

ERWC in a Nutshell

By John R. Edlund

Teachers and administrators often ask, “How is ERWC different from more traditional courses? In what way is it better?”

From Engagement to Writing

An ERWC course is a series of teaching modules designed according to the same template. Each module starts by connecting the text (which could be expository, persuasive, or literary) to the student's lifeworld in some way, helping them engage with it. Then they read the text to understand it, with scaffolding to help them. Then they begin to question the text, evaluating arguments, evidence, and rhetorical strategies. This is where the focus shifts to critical thinking. Then we connect the text and the work they have done with it to a writing assignment. Students rethink the issues of the text and their responses to it in terms of how they will use it in their writing. They think about the genre, audience, and purpose of the writing they will do. Then they write, revise and edit their own text. Because every module enacts some version of this pattern, the students have internalized it by the end of the course and are ready to apply it on their own to the texts they read in college and elsewhere. This is the whole purpose of ERWC—to prepare students to do the critical reading and writing they will encounter in college, in the workplace, and in their daily lives.

A Common Pattern

Of course this pattern—engagement, understanding, questioning, connecting, and responding—can be designed into any course in any discipline. However, many instructors, especially in college, assume that students will be engaged and will understand, and dive right into questioning. Such an instructor will probably find herself trying to get a discussion going with a roomful of baffled students. It is worth spending time preparing the students for a reading so that the discussion will be informed and productive.

Connecting Reading and Writing

A second feature of the ERWC approach is the emphasis on the connection between reading and writing. Traditionally, students are “learning to read” up to third grade and after that they are “reading to learn.” It turns out, however, that we are always learning to read. Every discipline, every genre, every field of endeavor has its own vocabulary, patterns of organization, and conceptual frameworks. The farther we go in any field, the more expert we must become in its discourse, both in reading and writing it. In academia, reading and writing are theorized, researched, and taught by faculty in different disciplines in different departments. ERWC brings these fields together.

Emphasis on Rhetoric

A third feature is the emphasis on rhetorical concepts and analysis. We are always asking, “Why did the author do it this way? What is the effect on the reader?” And when they are writing, we ask them, “Who is your audience? What is your purpose?” The emphasis is on learning “to do things with words” and this is accomplished both by analyzing what authors are doing and then practicing this sort of doing themselves.

Strategies and Habits of Mind

By the end of this course the student should be ready to encounter new texts and figure out new rhetorical situations. ERWC is not a body of knowledge, but a collection of interrelated strategies and habits of mind for working with texts, concepts, and practical purposes. It is excellent preparation for college-level work and for various workplaces. It's a good course for almost any high school student.