Focusing on DEI Principles in a GTA Practicum Course

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Background

The course I am revising is ENGL 802, a practicum for new GTAs who are teaching ENGL 102: Critical Reading and Writing for the first time. This is our second composition course where students learn to inquire into topics through research, reading and writing. The new GTAs are responsible for teaching their own sections of the course, and they are a combination of MA, MFA, and PhD students. Over the years, the GTAs have had less and less previous experience in teaching, and even our PhD students come with less experience than they used to. In their first semester, all of the students who haven't had a previous graded pedagogy in teaching writing course take ENGL 801: Study and Teaching of Writing. Their classes are visited, and their graded papers reviewed by our Teaching Mentor in both fall and spring. Students worked with a common syllabus and assignment sequence, along with a daily schedule that was developed for both hybrid and remote teaching in the Fall 2020 semester.

Issues to address

Below are the goals for the course. The first three goals are long-standing ones, and the last one I added this year. Each goal is paired with an explanation of how I have designed specific course components to help achieve it.

1. **To support teachers as they help students achieve the goals of English 102**
   - This goal focuses on helping GTAs teach the aspects of the course that build on what they have learned in the fall semester about teaching writing but are specific to this course:
     - **Working** with various types of research and evaluating the research
     - **Inquiring** into academic topics
     - **Collaborating** with peers to complete projects
     - **Examining** bias in sources and their own bias
     - **Reading** sources critically and analyzing them
     - **Negotiating** multiple perspectives on an issue to synthesize and join a conversation
   - This goal is necessary because it helps new GTAs, who are nervous about their teaching, feel more confident and be more successful teachers.
   - Each class meeting has a discussion on a topic related to achieving these goals and groupwork for GTAs that points them towards teaching the week's classes.

2. **To encourage teachers to collaborate with peers to help students learn course concepts and develop a community of colleagues with whom to share teaching materials and support**
   - Developing communities of colleagues is so important for these GTAs, because they have such a big teaching responsibility. Such a community supports them as they continue to teach in the program, and it also gives them social connections that will help support them in their graduate classes.
   - I used One Note Class Notebook to create spaces where GTAs each week can create:
     - **A Sandbox** where they can try out activities with each other and get feedback
     - **A Case Study section** where they can post descriptions of classroom problems written up as case studies and get advice and options for approaching problems from others
     - **A Found Ideas for Teaching section**, which is a place for them to post ideas about teaching that they discover online or elsewhere that might be useful to other teachers
     - **Breakout Group sections** where they are put into groups with other GTAs teaching the same assignment sequence; they work on an activities for their next class week together in the Notebook and Zoom during practicum meetings

3. **To help teachers to achieve their individual teaching goals**
   - This facilitates reflection about teaching and encourages using their previous semester experience to set goals, a very helpful practice
   - I asked the GTAs to tell me their goals during our pre-semester conferences, and in my responses to their weekly reflections I talk to them about their progress towards the goals and encourage them to add any goals that come up or amend those goals
   - For all of these goals and the individual goals, I will ask them to complete a survey at the end of the class that asks them to reflect on how well they have achieved the course goals and their individual goals

4. **To forefront DEI principles in pedagogy, please see below.**

DEI Highlights

I completely redesigned class meetings to focus more directly on DEI topics and integrate these into the work teachers were preparing for their classes each week. I paired DEI topics with pedagogical topics as we worked through the semester to highlight these connections. For 30 minutes of each class, we all met together and discussed these pairings, and for the second 30 minutes GTAs met in groups and worked on materials for the week. In almost all of the class periods, I went to the breakout groups and answered questions and helped problem solve.

The most extensive examples of how I incorporate DEI content and strategies in my course can be found in my ENGL 802 Course Schedule, which I have annotated to further serve the purposes of this poster. I have linked key documents I used within course materials, which broach topics such as microaggressions, classroom climate, stereotype threat, and many others. The link to the ENGL 802 Course Schedule can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/4vy2v3n8.

Reflections

I chose this course because it has always been a difficult course to teach, primarily because before this year GTAs have chosen from sample assignments and created their own assignment sequences, then created all of the daily activities themselves with feedback from experienced GTAs and each other. This worked better when we had more experienced teachers among the GTAs, but now that we have fewer teachers with experience, and they have had more help in the fall, it is too much of a jump for them to do what they did in the past, and they complained about it in practicum evaluations. I still wanted to have them be able to choose an approach, so I created two completely different classes with assignment sequences and suggested daily activities. Both of these approaches focus on DEI principles. Some days there was more discussion than others, but I saw in their work with each other and with their students GTAs applying the principles. It will be interesting to see in the student evaluations, as well as in GTA surveys of how they worked toward the course goals, if there are mentions of the principles we talked about.