

# DISCOVERING HISTORIES OF HIGH SCHOOL WRITING INSTRUCTION

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In his article “Where Did College English Studies Come From?” Thomas P. Miller rebukes composition historians who mistakenly “assume that historical change begins at the top” of the academic ladder; for example, at research and elite universities (66). Like Miller, Gretchen Flesher Moon questions the institutional locations we have used to research our disciplinary histories, calling for local histories that “challenge the dominant narrative of composition history, located in primarily elite research institutions” (12). Likewise, Lucille Schultz admonishes histories of the field that have marginalized “school-based writing instruction,” suggesting that “composition instruction as we know it had its origins” in the schools (6, 7). In our article, we take up the challenge offered by Miller, Moon, Schultz, and others to uncover histories of composition written from “the still-unexplored libraries, museums, historical societies, and private collections” that comprise the composition archive (Schultz 8).

In our research into the archives of one early twentieth century Midwestern high school—the Oak Park and River Forest High School (OPRFHS) in Illinois—we follow the advice of Gail Stygall who, in her 1998 article for this journal, advised that archival researchers consider a full range of documentary artifacts in reconstructing the history of writing instruction. Thus, our research emerges from the many works that OPRFHS English faculty made public in their conference presentations, books, and journal articles; the newspapers, yearbooks, literary publications, and other ephemera stored in the high school’s extensive archive; materials archived at the Oak Park Historical Society; and the high

school English papers written by OPRFHS students Marcelline and Ernest Hemingway, which are housed at the Oak Park Public Library.<sup>1</sup>

In the sections that follow, we analyze this high school's early twentieth century writing requirements and examine how OPRFHS teachers constructed a practical, rhetorical, and (for the time) forward-looking writing curriculum. We then discuss the work of a handful of OPRFHS English teachers who conducted classroom research studies at the school between 1912 and 1928. We offer this discussion to demonstrate how research informed the writing curriculum and the classroom practices at the school. We conclude our brief history of writing instruction at this school by suggesting some ways that current high school and college writing teachers may use their own school archives to engage their students in historical research and to help expand our understanding of the field's early history.

## **Developing a Practical High School English Curriculum**

In the early twentieth century, Oak Park, Illinois was “the bastion of Midwestern values, believing in devotion to family and community, progressive Protestantism, rugged individualism, and limited government” (Nagel 10). Founded in 1873, and expanded into a new district and building in 1907, OPRFHS offered a partially elective curriculum with required courses in English, math, science, history, and manual training, as well as electives in foreign languages and advanced study. John Calvin Hanna, the school's principal from 1898 to 1913, was an especially strong advocate for English education, abiding by the then-current arguments that literature was the core of an English curriculum with extensive writing requirements. Prior to his tenure at OPRFHS, Hanna delivered a paper to the National Education Association (NEA) titled “English—the Core of a Secondary Course” in which he argued that English should be considered a central part of the curriculum, “an immovable center belonging to

all courses” (666). In this NEA speech, Hanna argued that “in no field is there room for more extended research [than in the English course]... Nothing is more entirely indispensable. Nothing more truly needs a continuous study” (670). The early curriculum at OPRFHS reflected Hanna’s support for the study of English and the teaching of writing.

While Hanna privileged English as the core of a high school curriculum, the approach to English composition at OPRFHS under his leadership was neither particularly innovative nor especially rhetorical in nature, and was what we today classify as “current-traditional” and “modal.” The writing components of the literature-centered English curriculum focused primarily on grammar, sentence and paragraph construction, and modes-based essays. Thus, in 1912, the school’s English curriculum was described as providing “a clear conception of the fundamental laws of good description, narration, exposition, and argumentation, [while offering] abundant practice in the application of these rules both to written and oral composition” (“English. Special Statement,” 1912, 1). Key words such as “laws” and “rules” indicate the prescriptive nature of writing instruction at the school, but archival evidence suggests that when Hanna left the school in 1913, OPRFHS English teachers were empowered by the new principal, M.R. McDaniels, to develop a curriculum that placed a greater emphasis on “oral and written composition, with the definite aim of producing freedom and spontaneity of expression” (“English. Special Statement,” 1913, 1). While there is scant evidence to explain this dramatic shift in the goals for writing instruction at the school, it seems likely that when McDaniels reorganized the administrative structure of the school to more closely resemble the structure of higher educational settings, with deans for each department, the English faculty were empowered to determine their own curriculum (“Oak Park High Deans,” 1).

