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Teacher Work Sample

Standard V – Instructional Decision-Making

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**Abstract**

During her student teaching practicum, Jessica Haight was made firmly aware of the importance of constructive criticism and lesson plan flexibility. In general, she found early on that the best laid plans of educators often go awry, either because of uncontrollable circumstances, or students' own follies and preconceptions. In particular, Ms. Haight found that her sophomore students enjoyed a less circuitous means of learning about T.H. White's novel, *The Once & Future King*, which they would eventually be expected to write a research paper over. In addition, Ms. Haight also had an unfortunate opportunity to observe Xavier High School go through the grief process when a student took his life, the weekend before students were slated to begin said research papers. Both situations urged for lesson plan revamping, either externally (due dates) or internally (the approach on and of itself), allowing for reflection and the opportunity for Ms. Haight to grow in her role as a teacher.

## Teacher Work Sample

## Standard V: Instructional Decision-Making

**Introduction**

In the course of teaching, it often becomes necessary to reflect and build on one's initial lesson plans, either by tightening previous techniques, or revamping them completely. During student teacher Jessica Haight's practicum experience at Xavier High School, ongoing analysis and reflection became a crucial component of her time working with English teacher Michelle Flores' AP sophomores during their dual literature/research paper unit on T.H. White's *The Once & Future King*. In particular, students' reactions to lesson plans in the fledgling days of Ms. Haight's taking control of the classroom became a catalyst for the evolution of those plans over time.

*Thematic vs. chronological lesson plans (Week 1-2)*

- **Making sound professional practice:**

During the first week of Ms. Haight's instruction, the students were introduced to the novel, and asked to read most of Book I of *O&FK*. Ms. Haight's Master Teacher, Michelle Flores requested that Ms. Haight organize her lesson plans in the style of Madeline Hunter; the strength of this method, which Melissa Birkholz terms "Mastery Learning", lies in its pre-planning. The educator is asked to consider an anticipatory set of questions; an objective and purpose; and once he/she has modeled the lesson for students, Mastery Learning allots for the teacher to check for understanding and to plan both for guided and independent practice. Notably, the plan lacks a reflective component, disallowing the teacher from knowing whether or not students "know what they are supposed to be learning and why" (Birkholz), and whether or not they are, in essence, doing this.

To compound the reading assignment, Ms. Haight engaged students in thematic discussions of the text each day. Students were given a question-and-answer packet ("A"), which they would receive

homework points for having completed in sections before each of four quizzes over the material, as well as a study guide packet (“B”), with supplemental information about the novel, the author, and the culture (for example, a detailed explanation of the concept of “chivalry” and “courtly love”). The discussions themselves referred to the Q&A packet, but Ms. Haight based early lessons around daily themes. For example, while discussing Book I, chapter 5-8 (Week One, Day 3), Ms. Haight themed questions around the topic of animal transformations, asking students to name the animals which Arthur himself is changed into, and then to reflect on which animal they would appreciate spending the day as and why. Ms. Haight also turned students' attention to a hand-out on symbolism, including but not limited to animals (i.e.: Eagles represent nobility; forests, freedom and danger; the color white, peace and purity).

Similarly, on Day 4, the student teacher themed the discussion around the topic of myths and legends, beginning with a quote about the nature of legends, and segueing into comparing and contrasting legendary characters found in the novel, including Robin Hood/Wood, Morgan the Fay, and Arthur himself. This lesson, centered on chapter 9-11, was a lead-in for students to make “personal ads” for various characters, showcasing their understanding of the nuances of each one's personality. The student responses to this assignment were exceedingly creative and well-thought-out.

- **Making adjustments based on analysis of student learning:**

Despite appreciation for the creative bent of these themed assignments, class discussions were strained. The student teacher found herself consistently rephrasing questions, and often coaxing students to participate. After the first few days, Ms. Haight's Master Teacher stepped in, asking students confidentially while Ms. Haight made a “random” trip to the copy machine in the teacher's lounge what the source of their hesitation was. In part, students fussed about the novel's 639-page girth, which Mrs. Flores assured them was not a worthwhile excuse. Eventually, students touched on Ms. Haight's approach to the chapters – namely, that the thematic approach left them confused as to exactly which

part of the previous night's reading assignment they were discussing.

Naturally, Ms. Haight's instructional design (see Teacher Work Sample IV) changed significantly in coming weeks to reflect this specific construct. On Week Two, Day 8, for example, the class discussed the events of chapter 20-24 – essentially, the end of Book One, wherein the student teacher asked students to summarize each chapter, and themed her questions much more pointedly around those the students should have had answered in their Q&A packets. In addition, students spent time deciphering the badger's parable in this section, and discussed how White's retelling of the Creation story fit with what they are taught in their Catholic education.

This proved nominally successful; students still occasionally had to be pressed to do their reading assignments, but classroom discussions on a whole were significantly more productive afterwards. In addition, students appreciated being given the opportunity to work in small groups, wherein Ms. Haight would assign each group a handful of questions that they would be responsible for answering for the class. Often, Ms. Haight's afternoon group of sophomores would hear about the nature of the lesson from their morning class peers, with responses significantly more positive whenever they heard that small-group work was on the day's agenda.

