and something he learned from each", to Book III's, "Describe how the deaths of Morgause and Lamorak are related to the unicorn hunt from Book II. Who is involved, and what does each character represent?" Each quiz contains various types of questions: True-or-false; multiple choice; character identification; fill-in-the-blank; short answer; and essay. Though not written verbatim, assessment information was gleaned heavily from students' question-and-answer packets - in essence, the information presented was straightforward, and aligned with what was introduced previously during instructional time.

### *Alignment among goals, objectives, instruction and assessment*

As described in Standard II of Ms. Haight's Teacher Work Sample, the nine-week King Arthur unit centered on three distinct learning goals, each aligned with the Iowa Department of Education's Standards for Literacy for 10<sup>th</sup> grade students (2009). Goal A, for example, focused entirely on students' collective ability to "read and comprehend" White's novel, with specific focus on understanding stated (Standard A1), literal (A2), and non-literal (A4) information from the text, as well as being able to "determine the main idea, topic, or theme" in order to make

generalizations (A3). Finally, students were asked to "recognize aspects of a passage's style and structure", as well as various literary techniques used in the book (Standard A5). As mentioned previously, lessons were designed with both close-reading and factual analysis of the material in mind, with assessments closely culled from class instruction fodder. For Goal A, perhaps the biggest deterrent from student achievement is the book's 639-page girth. On the other hand, as Ms. Haight explains in TWS II: "The strict reading pace is necessary, in order for students to have time to complete the research paper [...] the pacing is also justified because both sophomore classes (approximately 25 students in each) are at level 7, Xavier's equivalent of Advanced Placement (AP)."

Goal B states that students will "draw upon contextual information, supplemental details about the author, and research to write a 3-5 page research paper about the novel of the topic of their choosing over the course of approximately four weeks." Standard VI of Ms. Haight's TWS details the aspects of said paper that students will be graded on. Just as students are expected to turn in their Q&A packets during the first five weeks for homework points, so too are they given frequent, smaller deadlines before the due date of the final paper. These checkpoints, so to speak, allow the student opportunity for feedback - for example, having a 10-minute rough draft conference with the teacher, a week before the final paper is due. In this sense, the instructional process of the paper directly corresponds with the assessment - that is, the final paper grade itself. If students are told during rough draft conferences and peer-editing that their in-text citations are not correctly formatted, for example, and their final paper still contains these errors, they have simply not taken advantage of proffered resources, and deserve a lower grade for this aspect of the assignment.

In contrast, Goal C is two-fold: Students are expected to "utilize technology to enhance their reading, understanding, and analysis of the novel". This breaks down into Standards C1 and C2; students are first asked to complete "analytical blog responses" on various aspects of the novel, while they are reading the book itself (C1). Conversely, in Standard C2, students will utilize library resources to research an aspect of *The Once & Future King* for their term papers. The blog responses proffer questions that correlate closely with the four book exams – in essence, the assignment allows students to earn homework points, and also the opportunity to practice answering test questions, which are worth more of their respective grades. Similarly, the library component of Goal C is directly tied into instruction and assessment of the latter half of the unit – in essence, students cannot begin their research without proper resources, let alone be assessed on said research.

### *Implications for future teaching*

In Standard VI of Ms. Haight's Teacher Work Sample, she considers a handful of instructional modifications, and considers how these would improve student learning. As previously mentioned, these include making sure that lesson plans are clearly explained and meted out in a recognizable pattern for students. If the goal of classroom discussion is for students to showcase a close-text understanding of the material, the lesson plan should focus on that, rather than trying to present the information creatively, but in a more roundabout manner. In addition, students reported greater appreciation and understanding of the book content when they were allowed to work in small groups.

In addition, Ms. Haight has her work cut out for her, in regards to addressing differences in achievement between subgroups. Are students in Period 1 better prepared for instruction than those in Period 5? Does the natural achievement gap between males and females in English class lend itself to explaining why female students performed better during the course of the unit than their male counterparts? Similarly, Ms. Haight can pinpoint a number of trouble areas that do not seem to be mutually exclusive to either the time of instruction or gender. For example, why is there not a stronger relationship between comprehension of the novel (as emphasized through quiz averages) and research paper grades? In the same vein, Ms. Haight may also wish to consider centering later lessons around stylistic aspects of paper-writing, in order to give students more in-class instruction on the most commonly marked down portions of the research paper assignment.

### *Implications for professional development*

Using insight gained from past experiences and statistics gleaned from this unit, Ms. Haight is able to consider a handful of individual learning goals for the benefit of her future students, as well as her own professional development. Ms. Haight feels her strengths during the course of the nine weeks lay in combining her own rigor and creativity with solid content knowledge and analysis. If Ms. Haight were to teach White's novel again, she would start from the beginning with clearly-inferred instructions and lessons that were more obviously stemming from previously introduced learning goals and standards. Small groups would be utilized more than, or at least as a prerequisite to whole-class discussion; in this sense, Ms. Haight would aim not only for students to understand cohesively what they have read, but to be able to reach

higher-level analyses of characters and themes amongst themselves. In the same vein, blogging could become a greater function of the unit, with ensuing groups of students needing less assistance in troubleshooting their use of this medium for enhanced learning.

For the research paper aspect of the unit, Ms. Haight will look towards how to reach the various ‘problem areas’, in an attempt to bridge achievement gaps between subgroups. Ms. Haight was pleased to find that none of her 51 sophomore students received lower than a “D” grade (anywhere from 63-72 percent, counting +/- delineations) on their respective research papers. At the same time, knowing how to address the large numbers of male students who were outperformed by their female counterparts, and learning why students performed best in the morning class is valuable information for future instructional savvy.

Finally, Ms. Haight addresses her own potential weaknesses in the field. Though she has proven previously proficient on state and school-mandated requirements to be an English teacher, the bulk of her undergraduate work focused on Psychology. Furthermore, the focus of the English content courses that Ms. Haight did squeeze in to her curriculum tended towards writing proficiency, rather than literature analysis. Though this did not greatly hinder her ability to teach White’s novel, her own ‘problem areas’ – namely, British literature and poetry – decrease her effectiveness in other aspects of the field. Ergo, Ms. Haight plans to supplement her knowledge base with additional, continuing education English courses; alternately, she will consider earning a second Bachelors degree in English, with specific emphasis on literature analysis, in order to provide the most meaningful and expansive body of knowledge to her future students as possible.

## Conclusion

Ms. Haight looks back on her instructional period with Mrs. Flores' sophomore students with fresh insight. She is not the same student teacher at the end of her practicum as she was when first walking the hallowed halls of Xavier High School. Likewise, her students are forever changed by her attempts, for better or for worse, to mold their understanding of Arthurian legend beyond its initial state. The training badge will be unclipped; the next time Ms. Haight walks into a classroom, it will be her own. In that sense, the end of her practicum experience is merely the beginning of a potentially long and prosperous career as an educator. Ms. Haight only hopes her students will grow as much as she does by their interactions and explorations of literature and life. She looks forward to putting them on-track to do just that.

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