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Our Monsters, Ourselves: How Monsters Can Build a Classroom Community in Developmental English

[Begin presentation with generic questions about what brought the audience members to the presentation. Let this information inform what elements to emphasize and which to minimize.]

Slide 1: Teaching the Weird: Monsters and Community

I want to welcome everyone to my presentation, and I would like to say now that because we do have an hour, I want to open my presentation up to conversation. Though I stand here to present my ideas and to theorize the data I've collected over two semesters of teaching, I realize you may have questions that we would all benefit from thinking about. At various points in my presentation, I will stop for brief question and answer sessions, and I will be especially mindful of the interests you've just shared with me.

So as I start, I would like to clarify what my presentation aims to do. Rather than provide a one-size-fits-all approach to Developmental English, I intend to offer reflections about what I have done in my classrooms that might then be theorized and adapted to your specific locations. To that end, this presentation:

- explores the weird of a monster theme in Developmental English
- explores the weird of community building through class activities and assignments
- explores the weird of the new Common Core standards from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

I choose to say "explore" because I want to avoid a prescriptive tone to my presentation. I, instead, want to consider theoretical ideas for my classroom along side the data I have collected. And as I have mentioned, I would like to now bring your ideas into this structure.

Slide 2: Course Context

Before I get into the specifics of the course, I would like to offer you some context for my institution, Houston Community College. We may find that our institutions are similar in ways that might help you think through your work with basic writers, and I encourage us to have those conversations. I hope, too, that this context emphasizes the location-specific creation of this classroom. A series of factors influence what I do in the classroom, where a network of outside elements affect my classroom environments. The first element that affects my classroom structure is the institutional constraints that I have. Our department has requirements about learning objectives as well as content focus. The HCC system requires:

- a focus on rhetorical modes of writing (e.g. descriptive, narrative, comparison, etc.)
- an introduction to the writing process
- a variety of texts to be read
- a completion of five essays, at least one in class

Though this influences the general content of the course, a more important context for me is the student population in my courses. Over the three semesters I have been with HCC, a majority of my students have been English Language Learners. Though the system does have courses
specific to ELL learners, more often than not there are not enough of these classes so they find themselves in developmental courses. In addition, my classes have been made up of mostly non-traditional students, those students who are coming back to school after long absences. With nontraditional students come other elements of family commitments and work. Economic factors have been a major influence on my students; they often have to choose their work lives over their academic ones. One pays the immediate bills; my class, unfortunately, does not. My students bring all of this with them on their first day, and what I’ve noticed is that packaged along with their extracurricular requirements are feelings of fear and trepidation, which is one of the reasons I moved to a monsters theme in my course. [shift to next slide]

**Slide 3: A Weird Theme**

To be completely honest, I love monsters. I devour horror movies regularly—even the bad ones. My childhood years were spent hidden away in a library reading books that I would not have been able to check out and watching movies with my aunt that my parents would have never allowed. I’m fascinated by the weird, and I’ve begun to work this into my classroom. For two years, I taught a vampire-themed Comp II, and when I moved to Houston, I decided to expand the theme to all monsters. Admittedly, I was slightly burnt out on vampires, so a broader monster theme would allow a wider range of monsters to come into my classroom.

I mention this background to emphasize this: I chose a monster theme, in part, because it was something I am familiar with. I found that the more knowledgeable I was about the topic, the better I was able to advise my students on revision and research. And I know I'm not alone in this sentiment. Rebecca Moore Howard, of The Citation Project fame, mentioned something similar in a keynote address she gave at The University of Houston. While the focus of her talk was on the findings of the larger project, at the end, she mentioned personal take-aways she had from the project. One of those take-aways was creating a course around something she was knowledgeable about. She suggested, as I learned while teaching my classes, that she gave much better advice about research writing when she knew the topics more thoroughly. While I don't consider my teaching style as the Sage on the Stage, I do know that my students, especially in the Developmental English courses I have taught, look to me as the expert. On certain levels, they expect me to lead, and when I don't, I've gotten frustrated push-back from students who think I don't know what I'm doing.

On the one hand, I do suggest the viability of the theme be influenced by your interests; however, I also advocate that the theme be something accessible to the students. In monsters, I have found a theme that gives everyone an in. All of my students have encountered monsters before coming to my class, so they all have a place to work from. But more importantly, the monster theme connects with our fears. On an affective level, the monster theme resonates with my students. As I mentioned before, the students in my class come to my course with a variety of backgrounds that effect their engagement with the course. But they all have come with a nervous, even fearful, energy about the class, and rightfully so. They must pass this course before they can move into other courses that are required for their degree, core-requirements like math, science, and history. There is a lot at stake for them to make it through. [Direct them to the Prezi slide.]

