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Teacher Work Sample

Standard I - Contextual Factors

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## Abstract

The Teacher Work Sample (TWS), an alternative to the traditional teaching portfolio, came into popularity in the 1980s (Henning & Robinson, 2004; Schalock & Myton, 1988; cited by Watkins & Bratberg, 2006), and continues to set the standard for incoming educators today. Typically, the TWS relies on "learning goals" and "local, state, and national content standards" as framework for "a unit of study [that] is designed and implemented using pre-assessment data" (Watkins & Bratberg, 2006, p. 2). Eventually, the burgeoning educator analyzes his/her "overall teaching and assessment results", in order to "reflect and revise their teaching" (Henning, et al, 2005; cited by Watkins & Bratberg, 2006, p. 2). Pre-assessment data includes but is not limited to contextual factors, such as the school environment, its surrounding community, and student data. In the ensuing Teacher Work Sample, the educator will explore contextual factors pertaining to a five-week unit for T.H. White's epic fantasy novel, *The Once & Future King*. Student teacher, Jessica Haight, will explore how best to approach this slice of Arthurian legend with a group of 10th grade English students at Xavier High School, a private, Catholic institution located in Cedar Rapids, IA.

## Teacher Work Sample

## Standard I: Contextual Factors

*Community, District & School Factors*

Xavier High School's Web site boasts of 771 students, as of February 18, 2009 ("Facts" section, 2009). Located in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the institution is "affiliated with twelve area Catholic parishes and the Archdiocese of Dubuque", while simultaneously being accredited by the State of Iowa. As one might expect, this speaks to Xavier's academic fervor - according to the "Facts", "98 percent of the Class of 2007 went on to postsecondary education" - as well as its community outreach. At Xavier, all students are required to participate in days sanctioned for community service; in addition, students can choose from one of 88 extracurricular activities for additional indulgence (Xavier Web site, "Facts" section, 2009).

One of Xavier's admitted slights is its diversity, or lack thereof— as an article published February 5<sup>th</sup> in the school's student newspaper notes ruefully, "the composition of the [student body] is pretty predictable: Almost completely White and Catholic, with maybe a couple non-White students, and a Lutheran or Baptist here or there [...] Xavier is not exactly diverse" (Collins, Thinnes & Esker, 2009). As it so happens, White students comprise 95.2% of the school, according to statistics printed alongside the article; this is compared to a 77.6% White population at the neighboring Washington High School, and 86.9% at Kennedy High – at Xavier, 9 African-American students were counted for the tally; at Washington High, 232. On the other hand, students and faculty alike are quick to defend the set-up. Minority students are interviewed, confessing that they "don't really notice the race difference", and even that being a minority at a fairly prestigious Catholic school makes a certain half-Korean senior a shoo-in for scholarships. Principal Tom Keating offers a similar outlook, one he also touts during faculty meetings: "Teaching respect and acceptance for all people in the absence of diversity," he is paraphrased as saying in the article, "is more important than merely putting people next to diversity"

(Collins, Thinnes & Esker, 2009).

Xavier's interest in community service is notable, particularly nestled in a town such as Cedar Rapids, whose city Web site is splashed with "flood information" links and bullet points. In the summer months of 2008, the city was hit with record flooding, causing millions of dollars worth of damage, and displacing 40,000 residents from their homes. In this sense, students who wish to help their city, school-mandated or otherwise, have their work cut out for them. Along with volunteer work, Xavier is partnered with several local organizations, ranging from the American Heart Association to radio stations, corporations such as Rockwell Collins, and the Workplace Learning Connection (Xavier Web site, "Facts", 2009). Politics occasionally intertwine with the Church's teachings - a handful of students recently traveled to Washington DC to participate in the 2009 March for Life rally, for example - but this tends to be the exception rather than the rule. If the community needs it, regardless of politics or agendas, Xavier students offer themselves up to help.

### *Classroom Factors*

As a merely decade-old facility, initially created as a feeder school for several other Catholic institutions in the area, Xavier is well-kept and up-to-date. The 60-acre campus and 146,500 square foot facility (Xavier Web site, "Facts", 2009) is in pristine condition, from the gymnasium to the library. Students are held accountable for textbooks - if vocabulary workbooks become lost during the school year, for example, the student is expected to foot the bill (\$9) for a new one.

Technology is integrated into the classroom; students tote individual flash drives, allowing an ease with which to transport work done on the school's computer labs to and from home, and teachers have their pick of in-classroom devices to facilitate instruction. As part of students' individual reflections on *The Once & Future King*, for example, they are expected to create an account on a blogging database created specifically for Xavier students, so that they can log-in and answer short essay questions pertaining to their thoughts on the novel. This is one way for the English department,

an admittedly pen-and-paper-rigorous group, to become more modernized.

