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Sophomore Writing/A University High Laptop Initiative Class

College Admission Essay Unit

Theoretical Overview of This Lesson

This lesson is grounded in modern rhetorical theory. This theory can best be described in the words of scholars C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brandon, who described it as “[a] close connection between language and thought, discourse and knowledge... [it] is preoccupied with the writer’s choice-making in the knowledge and development of texts, the exploratory movement of mind, the discovery of connection among ideas, the progressive testing, and the reformation of statements.” This premise of lesson planning based on this theory supports the writing classroom I’ve strived to establish: a teacher-guided, student-centered discovery for truth through writing portfolios, increased teacher-student interaction, and mutual collaboration. In this context, teachers are providers of, and nurturers in, a supportive environment that exists to build upon existing student competencies. In addition, teachers are able to more actively observe as well as participate in the learning processes of their students.

Unit Overview

The first five days of class will be devoted to reading and discussing college applications, admissions essays, and institutional websites. Time is given to analyze the Common Application— an admission application that students may send to nearly 300 member colleges and universities. (Perspective 1) During the second week, students will work in groups and practice the roles of the student application/college admissions professional. (Perspective 2) At the end of 10 days, students will have completed an application and an essay requirement to at least one school chosen from their college list. From the initial class discussions through the completion of the application, this unit requires the teacher and student to explore the rhetorical concepts involved in the stages of the college application process, a skill that all college-bound students will experience within their academic career.

IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
2. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

3. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
4. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
5. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
6. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
7. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
8. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
9. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Day One Lesson Plans: Reviewing College and University Web Sites

(Note: Each day's lesson is designed to accommodate a one hour class period).

Context

Students will begin this curriculum unit by exploring the institutional web sites of colleges and universities. The instructor will guide them to several pre-selected sites – the institutions chosen represent a sampling of the diverse post-secondary options available – to discern the messages the schools are trying to convey or project to their various audiences. Students will examine the ways the messages may differ across the constituents' respective corners of their sites. Their findings will be discussed as a class. In future lessons, rhetorical analyses will become more narrowed, moving from the college as a whole to the college's admissions application.

Materials

- Computer/Laptop classroom with Internet access
- Projector for teacher's computer

- Pre-selected list of colleges: Illinois Wesleyan University (www.iwu.edu), the University of Michigan (www.umich.edu), Creighton University (www2.creighton.edu)

Activities

1. Divide a Word document or spread sheet into three columns. At the top of each column, write *Illinois Wesleyan University, University of Michigan, and Creighton University*. (Note: In actuality, you can select any three schools that you'd like. These were selected because they collectively represent the various factors students consider when choosing a college – size, cost, in-state versus out-of-state, public versus private, Division I versus Division III, etc.)
2. Take the students to the first school's web site. Ask them to look at the home page and to write down the different messages they feel that the school is trying to convey through the page's text, design elements, and pictures. Write down the responses and their justifications on the overhead.
3. Repeat step 2 with the other two schools.
4. Have the students navigate back to the first school. This time, instruct them to look at the prospective student section's home page. As in step 2, ask the students to analyze these pages along graphic and textual lines. Write these results on the overhead. Ask the students to consider how these sites persuade or attempt to persuade prospective students visiting these sites to one day apply for admission to the school.
5. After a discussion of audience-specific messages, ask the students to prepare a similar chart on a Word document, this time with three schools they are considering in their own college search. Encourage the students to explore a wide array of web pages under the colleges' domain, but to focus most of their efforts on the prospective students section. Ask them to reflect on whether the web sites of the colleges they are considering are or were effective in persuading them to consider submitting an application. Have them elaborate on what elements were effective and why. If the web sites were viewed as ineffective, have them provide suggestions for improvement.

Homework

The students are to complete any of the unfinished work from step 5.

Assessment

The understanding of the key concepts from this lesson will be demonstrated through successful completion of future lessons. Please remind the students that their in-class and homework assignments will be assessed during portfolio review.

Day 2: Evaluating College Applications

Context

Just as college web sites can be analyzed to determine audience considerations and persuasive elements, the same can be done with college applications. Most colleges publish their own applications for admission (the exception being the schools that use the Common Application, but most of those schools require their prospective students to complete a supplemental application). The wording of the application instructions, its substance of an extra-curricular section, and the questions that make up the

essay requirement are all components of a rhetorical artifact that can be fleshed out to determine the values the school holds fundamental to its assessment process.

