

“The Courage to Act Begins with One Voice”

**Writing Their World: Promoting a Pedagogy of Authorship
in Teacher Education**

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Writing Their World: Promoting a Pedagogy of Authorship in Teacher Education

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Teacher education courses, and specifically literacy methods courses, can be viewed by many of us as a vehicle for “training” college students to become skillful technicians in a career whose success is measured by accountability to standards set by NCLB and other external frameworks. They can also be viewed, however, as a space where individuals may discover the importance of human agency in the transformation and preservation of a democratic society. As outlined by many critical educators (Freire, 1970, Macedo, 1994, hooks 1994), a domesticating education prepares students to acquiesce reflexively to the dictates of authority figures, uncritically consume information, and feel no compulsion to question or act, whereas a liberating education would involve students in the transformation of self, of schools, and of the world. In this paper, we investigate the power of personal narrative as a transformative process, discovered through authoring “books” – a practice in literacy methods course that may provide a means by which students can find their own voice and validate their stories as “texts” that can then be used for a variety of purposes in literacy education.

As professors of elementary literacy methods courses, we have found that involving students in sharing and writing about their personal experiences has solid pedagogical connections to several course outcomes, as well as giving our students a way to break down barriers and create collaborative partnerships that enhance their learning in the course. In summary, this project usually starts by reading a personal narrative of a

known author, followed by a sharing of personal stories from the students as a response to a given theme, and finally the integration of process writing to develop students' texts as a final class project. These student authored texts take on many forms and, depending upon the nature of the class and individual students, have illustrated the potentials of my students to not only overcome their own inhibitions about writing, but to also see themselves as "experts" on a topic and authors of a book that can be modeled for their future students.

It is widely established by many literacy scholars (Ada, 2004; Smith, 1988; Graves, 1983; Caulkins, 1987; Coles, 1980) that teachers who write and read and talk about it become better teachers. A wonderful article written by a teacher, Dolores Bustamonte, who had participated in writing projects and then shares her writing with peers and students, illustrates how the process helped them to become authors of their own stories. In *Telling our Stories, Finding our Voices, Nurturing a Community of Learners*, she stated so succinctly in her testimony, that:

"Something wonderful happens to teachers when they are expected to write and then share that writing with their peers. At the very least, empathy is immediately felt with the student who panics at the thought of reading his words out loud. How it feels to be asked to trust strangers with our personal thoughts and stories cannot be understood until you've been through the experience yourself" (Bustamonte, 2002, p. 5).

The pedagogical approach of authoring an original book is designed to connect students' personal lives and identities with literacy. As described by Alma Flor Ada and Isabel Campoy in *Authors in the Classroom* (2004), this process combines many important principles of literacy instruction, particularly relating to transformative, critical literacy. They outline the benefits of self-published book to include:

"Foster reading, vocabulary building and literacy in general,

Create a meaningful print-rich environment in the classroom and the home,
Build bridges between home and school by sharing life experiences and personal reflections,
Provide an opportunity for children and parents to create meaningful, lasting memories together,
Facilitate understanding of others by bridging cultural differences,
Invite self-reflection,
Bring out the artist or the creator within each of us,
Build self-esteem by validating life experiences and cultural history,
Empower us, as main characters of our own stories, to look at our lives as protagonists rather than as secondary characters in someone else's story,
Become valued treasure, to be kept as reminders of important moments in our lives or to be given as gifts,
Motivate us to: remember, reflect, dream, be authors, artists, creators, become whomever we may want to be." (p. 39)

Authorship is a natural and much needed component of teacher education programs, based on the philosophy that:

“teacher education programs should give new teachers the strength to believe in themselves and help them know the value of community. It is important for teachers to have the skills to help their students develop their own voices, and feel confident as authors. It is equally important for teacher education programs to promote the voices of their new teachers, for this is a crucial and limited time for new teachers to build reflection skills, develop their pedagogy, and empower themselves” (Winkley, 2005, pp. 254-255).

Authorship in teacher education asks teachers to engage in writing themselves, and in exploring their own voices as they write. Teachers learn not only about the writing process and how to teach writing, but also learn to engage their own voice. They thereby learn how to help allow their students to find and express the students' own voices. The act of involvement in writing about oneself is a natural preparation for the way a teacher *must* confidently stand in the world and project who he/she is and what he/she believes in and stands for. A successful teacher has a voice, and both uses and draws from it to kindle and empower the voices of their students. The act of practicing authorship helps

teachers model speaking their truth, getting words out, and using those words through the writing process to create drafts of written work.

One responsibility of teacher education programs is to empower students to be able to go out into schools and consequently empower their students. Authorship presents a way to accomplish this objective. When teachers have the opportunity to experience writing about their own life, goals, and dreams, it can transform them both personally and academically. Authorship also gives teachers a chance to experience the critical aspects of writing process for themselves, giving them a first-hand understanding of what their students will experience in creating their own work. This includes experiencing the emotional process associated with the mechanics of editing.

Unfortunately, many teachers have not had transformative experiences with their own writing. Such experience, however, makes it easier to spark a love for writing in their students. There is a desperate need for teachers to walk into a classroom with experience with authorship and the writing process, including experiences with reading, writing, speaking, and listening to others as well as themselves talk about their experiences with writing.

Many teachers who are experienced and successful either draw on their own powerful experiences in writing or they later learn this empowerment through transformative professional growth experiences such as *Authors in the Classroom*, developed by Alma Flor Ada and Isabel Campoy (2004). One of the purposes of *Authors in the Classroom* is to awaken the author within each teacher. Writing is a process that involves time, involvement, commitment, and engagement. Most importantly, powerful writing teachers engage in writing themselves. Being that fifty percent of teachers only

stay in the teaching profession for about five years, it is necessary to look at habits that teachers of writing practice in order to feel continued empowerment and involvement.

The involvement of teachers in the writing process that authorship nourishes creates excitement, enthusiasm, and a sense of hope. Many teachers feel a sense of isolation when they finish their credential program and get their first teaching job. It is therefore important for teachers to go into that first classroom with knowledge about how to create an environment of trust, community, hope, and honor different and unique voices. Authorship does those things. It also teaches invaluable reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

Teacher education programs simply must not assume that their students have had adequate modeling in the area of writing curriculum. Currently, credential students do not have enough opportunity to practice and feel empowered by the writing process. Many teachers do not feel prepared to teach writing when they begin their teaching careers. Teachers need that modeling in their classes at their university.

Authorship honors the voices of all students, which is more important now than ever because we need to educate all students who come into our classrooms. We each have something to write about and deserve to be heard. The teachers now getting their credential desperately need to support and empower students to write, to edit, and to share their work with others.

As teacher educators, the work of our past students, and findings from previous research projects (Laughlin, 2001; Winkley, 2005), are inspiring and bring us to consider several potential topics and questions for further study. What is the role of teacher voice, personal narrative and identity (or lack of) in literacy education? How might authoring

their own texts affect how pre-service teachers engage in future writing activities with their students? How do teachers conceptualize “authorship” and agency in the classroom? How do current teacher education practices enhance or inhibit opportunities for authentic literacy engagement? How might the writing process and authorship of “texts” be applied as a means for creating greater avenues for less well represented voices in history and in society? What might teachers and teacher educators learn from their students? What is the potential for expanding collaborative relationships with parents and communities?

Through this paper, and subsequent projects through our literacy courses, we hope to promote pre-service teachers’ engagement in authorship and validate how teachers’ own stories can be examples of how the “Courage to Act” does, indeed, “Begin with One Voice”.

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