

First & Second Year English Program Instructor Stories

Mikaela:

Students always challenge and surprise me with what they bring into the classroom. Before I became an FSE instructor, I thought I had a pretty good grasp on interdisciplinary work. In my past research, I crossed into art history, film studies, and linguistics. I could handle this. Typical first year teacher thoughts. To my delight, my ENGL 102 class was filled with brilliant future business owners, dermatologists, lawyers, graphic designers, and athletic trainers. I was suddenly far beyond my depth, questioning my teaching. Aren't competent teachers experts in *everything*? It turns out that I couldn't teach my students the fine details of copyright law, the mechanics of bridge construction, or market impact of March Madness.

Letting my students follow their research interests allowed me to let go of being the authoritative academic in the room. Confidence in my teaching did not have to diminish the intellect of my students. My job stopped being the person with the answers. It was now my students' task to problem solve within their field, locating the experts and resources they needed. I could focus on helping my students write about their findings in a clear, impactful style. Getting over this pedagogical hurdle helped my students write better and develop their own academic confidence. With a balance of trust and communication, I think my students and I both discovered what was beyond reading and writing across disciplines: working with the people within them.

Hannah S.:

Teaching in the FSE program has been a wonderful and rewarding experience, and has helped me grow as a scholar and a teacher. Although I came into the program with some teaching experience, I had never had any formal training in teaching composition or literature. Through my time in FSE, I've learned theoretical and practical skills that have helped me discover what kind of teacher and scholar I am, and want to be. Part of this process is lots of trial and error – what kind of activities went well? Needed more scaffolding or prep? What motivates an 8am class or a 4pm class? – as well as lots of revision and creativity! One of the joys of teaching through FSE is the ability to exchange information and ideas with other instructors. Personally, I find that teaching brings out a new level of creativity and passion in me, and sharing my ideas with other instructors is critical part of that process. This sharing community is one of the best aspects of FSE – talk openly with your colleagues (GTAs or faculty members) about teaching.

One of the most enlightening experiences through FSE was the unique opportunity to design and pitch a 200-level course to the department after two years of teaching. I was challenged to imagine a literature-based course that would combine the skills I'd learned teaching the 101/102 cycle, my feminist teaching pedagogy, and my scholarly interests. After I was given the chance to teach my romantic comedies literature course, I found that the conversations I had

with my students have strengthened my interests and intellectual questions for my own scholarship into nineteenth-century marriage plots.

Dana:

As a Writing 101 and 102 instructor, I love having students with a wide variety of interests in my classes. In my last semester teaching, for example, I had students pursuing engineering, graphic design, business, and environmental studies in my class. These students were also passionate about hockey, marching band, anime, tiny house living, and participating in social justice initiatives. As a new instructor last year, I felt encouraged by the FSE program to create low-stakes and final project prompts that gave students the space to write about what they love, even while writing their first academic research paper or performing original research. This flexibility encourages my students to see writing as a practice and skill that they utilize in and beyond the classroom. Students are often surprised that there are not pre-set topics to choose from or “correct” research questions to pose (“I can actually write this paper about the cultural and historical significance of instant ramen?”). As an instructor, it’s exciting to know that each writing course I teach will be different, shaped by my students’ interests. By the end of each course, it’s rewarding to see how my students have progressed in their writing, but it’s also humbling to look back and see how much I’ve learned from my students.

Hannah W.:

For me, my largest struggle in teaching First- and Second-Year English courses is my age. As someone who began teaching freshman students right after finishing my undergraduate degree, I found that many of my students were either near my age or perhaps a bit older. In my first few weeks as an instructor, I found this issue to be a disadvantage. I fought with myself as I tried to maintain a clear distance from my students in the classroom, attempted to appear different than my students in the ways I dressed and acted, and spoke with as much authority as possible. Eventually, I realized that none of these tactics were working. Instead, I used our small gap in age to my advantage and began to utilize our shared knowledge in my teaching methods. Popular culture grew to function as a large part of our learning experiences together, and the students appreciated my attempt to bring such a heavy concept as learning to write effectively down to a relatable level. I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to ride this train of age similarities, but I plan to stay with it as long as possible.

Charlesia:

I’m surprised (and delighted) by how flexible and supportive our teaching program is. We first gain experience by teaching introductory composition courses and then we have the opportunity to create our own classes. I would have never thought I would have the opportunity, during graduate school, to create and teach a course about Disney and Feminism but the department helps make our teaching dreams a reality. Teaching at the University of Kansas is an exciting experience particularly because few graduate programs offer the opportunity to teach many different courses.

I believe the most successful teachers collaborate - don't be afraid to rely on your colleagues for support; I am a better teacher now because of my willingness to ask and receive help from fellow teachers. In the classroom, I encourage you to be as honest and transparent possible. Consider collaborating with your students throughout the semester and you will learn so much from them just as they will learn from you; you will be learning different things from one another but don't forget the tap into your students as a valuable resource of knowledge.

Peter:

The most rewarding thing about being an FSE instructor comes at the end of every English 101 or 102 class I've taught. At the start of the semester, I always ask the same question of my students: how do you feel about writing? I get the responses anyone would expect from a class of first year writers: I hate it. I can't stand it. I've never been good at it. Writing is boring. I can't do it. English just isn't my thing. I get one or two students that have genuine feelings of fear when they even think about writing. Of course, there is usually one student who shyly admits to liking writing, but that is an atypical response. Mostly I just listen to these responses, make mental notes about them, and use them as jumping off points for introducing the material we'll cover in the course. As we carry on through the semester, each time I hand out a new unit, I ask the students if the assignment I've given sounds doable. The students always say yes, but by the end of the semester, the students actually believe it too. On the final day of class, I ask everyone again how they feel about writing, and while some still hate to write (it is hard work, after all), they have a newfound confidence in their ability to write that I very rarely see on the first day of class. The most rewarding part of teaching FSE classes is getting to see that sense of confidence being built in the students over the course of the semester.

Gibette:

Teaching in the KU FSE program has been very different than what I was used to. I came from a program that taught exclusively analytical writing, so it was a revelation when I came here and learned that KU emphasizes rhetorical flexibility over analytical writing skills. But then you stop to think about it and it makes a lot of sense. The students we teach will face many writing challenges throughout their college careers and beyond, and we can't instruct them in *every kind of writing there is on earth*. But we *can* teach them how to adapt to new writing challenges and change their approach according to the specific demands of the writing task. Once I figured that out, the whole business of teaching writing clicked for me. I'd always thought—back when I was just teaching analytical writing—that the whole thing was a waste of time. When would these kids ever need to complete a rhetorical analysis of an ad outside of my class? But teaching them how to adapt to different genres and change their approach based on the demands of the specific tasks, that feels really valuable and rewarding.