Materials

- Computer classroom with Internet access
- Projector for teacher's computer

Activities (Note: This lesson requires prior teacher preparation)

1. **Prior to the start of class**, create a dummy ID and password to use in order to access the schools' on-line applications. Open three Internet browsers, log on to yesterday's schools' application sites, and start reviewing the content of the applications. Look for elements that you'd like to bring to the class's attention. For instance, in the instruction section for Illinois Wesleyan University's application, a reminder that a campus visit is *highly* recommended (italics mine) closes an otherwise ordinary set of instructions. What might IWU be implying by such a statement? What are they trying to communicate to students and their families? Might securing a campus visit and an interview improve a student's chances for admission? Similar inquiries can be derived from other parts of an application: Why are colleges asking for the hours per week for extracurricular participation? Why does the word *diversity* show up multiple times throughout an application, including in the essay section? Why might a university such as Rice have a blank box on their application with the instruction to "Fill the box on the right with something that appeals to you"? (Found here at the top of page 9: <http://futureowls.rice.edu/images/futureowls/admissions/application/Freshman2007Part%20II.pdf>)
2. As was the case on Day 1, divide a spreadsheet into three columns. Take the students through the first school's application for admission. Explain to them that the lesson for today builds on the rhetorical and discourse analyses that they went through on Day 1. Have volunteers read aloud the sections of the application. After each section, discuss together the various components of the rhetorical artifact. The students should be able to generate and lead the discussions based on their experience with Day 1's lesson, but should they be especially reticent or need further prodding, refer to the examples of inquiries from step 1.
3. Given that most college applications ask for a writing sample(s), try to spend at least 15-20 minutes of class time discussing the schools' essay prompts.
4. After a class discussion on college essays, ask the students to review and make notes about the essay requirements for the schools they are considering. Ask them to outline the key messages that the colleges might be conveying to prospective students through their essay topics. Furthermore, urge the students to consider the audience – college admissions professionals – that will be reading the essays. Based on the research the students had done about the school on Day 1, as well as what they can discern from analyzing the school's application, ask the students to consider some of the key attributes and qualities that the admissions committee might be looking for in their applicants. The students can spend the rest of the class time on this endeavor.

Homework

The students are to complete any of the unfinished work from step 4.

Assessment

The understanding of the key concepts from this lesson will be demonstrated through successful completion of future lessons and assessed during portfolio review.

Day 3: Evaluating the Common Application

Context

The Common Application is a single college application that can be sent to any of the nearly 300 member colleges and applications. Membership is limited to institutions that evaluate their prospective students using a holistic selection process, i.e., a process that isn't based solely on test scores and/or GPAs. Two of the schools from the pre-selected list from Day 1 – Illinois Wesleyan University and Creighton University – are member institutions and give their applicants the choice between the institution's own application or the Common Application plus supplement. According to the Common Application's web site (found at <http://www.commonapp.org/>), the mission of this not-for-profit group is to maintain a reliable service while promoting equity, access, and integrity in the college application process.

The Common Application web sites and application itself are rich in the possibility for rhetorical and discourse analyses. The lessons of this day will build upon the ones from the previous two days.

Materials

- Computer classroom with Internet access
- Projector for teacher's computer

Activities (Note: Additional Instructor Preparation)

1. **Before class**, acquaint yourself with stated purpose, mission, and layout of the Common Application by looking over <http://www.commonapp.org/>. Provide background information for the Common Application. Direct the students to look over the web site.
2. Take the class through some of the sections of the web site. The mission statement is a good place to start: Why are the words *integrity, equity, reliability, access, and service* featured in the column on the left? Some additional questions: Why would the Common Application organization feature extensive testimonial and endorsement sections? Are there schools of note in the list of colleges? What effect might Harvard or Yale's presence have on the other schools? Does an Ivy League presence give the Common Application an air of legitimacy? (Hint: Much of this goes toward *ethos*.) Might their presence be a cause of concern for the other schools or for students? Is that why the Common Application writes that their "...nearly 300 institutions now represents the full range of higher education institutions in the US: public and private, large and small, highly selective and modestly selective, and East Coast, West Coast, and every region in between"?
3. After analyzing the web site, move to a discussion about the application (the PDF is available at http://www.commonapp.org/common2007_PrintApp.pdf). Allow some time for the students to review the components of the application. Ask that they pay particular attention to the essay topics. Given what they know or just learned about the Common Application organization, is the actual

application harmonious with, and representative of, the spirit of the organization? In what ways are the other college applications similar to the Common Application? How are they different?

4. Have students pair up to discuss two directions of persuasion, the first coming from the organization's side and the other coming from students who apply using the Common Application. Ask that the students write down the ways that the Common Application organization attempts to appeal to/persuade/allure prospective students to use their "product." Also have the students consider how they might "sell" themselves if and when applying with the Common Application given all they know about what listed institutions must agree to and abide by for membership.
5. If there's enough time, have the groups share their findings with the class.