The school’s revised English curriculum employed a scaffolded model, with students engaging in increasingly complex challenges as they entered each new English class level. The freshman English

class, English I, emphasized narration and description through a study of myths and legends. Marcelline Hemingway's archive of school papers, for example, includes a collection of English I daily themes in which she was asked to retell traditional myths about "The Miraculous Escape of Aeneas Through Sorcery" and how "Helen Aids the Greeks." Though Marcelline chose her topic, her teacher created and provided guidelines for the assignment to meet the dual requirements of teaching written modes and the classical myths that the freshman studied. For her final paper in English I, Marcelline wrote "The King's Decision," an original myth illustrating the attempts of War (a man) to persuade Ruler to engage in war, and the attempts of Peace (a woman) to intervene. While this first high school course still included prescriptive, grammatical instruction, some OPRFHS teachers chose not to emphasize grammar with every assignment. In an assignment Ernest Hemingway wrote for English I, titled, "A Paragraph Developed by Details," his teacher Margaret Dixon commented on the content of the theme, but not on obvious comma errors and sentence fragments. The archival evidence here suggests that even in their introductory English classes, students at the school transitioned from skills-based, rule-bound exercises to write more critical and creative works.

In English II, sophomores studied the history of the English language while reading Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Carlyle. Work with the modes of discourse continued in English II, but this work was also supplemented by longer, expository themes meant to demonstrate content knowledge and to "enhance the study and practice of rhetorical principles" ("English. Special Statement," 1913, 1). These longer works required students to make informed connections between their study of language and literature. For example, Marcelline's longer expository piece for English II was an analysis of the English language "from the time of the landing of the Norman missionaries to about the 16th century when Shakespeare was writing" ("Origins," 1). Marcelline's essay included historical discussions of Anglo-Saxon, Danish, and

Norman English; explained how religion influenced modern English; and incorporated literary texts she read for class.

In their third year, students at the high school enrolled in English III. This year-long course focused almost entirely on the study of writing, including one semester dedicated to “short themes, largely expositions,” the “study of [one famous] essay as a model of writing,” the composition of “a long theme, the subjects largely chosen from current topics,” “short story writing and reading,” and “the preparation and delivery . . . of a five-minute speech” (“English” 37). Writing in English III also focused on both local and national topics. In an assignment unique to her course that year, in 1915, English teacher Bertha Smith’s students wrote about “the process of making ‘movies’ after their class field trip to the Essanay Film Company studios in Chicago” (“Trip to Essanay” 4). However, the five-minute speech Marcelline wrote for her English III class dealt with headier matters: she argued to save the reputation of an America that she claimed had “sadly deteriorated” because of its fascination with “sensation and novelty” (“Lack of Ideals,” 1). In their second semester, juniors were required to choose between two versions of English III: one that provided “an additional semester of theme work,” or a class that provided them with a prolonged study of Edmund Burke’s “Speech on Conciliation” (37). Both of these second-semester classes incorporated formal debate and speech based on assignments written in class, and OPRFHS emphasized the importance of oral debate through “Junior Debate Week” in May—a much-anticipated annual all-school event.

The required, senior-year English IV class focused primarily on the study of literary classics, and students’ written work included the composition of creative works like morality plays. However, the English department also offered the elective courses, English V and English VI, which permitted teachers to move outside the literature-based curriculum and focus entirely on writing. For instance, Mignon Wright’s English V was a “theme course based upon the study of short story” (“English. Special Statement,” 1913, 1). Wright’s students read short stories by famous authors and

analyzed elements of those stories in their written themes. After composing these analyses, students penned their own stories utilizing elements employed by the famous writers (Wright 401). Laura Blackburn's English V students devoted their time to researching and writing about the various clubs and activities offered at their school, and their compiled work that semester, *Our High School Clubs*, was published by Macmillan in 1928.

