

Teaching Toward the Construction of Literacy Identities: Transforming an Undergraduate Literacy Methods Course using Authentic Literacy Practices

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Abstract

The literacy classroom is a powerful context for students to learn about their own lives and the lives of others. By integrating lessons on identity and diversity in the literacy classroom, the learning experiences become more relevant and engaging. Not only is this the case for K-12 students, but also for the preservice teachers in teacher preparation programs. This article shares the transformation of one undergraduate literacy methods course in designing instruction focused on identity work in an online environment. Intentional pedagogical shifts put reading, writing, and talking about identity at the center of the literacy methods course in Spring 2021. Through reading diverse texts and using writing as a tool for self-discovery, one literacy professor shares potential for the future of literacy teacher education, whether taught in-person or online.

Keywords: *Identity, Diversity, Reading, Writing, Preservice Teachers*

As an elementary school teacher, I often designed my writing instruction around organized units of study. Typically, these units focused on a single genre and progressed recursively through the writing process. This method of literacy instruction is grounded in the writing workshop framework as defined by Calkins (1994) and subsequent curricular resources developed with her colleagues at The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP). In my later role as a literacy coach, I supported teachers in planning literacy instruction this way.

Now, as a teacher educator, I also teach through immersive experiences by incorporating reading and writing workshop into my class each week. Preservice teachers (PSTs) learn how to teach reading and writing by engaging in authentic

acts of literacy and reflecting on the practices through the lens of a teacher and a student. Not only does this workshop process create more engaging learning experiences for the future teachers, but it also helps them internalize literacy practices by doing the work their future students will do and considering how the methods might look in their classroom one day.

During the Spring 2021 semester, I have grown in my understanding of what it means to teach reading and writing by moving away from only teaching genre-based units to situating literacy activities in the construction of PSTs' identity. Teaching through immersive and authentic literacy acts creates opportunities to read, write, and talk in ways that celebrate each other's differences and build a community of learners. These experiences cultivate an environment that

encourages PSTs to appreciate diverse perspectives and explore their own literacy identities through the intentional selection of inclusive literature and writing opportunities.

Identity is “composed of notions of who we are, who others say we are (in both positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 67). Because our identities are constantly being redefined both by ourselves and others (Muhammad, 2020), writing can serve as a tool for self-discovery while reading can provide truths about diverse groups of people. By integrating lessons on identity into literacy instruction, the learning experience for students is more relevant and engaging (Muhammad & Mosley, 2021).

McCarthy and Moje (2002) contend, “identity construction might be unconscious” because of the nature of forming identities as we interact within social, cultural, and political groups (p. 233). However, the way we represent our identity is more “conscious and strategic” because of how we choose to represent (or not represent) qualities of ourselves in a certain way (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 233). Therefore, the instruction inside of a literacy classroom, whether in a K-12 school or university, can be a way to help support and challenge the identities of learners. Most importantly, teaching literacy and providing a safe space for learners to explore their identity can be “stabilizing” for learners (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 333). Amidst a global pandemic, the possibility of stability is even more critical for young adult learners.

A focus on identity in a literacy classroom is not just about self-discovery, but also about nurturing an appreciation of diversity. Ahmed (2018) argues that we must explicitly teach and practice social comprehension so that our students are equipped with skills to both question and listen. Doing so will nurture empathetic students who are willing to be courageous in important conversations about vital issues (Ahmed, 2018).

Additionally, the texts used in a literacy classroom provide a strong foundation in developing an appreciation of diverse experiences. These texts should offer mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for students so that students not only see themselves represented, but also gain a deeper appreciation of diverse experiences (Bishop, 1990). As Bishop explained, “Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (1990, p. ix).

Drawing on the understanding that literacy identities are shaped by and shape the texts that individuals read, write, and talk about (Lewis & del Valle, 2009; McCarthy, 2001; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje & Luke, 2009), I created intentional pedagogical shifts that put reading, writing, and talking about identity at the center of my literacy methods course. When the COVID-19 pandemic required us all to quickly transform our in-person teaching to remote learning experiences, I was given the opportunity to restructure the activities in my literacy methods class. This article describes the process of not only shifting authentic literacy practices to an online platform, but also redesigning the course to align the reading and writing tasks of PSTs in ways that supported the construction of their own literacy identity.

