FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Susan Ertel
Associate Professor of English
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DSU CENTER FOR TEACHING & LEARNING
Ms. Susan Ertel, Associate Professor of English, has been at Dixie State University (DSU) for 23 years, with January being her teaching anniversary. Prof. Ertel's specialty is working with under-prepared students. Her career began in Arkansas at a community college, working with students that aren't quite prepared for college, which she continues to do here at DSU. As an open-access college, our students especially need this assistance. She assesses where students are in their journey, and tries to get them prepared for success in a college setting. She specializes in working with these students in composition, but she covers many other general areas of college life as well.

Outside of work, Prof. Ertel is a bit of a nerd. She enjoys all things Star Wars, Star Trek, Dr. Who, Lord of the Rings, and is fairly deeply embedded in fandom. She reads a lot of fantasy and sci-fi novels and has actually presented at conferences in the past on Octavia Butler, a famous American science fiction author and the first African American to win the Hugo Award.

One unusual fact about Ms. Ertel is that she is actually tall (5'11''). It's hard to see when so many of her classes are online; most of her students are surprised when they meet her in person. However, she is still the shortest person in her family.

**INNOVATION IN TEACHING**

Hands-On in Any Subject:

Hands-on teaching is a technique that Prof. Ertel has always tried to use in the classroom. As an English professor, she prefers using the flipped classroom technique. Students do the class' readings online, and then do learning activities such as discussing, learning, and writing while in person.

A very common misconception about English is that it is mainly lecture-based, where a lot of reading is done inside the classroom instead of the hands-on workshops you get in other disciplines. In Prof. Ertel's class, students are always on the move. For example, Prof. Ertel often uses group sort discussions, in which corners of the room are designated as different opinions, and each student has to walk to the corner of the room that they agree with. They then explain their position to other students in the classroom, debate with them, and even can move and change sides depending on what they learn. She also loves to do group activities, where students will break off into groups with their own whiteboard space and pick apart what they are learning through diagraming. Often, she will project onto the main board a section of the text, and then the students come up to the board and make notes, suggestions, and edits, as well as identify context clues.

Application and Interaction

Ms. Ertel also emphasizes that English is beneficial not only to reading comprehension but also to a student's own writing. As readers, we
decode what an author is trying to communicate. As writers, we can use those same techniques to give our writing a deeper meaning. Why did this passage make the reader happy or sad? Conventions like leading words and symbolism can improve students’ own writing when they learn about these techniques in the writing of others.

Even though classes have continuously moved more and more online, Prof. Ertel has adapted to the change and found new ways for her students to interact. Whether it is pulling up a document on zoom and allowing students to highlight instead of the usual board format, or using breakout rooms to create the group sessions she did before, there are still ways she can engage students actively when classes are online.

Another part of Prof. Ertel’s teaching method is using humor. Many students, after taking her class, expressed that they remembered and retained what they learned because she made the class fun and memorable. They’re still working hard and getting the projects and assignments done, but they enjoy that time as well. She brings her own flairs and personality to what she teaches.

CLASSES TO TEACH, AND WHY?

Professor Ertel’s favorite class is English 1410, elements of grammar. It’s a required class for English majors, and it’s where Prof. Ertel has the most fun of her classes. She gets to dive into grammar and rhetoric and really gets to play around in the class. At this point, the students in the class have chosen English as a major, so they’re passionate about it, and they’re willing to “go into the weeds” to figure out what a piece of writing is actually saying. To look at something they may have ready for pleasure in the past, and then think critically and go into depth about why the writing is powerful, is a unique experience. It’s amazing to learn about authors, what they chose to do with their writing, and why they did it to elicit the chosen emotions.

GET TO KNOW ME BETTER

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO COME TO DSU?

Prof. Ertel moved to the state for DSU. She grew up in Arkansas and was teaching at a local community college there. She and her husband had always wanted to live out west, with how beautiful the area was. She applied and moved here with her husband soon after.

WHAT IS YOUR MOST CHALLENGING TEACHING EXPERIENCE?

Teaching on zoom has been an especially challenging experience for Ms. Ertel. During in-person classes, she is always up walking around the classroom. She’s a walker and a talker, so having to sit for zoom classes is challenging to her. It’s hard for her as well because she knows that the students are struggling, and they tell her they miss seeing her in person. But, she is making the best of it and trying her best to make it an active learning experience regardless.

WHAT IS YOUR BEST TEACHING RESOURCE (PROGRAMS, COURSES, WEBSITES, ETC)? ARE THERE ANY PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN A TEACHING RESOURCE TO YOU?

As a walker and a talker, she finds it challenging to sit during zoom classes. However, she is making the best of it and trying to make the experience active for her students. She stays engaged by interacting with her students in various ways, such as pulling up documents for them to highlight on zoom or using breakout rooms for group sessions. Her teaching method also includes humor, which helps her students remember and retain what they learn. She brings her own personality and style to her classes, making them fun and memorable for her students.
Ms. Ertel's best teaching resource is howtostudy.org. It was developed by a friend of Prof. Ertel's from community college and is designed to help students learn how to study and manage their time when it comes to school. The content is discipline-specific as well, so students can learn how to study for the type of exams, quizzes, and assignments that will likely be used in their area. Another huge part of the website is the assignment calculator, where a student can put in an assignment and its requirements/deadlines, and it will give you a timeline of what to work on when leading up to the assignment's due date. It prevents procrastination or time crunches at the last minute and is a great way to micro-organize the steps to a larger assignment.

A great person who was a resource to her was her grammar instructor in grad school, Marette Jackson. She had a flair for teaching that was so unique. Ms. Ertel loved the class and learning from her, and she was a great mentor to Prof. Ertel in her career.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU IN YOUR TEACHING?

The thing that inspires Ms. Ertel most is students. A couple of years ago, Prof. Ertel was able to teach the granddaughter of one of her first students, who had heard about his experiences in her class many times. She got to see how his life turned out, and know that she made such an impact that his grandchild came back.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE TEACHING EXPERIENCE?

One of Prof. Ertel's favorite experiences was with a student that was closeted LGBTQ+. In class, she had asked the students to write about what they were looking for in a life partner, and she specifically said it like that to be inclusive. The student wrote a paper and came out to her in it, and at the end, thanked her because this was the first time a professor had ever been so inclusive with their assignments. On another occasion, she had a non-binary student in her class, and she used they/them pronouns when addressing them in class. After class, the student came up and thanked her because she was the only professor who has ever referred to them as their preferred pronouns. Prof. Ertel cherishes these moments, because it’s so easy to acknowledge a student as a human being, and it makes a world of difference in their learning experiences.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHER FACULTY TEACHING AT DSU?
STUDENT REVIEWS:

“Hey! I wanted to bring you a card and a treat this week, but I wasn’t sure if you were working on campus at all. Anyways, I just wanted to reach out to you and say thank you. Through my years at Dixie State, you were by far the most influential professor I had. One of the biggest things I learned from your class is that it is okay to be myself, and I will forever be thankful for that. I don’t think you will ever understand what an impact you had on my life. So, thanks again. :)

- Facebook Student

“You are the kind of mentor that everyone is looking for.”

- Capstone Mentor Student