In their senior year, Ernest and Marcelline took a more vocational version of English V with Fannie Biggs, who ran this elective class "as if it were a newspaper office" (M. Hemingway, *At the Hemingways* 139). Biggs's students "had daily assignments covering the various phases of a small-town sheet. [And they] took turns being editor, special columnists, writing the advertising, doing features, straight news and sports" (139). According to Marcelline, Biggs "insisted upon style in her students' work" (139). Biggs's course probably shaped the articles the Hemingways wrote for the OPRFHS newspaper; her class may have prepared Marcelline to work on the Oberlin College newspaper, and provided Ernest with the kinds of experiences he needed to work at *The Kansas City Star* after high school. While English V and English VI permitted teachers like Blackburn, Wright, and Biggs to develop a more practical writing curriculum, the school's English VII elective focused on literary and academic writing to prepare students "for the requirements of Eastern schools" ("Changes in Curriculum" 2).

As this brief historical sketch demonstrates, writing was at the core of both the required and elective English curriculum at OPRFHS, but this focus on writing extended beyond the school's course offerings. Students' in-class writing was regularly published in the school newspaper, praised in the town's newspaper, and featured at school assemblies. When their course work ended for the day, students at the school engaged in a variety of competitive, extracurricular writing activities, including the girls' Story Club and Debate Club, and the boys' Scribblers and Burke Debate Club. They wrote for the school's newspaper and literary magazine, and when those more conventional forums

did not suit their purposes, students published underground or parody newspapers. The school's administration regularly sponsored competitions in letter, story, essay, and speech writing. Writing was genuinely at the heart of the high school experience for OPRFHS students, extending beyond the writing instruction offered in the classroom to involve myriad other aspects of students' academic lives.

### **Using Teacher Research to Shape Practice**

Archival evidence suggests that the English faculty at OPRFHS used a variety of classroom research methods, experiments, and surveys to construct their curriculum. For example, in 1920, OPRFHS teacher Essie Chamberlain conducted a survey of the composition textbooks used in Illinois high schools. Chamberlain's Illinois Association of Teachers of English (IATE) committee distributed 500 questionnaires to Illinois high schools, and based their report on the 280 surveys that were returned. Each school was asked to supply five pieces of information about their approach to writing instruction: what textbook was used, whether or not it alone shaped how composition was taught, what other materials were used in the classes, what subjects were taught that the text did not cover, and whether or not the school offered a composition course separate from literature. Chamberlain notes that most of the thirty-four textbooks her survey identified as in use in the schools "have treatments of some sort on the conventional Narration, Description, Exposition, Argument, The Whole Composition, Paragraph, Sentence, Word" ("Report" 7), but she also observes that the high school teachers she surveyed were using: "1. Editorials; 2. News; 3. Current Events; 4. World War and Reconstruction" in an attempt to build a more practical English curriculum that linked the composition course to students' lives outside of the classroom (4).

OPRFHS teachers contributed to both local and national conversations about reforming the high school English curriculum to suit the needs of their students. During this time, Chamberlain served as president of IATE and as the acting president for the

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). In her 1924 NCTE president's address, she argues for a new English curriculum to be "constructed for a new age, designed for the interests and abilities of the pupils of the present generation" ("Curriculum" 3-4). Chamberlain's address led to the formation of an NCTE committee tasked with researching "the demands of business, home, and community life upon English" to ascertain what students needed to learn in high school English classes to be more effective writers and readers after high school (Applebee 85). While Chamberlain addresses a national audience, OPRFHS teacher J. E. Thompson published the findings of his survey of the magazine reading habits of 1,916 OPRFHS students in a regional English journal. Among other findings, Thompson discovered that students regularly read their parents' trade journals at home, wondering: "[C]ould the school, by using trade journals in some way, bridge the gap between the school and business?" (8). These national and local research initiatives helped OPRFHS teachers focus their classroom instruction on the kinds of reading and writing their students would encounter after high school.