This article is not grounded in the research of my PST’s experiences but in the relevant literature that helped support the transformation in my university classroom. The pedagogical shifts described in this article captures only a small portion of the undergraduate course specific to the immersive literacy experiences of PSTs. I began this transformation by first reconsidering the content taught in my literacy methods course, then modifying my instructional approach to an online and digital context to enhance the redesign of the content.

Transformation in Content

At the end of each semester, I ask students to reflect on the experience of reading and writing in the university classroom, focusing on practices they intend to carry forward. Prior to this semester, the feedback for the writing experiences concerned me. While many PSTs raved about the experiences with reading throughout the semester, most did not echo this sentiment with writing. Reading and writing were inadvertently disconnected, and the PSTs each semester found the work they were doing as readers more engaging and relevant.

In revising the curriculum for teaching literacy methods online, I chose to spend more time on identity construction and representation (Lewis & del Valle, 2009; McCarthy, 2001; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje & Luke, 2009) by better aligning authentic reading and writing experiences for PSTs. Instead of rebuilding my entire course, I sifted through practices that already existed, such as read alouds and independent writing tasks, and strove to enhance those areas with identity in mind.

I drew on Muhammad's culturally and historically responsive literacy framework detailed in *Cultivating Genius* (2020), Ahmed's social comprehension strategies as described in *Being the Change* (2018), and Rief's quick write structure in *The Quickwrite Handbook* (2018) to design weekly reading and writing workshop tasks that exposed PSTs to diverse texts and offered opportunities to write in response to those texts.

Muhammad (2020) explained "it is important to note that before educators begin to teach students to know themselves and others, teachers must first do their own self-work" (p. 76). Thus, I designed activities where the PSTs could write about their own identities and histories before exploring their biases, assumptions, and tensions, as advised by Muhammad (2020). I began the semester first with opportunities for self-discovery before expanding into the broader topic of diversity and inclusion inside of the classroom.

Because writing can be a powerful tool for introspection, I shifted in my approach to teaching writing with the PSTs. Instead of beginning the semester through genre-based units that progressed through the writing process as I had done in the past, I designed open-ended writing tasks as a way for the PSTs to explore their own identity.

I intentionally selected diverse texts to incorporate through read alouds and author spotlights each week. Then, I created opportunities for PSTs to write about their identity after reading texts that offered mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Through this intentional selection of diverse texts, the PSTs would see themselves represented (mirrors), gain perspective into a world that is different than their own (windows), and step into a world to share lived experiences (sliding glass doors). This inclusion of diverse literature made a difference to many of the PSTs. In a final reflection at the end of the semester, a student commented on her own literacy experiences in school and how she plans to change that for her future students:

Diverse literature can open a lot of doors to the students, they will be able to feel like one of the characters in the book. I do not remember having a lot of diverse literature when I was in elementary, I plan on changing that for my students.

Knowing the need for deeper alignment between reading and writing, I explored ways to guide PSTs in teaching literacy methods to diverse populations of students while also supporting them as individuals navigating a global pandemic. A more intentional selection of read alouds and writing tasks supported this transformation in content. The table below details the progression of reading and writing tasks for the first eight weeks of my undergraduate literacy methods course.

Table 1*Reading and Writing Workshop Tasks*

Week	Reading Workshop Read Aloud	Writing Workshop Task
1	<i>The Day You Begin</i> by Jacqueline Woodson	Identity Web (Ahmed, 2018)
2	<i>The Undefeated</i> by Kwame Alexander	Six Word Memoir
3	<i>My Name is Yoon</i> by Helen Recorvits <i>Your Name is a Song</i> by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow	Name Stories (Muhammad, 2020)
4	<i>Where are You From</i> by Yamile Saied Mendez <i>Where I'm From</i> by George Ella Lyon	Where I'm From Poem (George Ella Lyon)
5	<i>Ish</i> by Peter Reynolds <i>How to Paint a Donkey</i> by Naomi Shihab Nye	Lift a Line (Rief, 2018)
6	<i>I am Every Good Thing</i> by Derrick Barnes <i>Hair Love</i> by Matthew Cherry and Vashti Harrison	Social and Cultural Identities Quick Write
7	<i>The Hill We Climb</i> by Amanda Gorman	Personal Biases and Assumptions Quick Write
8	<i>Home</i> by Warsan Shire	Tensions with racism and oppression Quick Write