Rather than let my students be silent, what I have included for you is a sample of student reactions to the theme on the first day. Before coming to class, they do not know that the course has a theme, because this is a requirement at HCC. So on the first day, not only do we go through first-day introductions, but we also discuss the theme. In the spring, I asked my students
to orally tell me what they thought--and I got a mixed response from students who were afraid we were only going to work with horror movies to students who were excited to work with monsters. In the fall, I decided to document their responses, which you can see on the slide here. I would note two things here: 1) I had no negative reactions to the theme this semester, though my students could have just been nice because it was the first day; and 2) some of them had already connected the idea of monsters to the fear associated with the class. [Read some of the student responses.]

[At this point, break for a short Q&A session.]

[Shift to next slide.]

**Slide 4: A Weird Course**

At this point, I would like to breakdown the various elements of the course--the vocabulary we use, the assignments we engage in, and the activities that are regular occurrences in my classroom. Before I explain the details of the course, though, I should explain where I come from as a teacher. Critical Pedagogy hugely influences my classroom. I would prefer to have those classrooms that Freire and Shor describe where I work with my students as we all moved toward critical consciousness through reflection and action. But the realities of institutional requirements and even state mandates require me to re-think my agendas. To re-think my ideas, I turn to other scholars who explore Critical Pedagogy in a way that more fully engages with students.

Lisa Delpit, in her article "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," offers one such piece that I use as a reminder about how far my agenda may go for students who need to know and be able to access the "language of power." She explained, "If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier." My students are not participants in the culture of power--as ELL, as economically struggling, as racially diverse. Further, Delpit expressly links the culture of power with linguistic forms and being able to communicate with the culture of power. At some point, my students took a computer-scored writing exam that told them they couldn't communicate well enough to be in Comp I. They do not have access to the culture of power, and like Delpit, a part of my course is designated for acquiring power by learning the the skills of writing.

David Seitz is another voice in this mix. His book *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness? Practicing a Pedagogy of Humility* offers a way into critical consciousness through ethnography, where students begin by interrogating something in their own lives. Students begin by investigating their own lives, and then those voices become texts to be read in the classroom. I have pulled that idea into my classroom, though I have altered it in order to begin conversations among my students, where their writing is privileged in the same way that a textbook reading might be.

At this point, I would like to direct you to the slide on the screen and discuss the basic set-up for the course. I mentioned earlier that the monster theme resonates on an affective level, and I incorporate this idea into our labels for classroom activities. This works because it gets a laugh from my students--I'm always on the look out for those moments--but it also gives us a classroom vocabulary. [Direct them to the slide.] You can see that in place of "lecture," I instead turn to "Survival 101." And instead of "practice," we have "Survival Preparedness." These labels get my students laughing, yes, but they also build in a sense of transparency to the work we do. When these labels are on the screen, my students know what these moments are
supposed to be. My lecture is the material they need to know to complete a specific task, the material they need to survive.

Another element of the course is the sequence of assignments. Keep in mind that part of my institutional requirements is to cover rhetorical modes, so I have to have a variety of modes for their essays. To have this work in my favor, though, I have the assignments build on each other. I do this because when any of my students have had links between assignments, they have always fared better over the course of the term. This is, in part, due to the repeated exposure they have to the information. Instead of learning two new things with each writing unit—the genre conventions and new content—the students can focus their energies on practicing the genre. We begin with narrative writing, move into descriptive, and then into comparison/contrast writing. The first assignment involves the students creating a narrative about a scary moment, which is broad enough for them to write about a variety of topics. For the second assignment, the descriptive mode, the students create profiles of their peers. We begin to emphasize academic writing conventions here as well. For the third assignment, the students write comparison/contrast assignments where they consider their original narrative with the narrative of their peers. Our last two essays cover the process-analysis mode. The final out-of-class project involves a team explaining how to survive a monster apocalypse and presenting through a PowerPoint, and the final exam covers five steps to making it through my course (that the students can choose to share with my future students).

[At this point, break for a short Q&A session.]

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**Slide 5: A Weird Community**

As I'm ending my second semester of teaching the monster-themed course, I've found that the course theme isn't, in fact, what is weird for my students. Monsters they can handle. What is weird for them, what is strange, is the classroom experience that builds toward community. They aren't used to working on essays over time, much less in the classroom, with immediate and frequent feedback. They aren't used to asking their peers for help with reviewing essays or working on journal entries.