English faculty also felt that conducting research in their classrooms could help them determine the best instructional practices for both low-performing and exceptional students at the school. English teacher Bertha Smith, for example, spent three years testing the correlation between reading ability and student achievement. Smith began her research in 1916, studying six different groups of OPRFHS students whose grades ranged from failing to high passing. In her first study, she concluded that time was the most influential factor in low-performing students' ability to succeed in high school; thus, Smith argued that the high school curriculum should be arranged into separate academic tracks "to take care of these variable types, and begin with [students] where their abilities begin" (644-45). In 1924, when tracking high school students by ability was an established practice, Smith's colleague Chamberlain published the results of her year-long experiment to determine the best approaches for teaching the entire English curriculum to students of different abilities. In that *English Journal*



article, Chamberlain concludes that low-performing students fared better with shorter assignments, required more supervision, and lacked the ability to self-motivate (“Differences”). While she argues for additional studies to test these conclusions, it is clear Chamberlain hoped her research would both inspire “experimental teaching” (640) and shape English “departmental policy” at schools that tracked students according to ability (630).

Chamberlain’s 1924 Master’s thesis, “The Laboratory Versus the Recitation Method of Teaching English Composition to Groups of Low Ability,” analyzes an instructional method that provided students with time for supervised, yet individual, composition of papers in the classroom. While Chamberlain began her research as a supporter of the laboratory method, she concludes that low-performing students make more progress when allotted less time for in-class writing and more time for directed activities like peer reviews, “demonstration lessons,” and “drills” (38). While surveys and classroom experiments like those conducted by Thompson, Smith, and Chamberlain earned these teachers national acclaim and positioned them to influence the teaching of English in the nation’s schools, their research also inevitably informed the writing curriculum they advocated for within their own department, as well as the methods they employed in their own classrooms.

In examining the archives of this particular Illinois high school, we uncovered a handful of what we suspect may be countless examples of high school English teachers dedicated to improving both college preparatory and vocational writing instruction in the early twentieth century. While Progressive Era educators championed the kinds of standardization and standardized testing that shape—and often over determine—high school instruction today, their intent at the time was to improve educational opportunities for all of their students. Their recommendations were not intended to limit their students’ experiences in the secondary English classroom or to punish overworked teachers or struggling schools. The experiences of these early teachers illustrate what can be accomplished when expert educators use

their classrooms to engage in empirical research and turn it into effective practice and curricular development. We believe *Journal of Teaching Writing* readers may find similarly inspiring and instructive stories of teacher-research and innovative pedagogy in their own high school archives. In the section that follows, we discuss some ways to involve students in this type of research.

## **Conducting Archival Research with Writing Students**

As researchers, we are interested in the stories archives can tell about teachers and students of writing, and we are excited by the prospect that high school, college, and community archives may both inform and complicate our histories of composition instruction. We have both used archive-based assignments in our college writing classes to inspire our students to discover the untold stories of their own university. Asking our students to dig through primary documents to discover an important moment in their school's history creates a sustained sense of curiosity in our students, helping them become more invested in the life of their school. While the history of writing instruction that we uncovered in the archives at OPRFHS was not the result of research we conducted alongside our own students, our first-year and advanced writing students have researched the evolution of our universities' mascots; stories of violence and protest on campus; campus clubs, organizations, and publications; campus events, including one campus that hosted the Russian Olympic hockey team in friendly competition; the history of university buildings as sites of historical value; university censorship; as well as distinguished alumni, faculty, and students.

We have found that archival projects engage our first-year college students' research and writing skills in a number of significant ways. Students who engage in archival research must learn to write focused research questions, scour archival documents for new leads to follow, record exact bibliographic information for their sources, take careful notes, search online

databases for additional or contextual historical information, and make connections across a variety of sources to develop a single historical narrative. In the process, archival research also challenges students to understand institutional documents in often complicated and complex historical contexts, and to become familiar with ethical practices for working with primary sources.

There are many ways students can focus their historical research, including by writing the history of an academic program, department, or subject; composing the history of a school organization, club, or team; researching a particular school tradition or superstition; drafting a school biography for a famous alumna; exploring the history of a school building; tracing the work of a single teacher or administrator; or recreating debates, pageants, or plays performed by early students at the school. Students can also research how their school reacted to a specific moment in history by examining school newspaper articles and editorials about the World Wars, Civil Rights, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. or John F. Kennedy, the Challenger disaster, or 9/11.