The first week of class, the PSTs listened to Jacqueline Woodson read her lyrical picture book titled *The Day You Begin* (2018). This text celebrates uniqueness and differences among individuals. The PSTs were asked the following guiding questions: What does identity mean? What makes up a person's identity? What identities are represented through the characters

in the book? Then, the PSTs were asked to create Identity Webs, a social comprehension strategy presented by Ahmed (2018) to capture their own identity, coupled with a quick write about who they are. See Figure 1 as an example of my own identity web that was shared with students.

Figure 1

Identity Web Example



The second week, the PSTs listened to Kwame Alexander read his poetic picture book, *The Undeclared*. The PSTs were asked to reflect on the importance of texts that help us redefine ways we share about critical moments in history and create more inclusive classrooms that value and celebrate diversity. Then, they each worked through a process of writing six word memoirs to capture who they are as individuals.

The third week, we focused on our names. The PSTs listened to two beautifully diverse picture books: *My Name is Yoon* by Helen Recorvits and *Your Name is a Song* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow. Then, they wrote their own name stories in their journal. This task led to our

fourth week where we wrote our own *Where I'm From* poems after listening to the picture book *Where are You From* by Yamile Saied Mendez and the poem *Where I'm From* by George Ella Lyon.

The fifth week began with two read alouds: The picture book *Ish* by Peter Reynolds and the poem *How to Paint a Donkey* by Naomi Shihab Nye, which both highlight feelings of inadequacy and the beauty of imperfection. After listening to the texts read aloud, the PSTs completed a free write entry by lifting a line (Rief, 2018) from one of those texts. Due to the contextual setting of both texts, the literacy tasks helped move the work from who the PSTs were

as people and who they are as future literacy teachers.

The next three weeks focused on the PSTs social and cultural identity as they reflected on the following guiding questions: What is culture? How do I describe my cultural identity? How do my social identity factors shape my cultural identity? How does my cultural lens influence the way I will teach my students? During the sixth week, students listened to the picture books *I am Every Good Thing* by Derrick Barnes and *Hair Love* by Matthew Cherry and Vashti Harrison and completed a quick write entry about their own social and cultural identity.

The final two weeks concluded with two powerful poems, *The Hill We Climb* by Amanda Gorman and *Home* by Warsan Shire. Listening to these poems guided the examination of the PSTs personal biases and assumptions, as well as the exploration of tensions with racism and oppression. During those two weeks, the students completed quick writes reflecting on the ideas in the poems, then created a final product that captured their identity. The final products ranged in genre, structure, and language. Some PSTs wrote poems like Gorman and Shire, while others wrote personal essays.

The progression of activities across the semester allowed students to explore their own identities as individuals, readers, and writers, while also examining their personal biases and assumptions with critical social issues. In a final reflection on the writing tasks this semester, a student wrote:

We got to explore who we were and where we were from in a new light. I appreciated that we were always given examples of other's stories, so we had a sort of guideline to follow if needed. It was nice writing about diverse topics and some that were uncomfortable at times.

Muhammad (2020) urged for the construction and protection of a student's identity because "if they don't know themselves, others will tell

them who they are, in ways that may not be positive or accurate" (p. 70). From the beginning of the semester until the eighth week, the depth of writing increased as students read and wrote about critically important topics to construct their own identities as individuals and future literacy teachers.

Transformation of Context

After transforming the content for my literacy methods course, I considered the context in which literacy activities would occur. The online platform posed a unique challenge as the literature written for teaching with a focus on identity and diversity had been selected in the context of in-person instruction and relied heavily on interactions and dialogue around important topics. Because all instruction for my class was in an asynchronous online format, many of the strategies I used in previous semesters or read about in existing literature needed to be adapted to fit the new digital context while still upholding the integrity of the strategy itself.

