

# English 350: A Teaching Colloquium - Syllabus Redesign

Carly Yingst

The English department's graduate program recently introduced a new required sequence of proseminars, one (focused on an introduction to graduate studies) in the first year and a second (focused on professional development) in the second year. Before this new sequence, professional development had been a central part of the third year seminar, English 350, the primary purpose of which was to focus on pedagogical training.

As part of the broader revision of the grad program curriculum, then, we--the faculty course-head (Derek Miller) and graduate pedagogy fellow (Carly Yingst)--had the task (or opportunity) of **collaboratively redesigning this year's pedagogy syllabus** in order to better align it with the sequence of earlier proseminars, by **refocusing on the central goal of supporting and advising new TFs in their first semester of teaching** at Harvard while also aiming to **build a foundation on which future iterations of English 350 can continue to strengthen and expand instruction, advising, and community around pedagogy in our department.**

## Centering Community & Reflection through Practice

At the heart of our new approach to focusing on new TF's development as teachers was a division of what had formerly been a 2 hour class session focused on faculty-led instruction into two main parts, with each meeting including

one hour (typically the first) of **instructor-led discussion**, on key topics and skills ranging from **running the first day of class, discussion leading, grading and giving feedback, teaching writing, inclusion and equity in the classroom, and teaching and the job market**

one hour of **active teaching practice**, aka our teaching lab, which took the form of **short teaching demonstrations** by TFs in the class that concluded with **feedback, discussion, and reflection by the group** on each TF's teaching demo

By centering practice in each meeting in this way, TFs were able to not only **get early and regular feedback on their teaching from both the instructor and their peers** on their activities and discussion-leading strategies, but also--in the process of giving weekly feedback to others--were encouraged throughout the term to **regularly reflect critically on their pedagogical practices and to see themselves as part of a community in conversation about teaching.**

# Looking Ahead

As part of the syllabus redesign, we also regularly sought feedback--both formal and informal--from TFs in order not only to check in about this year's iteration of the course, but also to involve new TFs in discussions about how the department might continue to support graduate pedagogical training, instruction, and community, especially in the early years of teaching in the department. Following these discussions with TFs, **I propose three key areas for future development or expansion** of the department's pedagogy training:

## Early teaching practice

In general, this year's TFs were enthusiastic about the emphasis on active teaching practice, for the opportunity it gave them to both get feedback early and try out new activities and approaches before bringing them to their students in section. **They hope the in-class teaching demos continue**, and in fact were interested in **expanding this aspect of pedagogy training in our department**.

One idea the the PF and TFs discussed along these lines was to hold a **Spring or Summer teaching meeting** in which rising G4s--now with two semesters of teaching experience--would run a **teaching demo session for rising G3s**, in order to help orient them to the practice of teaching before the Fall semester begins. By having G3s involved in facilitating the demos, this meeting would also aim to **create a continuity in the graduate community around teaching**.

## Teaching Mentors

Along similar lines, the PF and the TFs explored possible ways to **encourage mentorship on teaching**. One idea was to aim to **place new TFs in Fall courses with faculty members who have designated a particular interest in supporting and advising graduate teachers**. Another, potentially more easily implementable idea involves **pairing rising G3s with a rising G4, who would serve as an informal teaching mentor starting in the last half of the spring semester before G3s start teaching**. Again, we hope that this would help to **build and sustain a stronger culture and community around pedagogy in the graduate program**.

In particular, the TFs were interested in the idea of **matching students based on similar teaching interests**, so that rising G3s could, in the spring, **visit one or two sections of a course** relevant to their interests, in order to **see both how a discussion section works at Harvard and to get a sense of the kind of in-class work TFs do in leading discussions and planning activities**. While some rising G3s have visited sections in the past, it's always been more informal, relying on individual requests and prior connections to rising G4s. By expressly including this on the seminar syllabus as an optional opportunity for the spring, we hope that more incoming TFs will see it as something they're welcomed--even encouraged--to do.

## Resource Sharing

This year's TFs were also enthusiastic about the idea of having a **centralized pedagogy resource bank**, that might include direct **links to the most relevant Bok Center resources** as well as a section devoted to **activities, assignments, or strategies specifically aimed at the English classroom**. I began developing this bank on our seminar's Canvas page this year, with resources organized by topic--following the sequence sessions on the new syllabus--which could easily be transferred to future versions of the Canvas site.

To make this accessible to all TFs, though, I'm also currently **prototyping a teaching resource page**--possibly to be hosted on the departmental website, an internal Canvas page accessible to all departmental TFs (and TAs), or possibly an all-TFs/TAs Slack channel--to which I'm also adding a **small collection of activities I've designed in conjunction with my work as an MDF at the Learning Lab**. To make this more of a collaborative community project, I also aim to **ask this year's TFs for handouts, short descriptions of any activities they tried, assignment sheets, or other brief documents that they'd like to share** with their colleagues--perhaps with an eye toward turning **this documentation and sharing into a small capstone project for the pedagogy seminar** itself.