Course: Perfa 33: Acting I Principles of Performance

1. Date of Application: 11/30/201
2. Name, Dept of Proposer: Rebecca Engle, Performing Arts
3. Name of Dept/Program housing course: Theatre Program/Performing Arts
4. Name of Chair/PD: Rebecca Engle (program director) and Frank Murray (chair)
5. How often is the course taught: yearly
6. Course Prerequisites: None
7. Unit value of course: 1
8. Normal Class Size: 20
9. Number of sections expected Fall 2012: 2
10. Number of sections expected Spring 2013: 0
11. Is the course appropriate for first-year students: Yes
12. Relevant Learning Goal(s): Artistic Understanding
13. Chair will oversee submission of student work: Yes
14. Chair will oversee instructor participation in norming/asst: Yes

15. Teaching: "Brief overview: Perfa 33/Acting I: Principles of Performance is a gateway course to the theatre track of the Performing Arts major, introducing our acting course sequence. It was developed in part to fulfill the Area A requirement and regularly enrolls general-interest students. The idea of a theory of acting initially perplexes students, who may enroll expecting "to act." Robert Benedetti, noted theatre artist and teacher, and author of the textbook used in this course, admits to the challenges of writing about acting, which he characterizes "physical and intuitive." But he argues that intellectual skills provide a necessary foundation to the actor's physical/emotional technique; and it is these conceptual and analytic skills, called script analysis, which Acting I emphasizes, alongside the embodied skills required to perform.

Acting I thus addresses all five AU learning outcomes, offering an integrative course experience of Artistic Understanding. The integrative intent is reflected in the course's organization: Mondays are devoted to text-book based discussions on the theory of acting, using assigned readings from Benedetti's "The Actor at Work." On Wednesdays, specific conceptual tools are applied to a play script (which changes each semester); and on Fridays the concepts are put into action in an "acting lab" class. The common play (as I will refer to it during the rest of this proposal) is chosen from among those being produced locally that semester by a professional company; recent selections have included "Doubt" by John Patrick Shanley, and "Medea" by Euripides.

1a) Look at or read works of art.
In seminar-style discussions students develop insights into the assigned play, read scene by scene over a number of weeks. In addition, each student is assigned a particular role in the common play, and is responsible for an in-depth analysis of that character.

In the last month of the course, students work in pairs on an individualized final project: the analysis and performance of an assigned scene from a modern or contemporary play. In contrast to the first part of the course, when the whole class studies a single play, each student teams now works on a different play. To complete the final project, each student must read and discuss his or her assigned play, and conduct the kind of analysis modeled in the first half of the course.

In addition, the class attends a professional production of the common play, and also the fall mainstage production at the college. Often the group attends a second professional production off-campus.
1b) Analyze/interpret form and meaning
The course teaches students to approach the interpretation of plays and dramatic roles through close reading, structured analysis and shared inquiry. Class discussions consider the relationship between form in dramatic writing (for example, the structure of dramatic action, the playwright's use of language) and in performance (for example, the use of stage space or expressive gesture) to the production of meanings for an audience.

A unique feature of the course is the opportunity to observe others interpreting the same dramatic role. For example, the class might include three students assigned to study and perform "Sister Aloysius," in different scenes of the play "Doubt." Further, after the class attends the professional production of this play, one or more of the actors visit our classroom for a production post-mortem, allowing students to test their own ideas about the script against those of the professionals they've seen bring it to life. These multiple perspectives reinforce the idea that theatre is an interpretive art-form.

1c) Apply discipline-based vocabulary
Each assigned reading in The Actor at Work introduces discipline-specific concepts and vocabulary. Their application is reinforced by the instructor during discussions of the assigned plays and the acting lab course component.

1d) Explore the artistic piece's significance within appropriate contexts.
Each play studied provides a range of relevant research topics, including the social-historical context of its setting, and the playwright's own era and body of work. The study of Doubt, for example, required research on such contextualizing topics as the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, Vatican II, Civil Rights legislation, parochial schools, American women in the 1960s, and so forth. Such research informs both class discussions and written analyses.

2a) Participation in Creative Process
The weekly lab classes, on Fridays, progress developmentally from introductory acting exercises to the rehearsal and performance of scripted scenes. The training emphasizes fundamental physical, mental/emotional and interpersonal skills required of an actor. Each lab class includes opportunities to engage in creative problem-solving sometimes alone, often with a partner or as part of a larger ensemble.

2b) Production of artifact appropriate to the discipline
The performance of a scripted two-character scene - requiring not only script analysis but physical characterization, memorization, partner work, and staging - is the standard artifact? required in acting courses at all levels. Written assignments spread across the semester, and culminating in the final project portfolio, provide incremental practice with the analytic tools used in script analysis.

16. Learning: "1a) Look at or read works of art.
Over the semester, each student reads and studies closely two full-length plays, and attends productions of two or three full-length plays. All plays, whether classic or contemporary, are by playwrights of recognized importance.

1b) Analyze/interpret form and meaning
As in seminar, class participation is an important component of the coursework. In weekly discussions of the assigned plays and performances, students demonstrate analytic skills
and forward developing insights and interpretations. The comprehensive mid-term exam includes several questions asking students to synthesize and express their own ideas about the play and character in essay form. A take-home component of the mid-term, a character autobiography, allows students more creative latitude in conveying their own insights into their assigned role.

The course’s final project requires the production of a written portfolio documenting the developing analysis of each student’s assigned play and role, from first impressions of the script to deeper insights into scene structure, dramatic themes, and character. This summative portfolio assignment foregrounds the intellectual inquiry at the heart of the rehearsal process, requiring students to go beyond a test-taking grasp of course content.

1c) Apply discipline-based vocabulary
Students demonstrate command of discipline-specific vocabulary, introduced in the assigned readings, in a number of ways, including periodic quizzes and a comprehensive mid-term exam. Students must also use discipline-specific terms in class discussions of the assigned plays, and in written reflection-responses to live performances. In addition, short weekly written assignments [about fifteen per semester], allow students to show that they can relate these terms and concepts to real-life observations and experiences.

1d) Explore the artistic piece’s significance within appropriate contexts
Each student is assigned one context report on a specific topic, and presents this information in an oral report. Students are responsible for all information presented in the context reports, and must demonstrate a thoughtful, selective application of it to their assigned character. Both the midterm exam and the final project portfolio require students to show that they have incorporated an understanding of the play’s social/historical context into their assigned roles.

2a) Participation in Creative Process
The rehearsal process for two assigned scenes (one from the common play and the second from the individualized summative project) requires students to apply technical skills, theoretical concepts and the fruits of their own script analysis to the embodiment of a character and the realization of a scene. Creative process is emphasized as individuals negotiate their own ideas and choices with others in their scene. Students conduct their own rehearsals in and out of class, and the instructor observes and consults on the work in progress; the instructor also offers individual coaching out of class.

2b) Production of artifact appropriate to the discipline
As described above, both the study of the common play, and the course’s final project culminate in rehearsal and performance of a scene. Each student thus develops and presents two roles during the semester. These performance assignments close the circle between the parts of Acting I devoted to play analysis and a theoretical understanding of performance, on the one hand, and the experientially based Friday lab classes.

The final project’s written portfolio, whose components reiterate the steps students have earlier taken while working as a class to analyze the common script, strengthens the conceptual unity of the course, giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their command of key course ideas even as it invites them to freely develop their own individual interpretations.