- **Congruence between modifications and learning goals and objectives:**

Though the sophomore research paper is an assignment mandated by Xavier High School specifically, the roots of the literature-based assignment are planted firmly within the Iowa Department of Education's 10<sup>th</sup> grade Standards for Literacy (2009). Likewise, Ms. Haight's own goals and objectives for the assignment align tightly with state standards (see Standard II of Ms. Haight's Teacher Work Sample). Goal A relates entirely to the reading and comprehension of the novel: "Students will successfully read and comprehend T.H' White's novel, *The Once & Future King*, over the course of a five-week period." Goal A is then divided into five Standards, A1 - A5, respectively. These include understanding "stated information"; determining the "literal meaning of specific words" in the novel, as

well as interpreting "non-literal language" used in the text; determining the "main idea, topic or theme", in order to make generalizations about the book; and recognizing "aspects of a passage's style and structure", in order to "recognize literary techniques" (Standard II). The use of the Q&A packet ("A") allows students submergence in many of these standards - for example, asking students to explain what happens to Arthur in the Mews at Sir Ector's castle in Book I ("stated information", Standard A1).

Ms. Haight's initial folly was asking students to focus so much on the book's "main idea, topic, or theme" (A3) that they failed to pick up on much of the rudimentary goings-on in the novel. By spending more time on literal and non-literal language (Standards A2 & A4), Ms. Haight's sophomores were eventually able to discuss themes and stylistic techniques of the author (A5), both necessary to conduct proper research for their term papers on the same novel.

*Expecting the unexpected: Funeral accommodations (Week 5-6)*

- **Making sound professional practice:**

At the end of Week Five, students were finished reading the novel, and ready to begin working on the ensuing research paper, an additional four-week process. By Week Five, Day 31, students understood that they would have a final exam over the novel in Week Six, and left class grumbling accordingly.

Over the weekend, a sophomore student – not a student in either of Ms. Haight's classes – took his own life. Before the beginning of the school week, Ms. Haight discussed with her Master Teacher the necessity of allowing students time to begin moving through the grieving process; thus, the final exam was postponed from Monday to Friday, with Monday instead being set aside for memorial-related activities and reflections. The entire school was closed that Wednesday for the observance of the student's funeral service. Naturally, the rest of the week allowed students to go through the motions a bit – on Thursday, for example, each class met with Mrs. Davis, the school's librarian, to discuss

available research paper resources.

- **Making adjustments based on analysis of student learning:**

By the time the final exam rolled around, morale was shaky, but students had eased through the week, and seemed outwardly more capable of the concentration required for the test. Inwardly, of course, may well be another story; as Jimerson & Huff (2002; cited by Poland & Poland, 2004) point out, "The death of a peer may not only constitute the loss of a classmate but also may point out the reality of his or her own mortality. In addition, young people may have had no experience in coping with death or have unrealistic perceptions of what grief entails ..." Unfortunately, most Xavier students have a wealth of experience with death, having mourned the previous school year for a peer killed in a car accident. Poland and Poland's further advice for grieving school communities follows Xavier's own process very methodically. Given that the death was a suicide (the student was found by a member of his family, having hung himself in his bedroom), the school tactfully avoided specific details, believing, as Poland and Poland do, that emphasis on the method of death "runs the risk of communicating to vulnerable students that death is a way to obtain incredible amounts of attention" (2004). Instead, the school relied on a carefully worded memo read by each 1st period teacher. The faculty met in the school chapel before classes began, and the entire school assembled later that morning. Teachers were also encouraged to allow small-group discussion throughout the remaining school day - of note was students' natural curiosity about the Catholic Church's stance on suicide.

Ms. Haight stayed nominally on the peripheral of activities during this time; attending the student's funeral service and simply being present while the school dealt with the tragedy of the death of one of its own seemed sufficient. Indeed, Poland and Poland promote the visibility and availability of supportive staff members, citing its collective ability to offer students "nurturing and guidance of familiar adults", and helping them to "maintain a sense of normalcy in their lives" (2004). Indeed, in furthering this cause, Ms. Haight found her own connection with the school community strengthened.

- **Congruence between modifications and learning goals and objectives:**

The Once & Future King research paper institutes Goal B of Ms. Haight's earlier Teacher Work Sample components; that is, asking students to "draw upon contextual information, supplemental details about the author, and research to write at least a five-page paper about the novel of the topic of their choosing over the course of four weeks" (Standard II). The purpose of Week Six was to serve as a primer to this paper, prefaced by a final cumulative exam over the novel itself. The death of a student at the school did not alter the course of the assignment too much. In addition to the paper, the assignment also asked students to "utilize technology to enhance their reading, understanding and analysis of the novel" (Goal C). Students were eased into the rigor of school following the death of a peer by spending three days in the library. There, they learned about the resources available to them for researching their paper (Standard C2). Students also penned "analytical blog responses" (Standard C1), which primed them for completing Goal B.

### **Conclusion**

As Ms. Haight grew into her role as an educator, the students grew with her, growing increasingly comfortable and able to let her know what they needed in order to learn. By keeping an open mind and heart, Ms. Haight's lesson planning and teaching style adapted accordingly, leading to increased success in the classroom. Being open to both constructive criticism and students' reactions to current events alike helped Ms. Haight to tighten her specific approach to a specific group of students, allowing their understanding of the material to flourish. Teachers must be willing and able to accept criticism and be dually flexible in their agendas and daily expectations for the classroom; knowing this now, Ms. Haight anticipates future success for herself in the realm of education.



### References

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