The following are some recommendations for setting up this kind of research-based project for your own high school or college writing classes. Although archival resources vary considerably from context to context—for instance, few high schools can match the extensive and well-funded archive of OPRFHS—such projects can be completed in almost any academic institution using a combination of school yearbooks, school and community newspapers, course catalogs, and oral histories. To teach writing using the archives, we suggest the following:

- **Get to know your archives.** Find out what school documents are available and where they are stored. Before you introduce archival research to your class, spend some time reading through yearbooks, newspapers, and school board reports to get a sense of the history of your school, of stories unique to your institution, and, in particular, of the kinds of documents your students will be able to use in their research.

Furthermore, have discussions with your students about the different kinds of archived materials they may encounter and where to look for more information. For example, the documents cited in this study were found in three different archives in the Oak Park area: the Oak Park Historical Society, the Oak Park High School library, and the Special Collections wing of the Oak Park Public Library—all public archives. Each collection held different types of materials and resources, providing for a unique and rich narrative of Progressive Era writing instruction at OPRFHS.

• **Make sure your students understand the value of archival sources.** It may be difficult for twenty-first century students to understand that the copy of the school newspaper they hold in their hands may be the only copy of that newspaper in existence. Remind students that the archives they are researching are filled with documents and artifacts that your school wishes to preserve, and work with your school's librarians to make certain your students understand how to handle these materials. You may also ask your students to consider the differences between using publicly versus privately archived materials for research and writing, and the ethical considerations they will need to make when researching private archives or gathering personal accounts. While the materials cited in this article are considered open to the public for viewing and research, had they been private, publishing such materials would have taken careful consideration, permission, and legal guidance. Either way, discuss with students the ethics of handling and writing about the variety of archived materials they may encounter in their research.

• **Encourage students to be open to using different kinds of documents.** Rarely will researchers find a single document that tells the whole story about a topic. A variety of documents, including high school and local newspapers, yearbooks, and literary journals may serve as a starting point for their research; but, other kinds of documents—photographs, recordings, scrapbooks, obituaries, textbooks,

etc.—will inform and enhance the stories your students tell. Your students may also wish to expand their research to a local public library, museum, or historical society.

- **Teach your students to take careful notes as they research.** Require your students to record bibliographic information for each source they find, and to write either a summary of that source with a list of the keywords, names, and dates mentioned in the source or to compose an exact transcription for future reference. Keywords, names, and specific dates from each source can then be entered into online search engines, which may provide additional source material for your students' research. This information may also come in handy if your students move their investigations to the public library or a historical society. Since most students have cell phones that double as cameras, you may want to encourage your students to take pictures of the documents they find (with permission) so that they can refer to those documents later.

- **Have your students conduct oral histories to inform their research.** Primary documents like newspaper articles may tell part of a story, but recorded oral histories collected from alumni, current and retired faculty, administrators, coaches, and staff will fill in many gaps in your students' research. Incorporating oral histories into archival projects also provides your class with opportunities to discuss the ethical treatment of human subjects and informed consent: two topics that have become increasingly important, considering the availability of video and audio recordings on the Internet. When their own research is completed, your students should donate these oral history recordings to the school's archives for future generations to discover.

- **Emphasize the importance of your students' research by preserving and publicizing their work.** When their projects are completed, the class should make a point of adding their histories to the school's archive. You may also want to have your class publish their work in the school or local newspaper, develop a website with their narratives, or

present their histories at a school assembly. Publishing their research may open up other teachable moments as students are asked to research, understand, and comply with copyright and fair use laws.

Archival projects can enhance students' understanding of the history of their institution, but such student-led archival projects may also one day contribute to our field's larger project of historical recovery. Published student archival projects could help composition scholars locate abundant sources of student texts, discover innovative practices and practitioners who have remained hidden in our field's histories, or uncover how local writing teachers and school administrators responded to a variety of movements, professional statements, research findings, and practices in the history of writing instruction in this country. Even those projects that do not go on to inform the larger discipline can help students to develop a better understanding of the past and a greater sense of individual, school, and community pride. Such projects, we believe, may hold a great deal of research promise for both writing students and their teachers.

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