When I speak of the community of my classroom, I mean a general sense of belonging in the classroom where the students have to and learn to rely and trust each other as they move through the writing and thinking process. I realized that the term "community" has been critiqued and challenged for its possible exclusionary effects, but I would offer here that I have yet to find the exclusions explored in other articles. All of my conjectures come back to location-specific information, though. So while I do agree that "community" could pose problems in courses, I would suggest that we consider our local needs as we develop of classroom experiences, where student feedback is especially important. And in that way, community, again as a sense of belonging, is a weird element of the classroom.

What I offer here is a selection of feedback from my students about what they like about the course. At the beginning of the course, I asked them what it meant to learn certain topics that HCC requires in the learning objectives. And their answers effected what I did in the course. At the end of every unit, I asked my students to tell me what was one thing they thought we should keep doing and what is one thing we could fix. They also had to explain how they would fix it. What we see in these moments of student interaction is the dialogue I am committed to having in my classroom. I very much want my students to be active participants. Who better to ask to find out if the class is working? [Direct them to slide and review some of the student responses.]
My point here isn't to show you how awesome my class is, though I do think my students are pretty amazing human beings. My point is to show this information in order to highlight what mattered to my students, what their "one thing we should keep" ended up being. And you'll notice some trends: 1) they like working on their essays over time, 2) they like getting feedback before turning in a final draft, and 3) they like working with their peers. The other comments my students provided show much of the same thing, with a few additions of humorous things I do to keep the class entertaining.

But I'd like to focus on this third trend for a minute. My students have enjoyed working together, turning to each other for help. I would suggest here that these moments allow them to demonstrate their agency in the classroom, but I would also offer that these moments break down any fears that one student might have that s/he is the only one struggling with something. Several students have commented to me that they like the sequence of assignments because it allowed them to meet other people in the class and build friendships. Even more, this semester is the first time I have heard students deliberately trying to arrange their schedules in order to take other courses together.

At this point, break for a short Q&A session.

[Shift to next slide.]

Slide 6: A Strange, New World

At this point, I would like to transition into a sort of "Where do I go from here?" section. To start, I'd like to review the core curriculum changes that will take effect in Texas for Fall 2014. As I briefly mentioned earlier, state mandates influence the generic content of my courses, so I have to consider that when I create my course content. But I also review the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's standards for core curriculum. Although developmental English falls outside of the bounds of core curriculum, I review this material in order to know what my students will be getting later on. I want to create a course that gives them a foundation for the English core, again a nod to Delpit's comment.

For this reason, when I read about the additions to the curriculum in 2014, I immediately set to work incorporating these into my classroom. I wanted to pre-emptively address these issues because, honestly, if I am going to invest so much time in creating assignments and curriculum, I would prefer to have a general model that can last more than one semester (ain't nobody got time for that). There are three areas new to the core curriculum--Personal Responsibility, Social Responsibility, and Teamwork. [Direct them to the slide for definitions.]

Although I am unsure which of these will ultimately be a part of the revised curriculum, HCC is currently piloting revamped classes, and I am more ready for what weird, strange changes may come.

[Shift to next slide.]

Slide 7: What I've Realized

To close, I would like to briefly reflect on a few things that I've realized after teaching two semesters of this course. I think these offer general ideas that you can take away for your own classrooms. First, the monster theme works in my classes, mostly because everyone has an "in." But I in no way want to suggest that monsters are the only way to build community in a classroom. In fact, any broad enough theme, one that the students could engage in, would offer a similar starting point.

Second, the monster theme engages students in an affective way because they connect their fear of English with the fear associated with monsters. When questions of engagement
continue to come up as part of curriculum discussions, I would suggest, not that all courses start from a place of affect, but they start from a place that recognizes the fear and loathing our students bring to the classroom. Most of my students enjoy the class, but they have told me part of the reason is that they get to tell me what is working and what doesn't—and then I listen and shift the course accordingly.

Which brings me to my third point: the weird element of my course isn't the monsters; it is the sense of community we build in the classroom, where they have to rely on each other to succeed. From activities to essays, my students are part of a constant dialogue about the class, the work they produce, and their successes and failures. And though I realize some scholars have critiqued "community building" for requiring students to expose personal information, I would offer that starting from a place of a particular personal narrative—in this case the scary story—has been a helpful way to avoid those tensions.

Finally, using student voices and texts has created a classroom community where my students are more engaged with each other than previous courses I have taught. From the first day, my students have a say in what occurs in the course. We don't even discuss the syllabus on that day but save it for the second day so that I can privilege their ideas over mine. And my students continue to have a voice in the course even after it has ended because their final exams become texts for future students. It may be a little weird for them at first, but they adjust and become more confident and skilled writers in the process.

[At this point, break for a final Q&A session.]

[With a minute or two left, thank the audience for attending.]