In addition to resources, the student teacher must also take into account seating arrangements and potential grouping factors. Ms. Haight's Cooperating Teacher, Michelle Flores' classroom tends towards cramped; it is oddly tempered, with desks arranged along the sides in rows and in the center of the room in pairs, encouraging students to face the front-middle of the room as best it can. Walls are sparsely decorated, save for a mural of Merlyn the wizard, commissioned by a previous English teacher, and a few tasteful inspirational posters. The teacher's desk, and student teacher's desk, though on opposite ends of the room, are nonetheless out of the way; while instructing, and even while proctoring an exam, the student teacher is encouraged to stray from the relative safety of her desk, in order to give off the impression that she is available to students.

### *Student Characteristics*

For the sophomores participating in this unit on *The Once & Future King*, a great deal of personal responsibility is implied. Xavier's coursework is divided into levels 3, 5, and 7 – students at level 3 are in remedial classes, whereas level 7 is the equivalent of Advanced Placement (AP). Both classes, each containing roughly 25 students, are level 7 students. For a unit on TO&FK, this tends to entail being able to keep with occasional weekend reading assignments of some 80 pages, as well as being able to discuss material in class ranging from basic plot detail, to characterization, to the author's vision of society and how this comes across in his writing. “Push them to think for themselves,” Jessica Haight's Cooperating Teacher, Michelle Flores says frequently. “They can handle it.”

For students who cannot and/or do not wish to try, Xavier's strict grading policies and parental involvement help steer its youth back onto the right track, so to speak. Students receiving below a grade of “C-minus” in any subject are placed on “deficiency”, entailing required correspondence with parents and students' own written resolutions to bring their grades up. In addition, students with learning disabilities may require special needs per individual 504 plans which classroom teachers must

attempt to abide by, in any and all grade and ability levels. A boy in Ms. Haight's first-hour class has Asperger's, for example, mandating not only a "Guided Study" worksheet containing any and all assignment and exam reminders for the week to be provided for said student, but also specific reminders in class of upcoming due dates. A recent incident with the student (Ian) outlines the need for flexibility and acknowledgment of individual needs: When mentioning an upcoming due date for a vocabulary unit, the student teacher did not have a chance to write said information in its usual space on the white board before Ian bounded up out of his seat and scrawled it on the board himself, declaring, somewhat irritatedly, that "a due date that important should be written down". The student teacher must stay on top of all aspects of her role as an educator, even the ones that may seem extraneous. Students are counting on her for it.

#### *Implications for Instructional Planning & Assessment*

For the majority of the class, the student teacher will rely on whole and small-group discussion of the novel. Occasional supplemental activities include having students write "personal ads" for various characters, and asking them to reflect on animal traits, given the novel's emphasis on King Arthur's childhood being spent alongside Merlyn, being transformed into various animals. Students are equipped with a question-and-answer packet for each chapter of the novel, which they receive homework points for completing in sections by a certain date – in this case, correlating with the completion of each of the four Books within the novel. Students are quizzed on each Book, using a combination of true-and-false, short answer, multiple choice, and essay question formats, and the unit will culminate into both a final exam, and a term paper on an aspect of the novel of students' choice. Xavier requires students in each grade to write a term paper whose characteristics become more sophisticated every year – by senior year, students do not even discuss said paper during class time at all. For the sophomore term paper, the student teacher will brief her class(es) on how to construct a proper thesis statement, how to locate research materials, and how to analyze the novel, rather than

simply summarize it.

Though level 7 students are expected to be fairly self-sufficient, the student teacher must adhere to a particular routine set forth by the Cooperating Teacher and the institution itself. Each class period begins with prayer, for example, after which the teacher directs students' attention to due dates for the week. This is done on a daily basis, with assignments also being made available via the school's "Homework Page", a message board which students can access at home. Class periods are roughly 45 minutes long, with somewhat frequent breaks and shortened schedules on days when the school attends Mass (usually once a month), or there is an Early Release day, etc. As a general rule of thumb, teachers send home lengthier assignments over the weekend and during Early Release days; on the other hand, if students have an upcoming vocabulary unit or quiz, the teacher will attempt to relinquish them from additional homework in the same class. Busy work is a dirty word at Xavier – students are there to become prepared for college, not to be entertained by movie adaptations of novels and such. For the sake of academic merit and rigor, all lessons in the TO&FK unit are aligned with 10<sup>th</sup> grade Standards for Literacy, set forth by the Iowa Department of Education (2009).

### Conclusion

Contextual considerations for a unit centered around a novel are numerous and varied. The teacher must have not only a firm grasp of the subject matter, but also a means to assess it, and a number of tools to encourage student participation and interest. A novel clocking in at over 600 pages is more likely to be met with grumbling than academic rigor if lessons are muddled and boring. The best in-class discussions, ergo, are ones where a combination of skillful teacher maneuvering and student interest intertwine; if students can relate to the literature in some way, so much the better. In addition, students need to be held to the same high standards that their ability and placement by the school allots. They are in class to learn, after all. Ergo, the student teacher must do her best under the circumstances to ensure that she and her students are, in essence, on the same page.

## References

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