The read aloud was the foundation of the curricular redesign of my course. Each week, I selected a text for the read aloud that featured diverse characters and was written by a diverse author as detailed in Table 1. Because the course took place online, I used videos of the authors reading the texts themselves, whenever possible. In a brief recorded video posted on the university Learning Management System (LMS), I discussed the rationale for selecting the text, expressed important information about the author, and provided a few guiding questions for PSTs to consider as they listened to the text read aloud. I also embedded links to the author's website and purchasing options to encourage building classroom libraries of diverse texts.

Knowing the role of social spaces on the construction of identity (Gee, 2017; Kohnen, 2019; Nasir & Cooks, 2009) and aiming to promote collaboration and dialogue among the PSTs, I organized the class into five small

groups. Each group met weekly to discuss the topic using video-conferencing apps, such as Zoom. The integration of virtual collaboration allowed students to have live interaction with others even though we were meeting asynchronously online. The PSTs also engaged in asynchronous discussion opportunities through Discussion Board on the LMS and other web-based discussion platforms, such as Padlet, Flipgrid, and Jamboard.

For writing, I designed tasks in response to the text selection for the week and in support of the construction and representation of their identities, as described in Table 1. Each week, I

shared examples of my own writing, modeling writing possibilities and the construction of my own identity, while situating the authentic writing tasks in the real world. The figure below is an excerpt from the second week of class when we wrote six word memoirs. Building on the idea of cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991), I made my writing process and thinking about my own identity clear and explicit using both video and written examples within the weekly online modules in our course LMS. I also embedded hyperlinks to additional real world examples of six word memoirs, like those captured by the *New York Times* during the pandemic.

Figure 2

Modeled Writing Example

Writing Workshop- Six Word Memoirs



This week, we will be focusing on a creative writing piece that combines poetry with memoir, called Six Word Memoirs. You can read examples of six word memoirs [here](#). You might also enjoy reading this opinion piece from the New York Times that captured six word memoirs about the pandemic [here](#).

A six word memoir is only six words that capture who you are or what you believe. You can use the following steps below to create your own six word memoir. All of these steps should be kept in your writing journal.

Brainstorm:

Take a minute to think about who you are as a person. You might begin jotting down things that make you interesting or unique. You might write down moments when you were most proud of yourself. You might think list things that you enjoy doing or things that make you happy. This could be just a list of different words or phrases that describe you. Resist the temptation to cross out, edit, or revise- **just write**. The goal should be quantity, so write as much as you can for about *three* minutes.

Example: mother, sister, wife, nature, outdoors, yoga, swimming, wine, dogs, puppies...

Narrow Down:

Now that you have a long list, circle two or three words that really stand out to you. These are words that you could find yourself saying more about.

Example: mother, wine, dogs

Free Write:

Pick one item that you circled and begin free writing on that topic. The only rule is not not stop writing for at least *two* to *three* minutes. Write whatever comes to mind!

Example: Motherhood has been the hardest thing I've ever had to do but it's also the most rewarding. My day revolves around these little humans. I question ever decision I make, only wanting to do what is best for them. I constantly worry about the type of people they will become and the types of decisions they will make when I'm not around. My heart is filled by them. So much love that I never even knew was possible. How can something be so rewarding and so exhausting at the same time?...

Synthesize:

Now look back at your free write entry and think about the essence of your topic. Combine the ideas into one coherent whole about what that topic means to you.

Example: Motherhood is really hard but rewarding.

Revise into Six Words:

Now take that synthesis and revise it so it becomes six words. Think of this as a slogan of sorts. There is no right answer for this!

Example: So much love. So little sleep.