Homework

The students are to complete any of the unfinished work from step 5.

Assessment

The understanding of the key concepts from this lesson will be demonstrated through successful completion of future lessons and assessed during portfolio review.

Day 4: Evaluating College Admissions Essays

Context

Sarah M. McGinty, a university supervisor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the author of several books on the college application essay, traces the history of the application essay or personal statement to the boom in college enrollment following World War II. Originally conceived to gauge student interest, the essay evolved over the years as a way to capture additional information about the applicant. Essays now provide information about an applicant that is not apparent from the general application. These writing samples can provide glimpses into the student's writing style, background, personality, passions, apprehensions, and values.

Most student groan when they hear that a college has an essay requirement as part of their application. They see it as another hurdle in an already laborious process. If encouraged from a rhetorical standpoint, however, students may be encouraged to embrace the opportunity. Most schools that require essays do so in order get a more complete picture of an applicant. For an already stellar student, an effective and persuasive essay confirms scholarly worthiness; for students who are more marginal, a well-written essay might be what they need to push them over the top. In either case, admissions essays merit a closer look, especially along rhetorical lines.

Materials

- Computer classroom with Internet access
- Projector for teacher's computer

Activities

1. Ask students to find at least three colleges and universities that require an essay as part of their application process. Encourage the students to include the schools that they are considering in their own college search. Have them compile the essay topics under the schools' names in a Word document. Give them at least 15 minutes to complete this task.
2. Pull up an example of your own. Notre Dame is a good reference choice. (You can find them on page 10 of their application at <https://admissions.nd.edu/applications/NotreDameApplication0607.pdf>). Should you choose Notre Dame, your Word document might look like this:

Notre Dame

- Students at the University of Notre Dame are passionate! Their passion gives direction and definition to campus academic, community, and spiritual life. Recognizing that you have already provided us with a list of your extracurricular activities, please briefly describe your greatest passion and tell us how it defines and directs you.
- St. Therese of Lisieux wrote in *Story of a Soul*, "The sun shines equally both on cedars and on every tiny flower." She reminds us that beauty can be found in the great and the small, in the extraordinary and the mundane. Show us the magnificence of the simple in your life.
- Ask the students to pull up the page <http://www.teachnlearn.org/APstrategies.htm> as a reference for the SOAPS – subject, occasion, audience, purpose, and speaker – rhetorical analysis. Use the SOAPS acronym to go over the rhetorical aspects of the essay questions as a class.
- With the remaining time, have the students start working on a SOAPS analysis for the three schools they have chosen. Remind them that while occasion, purpose, and speaker should be fairly consistent across the board, subject and audience should vary widely. To that end, students should devote substantial time deliberating about their subject and audience, and ponder the following: Why is the college asking these particular questions? Do the questions speak to a college's values? Are students to assume that the admissions professionals hold these same values?

Homework

The students are to complete any of the unfinished work from the last bulleted point

Assessment

The understanding of the key concepts from this lesson will be demonstrated through successful completion of future lessons and assessed during portfolio review.

Day 5: Review and Writer's Workshop

Materials

- Computer classroom with Internet access

Activities

1. Review the lessons covered over the course of the week: the analysis of college web sites, evaluation of applications, evaluation of the Common Application, and discussion of the rhetorical elements of admissions essays.
2. Instruct the students to use their SOAPS guide and the rest of the class time to start writing an admissions essay.

Homework

The students are to work on their essays. First drafts must be completed by Day 8.

Day 6: Creating Admissions Essays

Context

These students have grown up in an era of consumerism and are therefore acutely aware of what they want from a college or colleges. On the flipside, very few of them are as aware of what the colleges want of them. The lessons from the previous week were designed to bring out that awareness. This week's lessons will do the same, but in a new manner. For the first part of the week, students will take on the role of a college representative, the idea being that students will have a greater appreciation of the rhetorical situation after "becoming" their audience.

Materials

- Computer classroom with Internet access

Activities

1. Explain to the students that for the first several days of this week, they'll be asked to see things from the other side of the college application process – from the perspective the admissions professional. Their first task is to select a school that they'd like to represent. Encourage the students to select a school with which they are not as familiar.

2. Have the students analyze the web page of the school they have chosen to represent. Ask that they note all the messages being conveyed via the college's web site.
3. Using the information from step 2, ask that the students construct a school-specific admissions essay topic. For instance, Notre Dame proudly promotes its religious heritage, and so it should be of no surprise to read religious threads in both of their essay prompts.
4. Ask that the students pair up once they have finished writing. Tell the students to swap essay topics and to start working on their partner's prompt. Encourage students to research their partner's school before tackling their essay in full.

