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Eng 509
Lesson Plan
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Mocking Modern Life

This lesson is designed to be used after reading and discussing the mock heroic style in Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" and in sections of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. It is formulated for use in an Honors or Advanced Placement senior English class. Three class periods of 50 minutes are required for completion of this lesson.

Objectives:

Students are to write a mock epic in the style of Chaucer or Pope about some trivial event or aspect of social life in contemporary American society. The incongruity between the serious, elevated style and the subject matter should produce a comic effect.

Students will be given the option of satirizing some aspect of their school life. Finding a school event, rule, meal, or teacher to gently satirize should be no real problem for a teenager! Since most of my students are also taking journalism, they could include their "school epics" in the final issue of the school paper in May, which is devoted to the senior class. Another authentic audience for this writing could be the senior luncheon, when students typically share songs, speeches, and poetry about their high school experiences.

This piece will be added to their working portfolio for consideration and possible inclusion as a literary writing in the final KERA 12th grade writing portfolio, although it is offered here primarily as a fun way for seniors to "blow off steam" after portfolio completion, while putting their understanding of language, voice, and style to use.

Connections:

This assignment easily fits into the Academic Expectations and the Program of Studies from the Kentucky Department of Education for English IV. One of the guiding questions from this program is "How does literature reflect time periods, cultures, and writing styles of British and contemporary writers?" By identifying, and imitating elements of the mock heroic style of Chaucer and Pope, students will be applying genre features to their own writing while exposing and satirically analyzing contemporary social problems.

Kentucky Core Content:

WR-H-1.3-Literary Writing artfully communicates with the reader about the human condition.

Academic Expectations:

1.11-Students write using appropriate forms, convention, and styles to communicate ideas and information to different audiences for different purposes.

2.22-Students create works of art and make presentations to convey a point of view.

5.1-Students use critical thinking skills such as analyzing.

Procedure:

Day 1-

1. Teacher-directed review of the characteristics of mock heroic style, emphasizing these elements: a trivial subject, elevated language, epic similes, a "brave" hero, a major battle scene.
2. On paper, students will list and identify these elements in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" and in *The Rape of the Lock* and share their lists in class discussion.
3. The class will then brainstorm possible topics for a contemporary mock epic and possible "grandiose" words and phrases for common objects and activities. These activities should take about half of the class period.
4. The "Mock Heroic Epic Rubric" (see below) will be distributed.
5. Any remaining class time should be spent by students beginning a rough draft of an original, contemporary mock epic, to be completed for homework.

Day 2

1. Students will be divided into groups of 3 to share their mock epic drafts.
2. They will give and receive constructive criticism on content and style with their group.
3. We will then re-group as a class to discuss any common concerns or questions on the assignment.
4. The remainder of class will be spent on revision and preparation of the final drafts.

Day 3

Students will present a dramatic reading of their mock heroic poems to the class. A final written copy will be submitted to the teacher for assessment. Possible venues for further presentation or publication will be discussed.

Assessment:

Although rarely needed in an honors class, a daily participation grade can be given on days 1 and 2 for staying on task and involved in the class and group activities.

The completed poem will be assessed as follows:

Mock Heroic Epic Rubric

"Let Wreaths Of Garlands Now Your Temple Twine!"

1. Complete Story Line
2. Good Character Development
3. At Least 2 Classical Allusions
4. Good Use Of Elevated Language
5. Appropriate, Consistent Tone
6. At Least 24 Lines Of Rhyming Couplets
7. Very Few Surface Errors

Distinguished

"Oh Thoughtless Mortals!"

1. Complete Story Line
2. Some Character Development
3. At Least 1 Classical Allusion
4. Elevated Language Attempted
5. Appropriate Tone
6. At Least 24 Lines Of Rhyming Couplets
7. Few Surface Errors

Proficient

"Cease, Rash Youth!"

1. Gaps In The Story Line
2. Minimal Character Development
3. One Or No Classical Allusion
4. No Attempt At Elevated Language
5. Indefinite Tone
6. At Least 24 Lines
7. Frequent Surface Errors

Apprentice

Theoretical Rationale:

"Imitation is natural to man."

Aristotle

After all our readings this semester, I remain committed to the value of requiring students to read good literature from a variety of formats. I still subscribe to the Greek tradition of teaching writing through modeling or imitation. The endurance of this method points to its effectiveness. The Romans continued this instructional pattern of precept, imitation, and practice. The use of imitation can be traced through the Renaissance to early American education. The following is taken from the Hartford Female Course of Study in 1831. It explains a typical assignment given after several readings of some well-known text. "The pupils are then to bring, the next day, an imitation of the piece read, using the words given, and aiming to catch the style and turn of expression. By continuing this exercise, and changing the subjects and the authors, it will be found that scholars will soon acquire a ready command of language and easy modes of expression" (Wright and Halloran 245).