In connection to the weekly read aloud and guiding questions, the PSTs wrote in response to the specific writing task, uploading their writing in a digital journal on our course LMS. Students

had the option of keeping a paper journal and uploading photos each week or typing directly into the journal. The journal was only visible to me and the student, and I read and gave

feedback on individual entries weekly. In a final reflection at the end of this semester, many students shared that the writing journal allowed them to take a break from academic writing and to begin to enjoy writing, especially because it was kept in a private online space. In fact, one student wrote:

I realized I had not written for joy in a long time, I mainly wrote because I had to for assignments. Throughout the semester I found myself writing in a way I hadn't in a long time. When I was younger, we had a little more freedom with writing and now in

college I find myself trying so hard to sound smart and to write the right thing. The writing journals helped me write freely again.

During the fifth and tenth week of the semester, the PSTs participated in a writing celebration on Flipgrid, an online video discussion platform (see Figure 3). I asked the PSTs to select a piece that carried gravity for them and read aloud the piece. The PSTs had the option of focusing the camera on the piece of writing or their face as they read. I also shared my writing aloud as I was writing alongside the PSTs each week

Figure 3

Flipgrid Writing Celebration Prompt

Week 5 Writing Celebration

22 responses • 204 views • 49 comments • 4.8 hours of engagement

Choose a writing piece that has carried gravity for you so far this semester. Take a deep breath and harness some courage and bravery. Sharing our writing out loud is deeply personal, but also very rewarding!

In two minutes or less, read your writing aloud to the group.

After you finish, celebrate your bravery, then, provide specific feedback to the other writer's in our class on their writing.

As a writing community, we took the time to listen to each other's writing and leave positive feedback. For example, in the first writing celebration, a student read her original "Where I'm From" poem, and her classmate commented, "I like how soothing your voice is when reading your poem." Then, in the second celebration, a student read her piece about her name, and many students commented praising her for being vulnerable in sharing her story. One student's

comment said, "I love that your first, middle, and last name have an amazing story how you got them. Names are so special, thank you for sharing how you got your name!"

The writing celebrations allowed the PSTs to share more about themselves and their identity, which was even more important since we were not physically present in a classroom this semester. In each celebration, the PSTs would reveal intimate details about their lives in the

pieces they chose to read aloud. In the second celebration, a student commented on a video of an original poem being read aloud and said:

Wow! I loved your poem! I love these writing celebrations because I feel like I get to know my classmates better. After hearing your poem, I feel like we have a common belief! Awesome poem, I could tell it was from the heart!”

In shifting my class online, I wanted to create a vibrant community that reflected qualities of good literacy instruction but also embraced digital platforms to enhance those experiences. In striving toward a focus of identity and representation, I incorporated read alouds, small group discussions, writing opportunities, and writing celebrations in an online context using a variety of digital tools and platforms.

Reflective Thoughts

After this semester, I have expanded my understanding of what is essential for teaching literacy, both with PSTs and elementary students. There is so much promise in the inclusion of read alouds and writing opportunities to explore our own identities and the cultures of others. The PSTs engaged in authentic literacy practices focused on identity and diversity, while also developing a repertoire of strategies to use in their future literacy classroom.

In speaking directly to literacy teacher educators, Spitler (2011) argued that we must look closely at our curriculum and teaching spaces because PSTs deserve “education

programs that focus on the personal and professional identity development needed to consciously and confidently implement instruction that supports ... literacy development” (p. 314). After a year of uncertainty, fear, and isolation from a global pandemic, literacy became a tool for my PSTs to process, discover, and explore.

Not only did the first eight weeks of the semester support the construction of identity and exploration of critical issues relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but this time also built momentum for literacy into the semester. There was an undeniable energy because the literacy work was deeply aligned to topics that mattered.

Through this redesign, I also learned much more about my students early in the semester from their writing because the focus on identity created an environment where PSTs could see themselves as members of a literacy community. Our relationship was forged from intimate details of who they were as people. Because I also shared my writing and was actively present throughout the semester, they knew me on an intimate level, too. Compared to my experience in previous semesters, the distance behind a screen worked in our favor; PSTs shared more and wrote more.

The transformation of this course and my own personal pedagogy provides promise beyond just the scope of online education. Not only are authentic literacy experiences possible in an online format, but they are even more meaningful when centered around identity construction and representation.

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