Homework

The students are to answer their partner's essay prompt for the next day. Responses need not be more than two pages double-spaced.

Assessment

The understanding of the key concepts from this lesson will be demonstrated through successful completion of future lessons and assessed during portfolio review.

Day 7: Reviewing Admissions Essays

Context

A continuation of work from the Day 6, students will spend a significant portion of class time evaluating their partner's response to their essay prompt. Students will don the hats of prospective student and admissions professional.

Materials

- Computer classroom with Internet access
- Access to printer/ copier

Activities

1. Have the students return to their pairing from Day 6. The students should "turn in" their essay to their partner.
2. Ask that students to carefully read over their partner's essay and to make comments using the Student Feedback Form (a copy is included after the bibliography).
3. Have the students share their comments with one another.
4. Encourage students to share points of interest with the class.

Handouts

- Copies of the Student Feedback Form

Homework

Remind students that the first drafts of their essays are due on Day 8.

Assessment

The understanding of the key concepts from this lesson will be demonstrated through successful completion of future lessons and assessed during portfolio review.

Day 8: Reviewing Admissions Essays – Part II**Context**

This lesson builds on the mock admissions review that the students participated in on Day 7. Students had been reminded to bring the first draft of an actual admissions essay on this day. They will once again partner up and assess each other's essays. For the purposes of this lesson, the student assessor is to stay in the role of admissions professional, and not revert to classmate.

Materials

- Computer classroom with Internet access
- Access to copier

Activities

1. As was the case on Day 7, have the students return to their partner to once again swap admissions essays. This time, the students will be reviewing responses to actual admissions essay prompts.
2. Ask the students to read over their partner's essays and to make comments on the Student Feedback Form (a copy is included after the bibliography).
3. Have the students share their comments with one another.
4. Encourage students to share points of interest with the class.

Handouts

- Copies of the Student Feedback Form

Homework

Having received some formal feedback on their admissions essay from a classmate, students should continue to work on their writing sample. A second draft will be due after the instructor determines how much additional time students need to be given as they continue through the drafting process.

Assessment

The understanding of the key concepts from this lesson will be demonstrated through successful completion of future lessons and assessed during portfolio review.

Days 9 & 10: Completing College Applications

Context

The last two days of this unit will be devoted to time for the students to work on their college applications. Students can choose to spend the time revising their admissions essay, looking at additional student samples of admissions essays from various websites, which may inspire them add ideas to their own essay, completing the other sections of the application, or helping out classmates with their applications. Students will read portions of their essays aloud on Day 10, getting the opportunity for some last-minute feedback before turning in their “final” copy to me on Day 11.

I use the term “final” draft loosely, as I believe that after students receive comments, suggestions, and an advisory grade on their each draft, they should have the chance to continue to revise drafts within a reasonable amount of time. The grade received at the end of the 9-weeks term will be the grade posted and considered as the final grade for that assignment.

Materials

- Computer classroom with Internet access

Activities

1. Inform the students that they are to spend class time working on their admissions essays and/or their applications. They can also spend their time assisting classmates with their essays and applications.
2. On Day 10, ask each student to share aloud the school for which they'd written the essay, the essay topic, their rhetorical strategy for addressing the prompt, a brief synopsis of their response, and a sample of their essay. Another option that is viable for the laptop-based classroom is to have the students share their essays in a class “drop box” which allows students to read and respond to each other's essays on-line. In addition, the instructor may choose to showcase several different levels of essays (sans names), to be used as further teaching samples of “what worked,” “what needs improvement,” and “here's what can be done to make it better.”

3. Encourage the rest of the class to provide feedback: Did the student use *ethos*, *logos*, and/or *pathos*? Was audience appropriately considered? To what extent and how effectively did the student address the subject matter?

Homework

Remind the students that at least one college application, and a draft for an advisory grade, is due by Day 11.

Assessment

The understanding of the key concepts from this lesson will be demonstrated through successful completion of future lessons and assessed during portfolio review. Student feedback form is on the last page of this document. This form can be completed from the Blackboard shell.

Bibliography

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Sophomore Writing: College Admissions Essay

Student Feedback Form

Date _____

Evaluator's name _____

Classmate's name _____

1. For what college did your classmate write an essay? What are some of the messages/values being conveyed by that college through its web site?

2. What essay topic did your classmate address? Was it a prompt you had written? Was it from the college?

3. Comment on the ways your classmate addressed his/her subject and audience.

4. A college admissions essay is really an act of persuasion – students are *persuading* colleges to accept them. Did your classmate implement any of Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals – *ethos*, *logos*, and/or *pathos* – when composing his/her essay? If so, how? If not, how might these appeals get worked in?

5. Please note any other comments, suggestions, constructive criticisms, etc.