Those students exposed to a variety of literary genre have a broad base of writing styles from which to choose for their own writing. As Flower and Hayes state, "a well-read person simply has a much larger and richer set of images of what a text can look like" (Flower and Hayes 71). Maxine Hairston concurs, stating, "I believe we also need to continue giving students models of excellence to imitate" (Hairston 125).

I believe this approach improves reading comprehension, as well as writing skills. No method teaches an appreciation for, say, the sonnet, better than requiring students to attempt to write an original sonnet. The mock epic assignment is intended to emphasize the importance of word choice in establishing tone and meaning. I expect my students will have a greater understanding of, and respect for, the works of both Chaucer and Pope after completing their poems.

I have been influenced by Maxine Hairston's explanation of the paradigm shift in writing theory. She reviews the current research on the writing process and draws some credible conclusions about the implications for the successful teaching of writing. She lists 12 features of an emerging writing paradigm, several of which I have incorporated in my lesson plan. These include:

*"Audience, purpose, and occasion figure prominently in the assignment of writing tasks."

*"It is holistic, viewing writing as an activity that involves the intuitive and non-rational."

*"It views writing as a disciplined, creative activity that can be analyzed and described." (Hairston 124).

Hairston also speaks convincingly of the effectiveness of peer-editing, suggesting that, "students might benefit far more from small group meetings with each other than from the exhausting one-to-one conferences that the teachers hold" (Hairston 117).

The most important writing lesson I have learned from our class readings is that student writing improves when students are allowed to adapt their writing assignments to their personal interests and experiences. This seems to be the pervasive theme throughout Sondra Perl's *Landmark Essays*. From her case study of the struggling writer Tony, to the study on the differences between good writers and poor writers by Linda Flowers and John Hayes, to the

confessions of experienced writers like Donald Murray and Nancy Sommers, the importance of personalizing one's writing is consistently emphasized.

Although Perl's study makes clear that all writing was a challenge for Tony, there was a marked difference in his success in objective and reflexive or personal pieces. Perl says of Tony, "the more distance between the topic and himself, the more difficulty he experienced.... Conversely, when the topic was close to his own experience, the smoother and more fluent the process became" (Perl 49).

Flower and Hayes observed a similar distinction between poor and good writers. They stress the necessity of teaching students "to explore and define their own problems, even within the constraints of an assignment" (Flower and Hayes 74). They maintain that if we teach students to identify their rhetorical problem and choose an appropriate genre and voice, "we can help them to create inspiration instead of wait for it" (Flower and Hayes 74).

Sommers shares her gradual journey of realizing the value of incorporating her personal life experiences into all of her writing activities. She speaks convincingly of the "journey of learning how to be both personal and authoritative, both scholarly and reflective" (Sommers 222).

It has certainly been true of my academic experience that if I can bend an assignment to fit a personal obsession, the experience is much more productive, meaningful, and enjoyable than if I'm bound to a cookie-cutter assignment.

My lesson plan is a "fine tuning" of a simple classroom writing practice I've used before. In the past, we've spent 20 minutes or so describing a common problem or event in a mock heroic style. After reading Donald Murray's essay "All Writing is Autobiographical," I think I can improve the assignment by providing a personally relevant subject and a real audience for my students. By allowing my students the option of choosing an aspect of their school life to satirize in the mock heroic style, I believe I'm following Murray's advice to explore "the questions that itch our lives" (Murray 214). I'm hoping the assignment will prove to be a creative and fun outlet for some of the frustrations of school my seniors typically feel as graduation approaches. I'm reminded of a quote Murray includes by John Hawkes: "Fiction is an act of revenge" (Murray 208). I intend to share this quote and the underlying application for their assignment with my students.

This leads me to a final theoretical rationale for the mock epic assignment, taken from Lex Runciman's essay "Fun?" Runciman decries the overemphasis of words and phrases like "hard work" and "problem-solving" in essays on the writing process. A review of such articles leads him to ask, "If writing itself is so problematic, why then would anyone want to encourage it or teach it?" (Runciman 201). Good question! I'm afraid I sometimes suck the fun right out of the writing experience--for my students and myself--with restrictive guidelines, deadlines, portfolio pressures, and AP practice exams.

Runciman encourages writing teachers to reflect on the true pleasure of the writing process, so they can share this experience in the classroom. He states, "Maybe we need to encourage student writers to discover and even savor the range of large and small rewards which attend their own writing and thinking" (Runciman 205). He reminds his reader, and himself, of the fun involved in finding just the right words to use, in just the right way, to say just what the writer wants to say, to just the right people! For the few brief class meetings I have with my seniors--between state testing, AP testing, and graduation practice--we're going to try to have some writing fun.

Reflection:

Did students make effective use of language and tone to accomplish their purposes?

Did they give and receive positive feedback in their groups?

Should this assignment be given earlier in the year for possible inclusion in the writing portfolio?

What modifications could be made to use this assignment with my regular senior English classes?

Did my students have fun with this assignment?

Follow Up:

This lesson could be extended by including a study of the mock epic hero in Lord Byron's Don Juan. I think my students would be better prepared to write an analysis of this work after writing their mock epic.

Works Cited

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