

Preparing Teacher Candidates to Integrate Reading and Writing Instruction: A Conceptual Piece

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Abstract

This piece focuses on increasing writing instruction for secondary English teacher candidates in the form of integrating reading and writing. Often, teacher candidates are not sufficiently prepared in university coursework to teach writing and are left to rely on formulaic writing that merely prepares their students for the end-of-year tests. Using existing research and personal experience, this paper will focus on the importance of blending reading and writing instruction and providing more writing instruction strategies in methods courses. This paper provides a conceptual framework for increasing the integration of reading and writing instruction in secondary English classrooms and provides a template for integrating reading and writing instruction in practice for teacher candidates and practicing teachers.

Teaching reading and writing together can be a difficult task, but if it is tied into students' lives, it can be quite useful. Teaching students to write should involve more than just teaching them how to make specific moves that work for any essay they may write in school or end-of-year test (Smagorinsky, Daigle, O'Donnell-Allen, & Bynum, 2010); however, this is often the case. I distinctly remember referring to essays in high school as b-essays, as a play on the "BS" that I would use to work my way through ideas of which I had little knowledge. I still did well on those essays because I learned the moves to "BS" my way through. Many students are taught writing in this manner and even high achieving students will still write essays in this fashion (Smagorinsky et al., 2010).

As a former high school English teacher, and now doctoral student, I see gaps in how we approach writing instruction with teacher candidates. As a teacher candidate, I was taught

writing instruction in just a few class sessions. Grisham and Wolsey (2011) suggest that “one or two class sessions about writing instruction with teacher candidates will not prepare them adequately to teach writing in [the classroom]” (p. 360). If the research suggests that one or two class sessions does not adequately prepare preservice teachers to teach writing, something needs to change (Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Smagorinsky, 2016; Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Stockinger, 2007).

Story of the Problem

My experience with having only a few class sessions on writing instruction made me reflect on my teaching methods course. I do not recall learning, in detail, how to teach writing to high school students. I had a course on adolescent literature, but the focus of that class was teaching literature; writing instruction was not emphasized. I took a course on critical reading and writing, but that was not geared toward teaching writing, instead learning how to develop my own writing skills. I could have taken the skills I learned in that class and taught them to my students in the classroom, but I did not have the talents as a fresh, first-year teacher to take those skills and make them meaningful to young, novice writers. Once I was in the classroom, I discovered that teaching writing to teenagers is difficult. As an English major, writing is second nature, and it was difficult for me to take what I now did naturally and break it down for students to understand. Because of my lack of preparation, I found myself wondering what these students learned about writing in previous courses. When I spoke to my fellow English teachers, they just gave me formulaic (e.g. the five-paragraph essay), generic writing instruction that they had been using for years. I had to teach myself how to teach writing; this should not be what first-year teachers experience.

Over the years, I changed and adapted the formulaic instruction as I reflected on my teaching and found more information about the different ways to teach writing. While I understand it is important for practicing teachers to receive professional development on the teaching of writing, teacher candidates can have the opportunity to learn useful skills and tools, in methods courses, for teaching writing, before entering the classroom. Teacher candidates need lessons and skills they can use when they enter the classroom; whether it be for field experience, student teaching, or their first job, teachers need something in their repertoire to teach writing effectively. Writing instruction is hard and assuming that new teachers will be able to teach writing is inequitable. Many teacher candidates, if not prepared to teach writing prior to their first jobs, will revert to teaching writing the way they were taught—formulaically (Stockinger, 2007). Even if it does not happen, the Virginia Standards of Learning separate reading and writing standards for practicality, so many new teachers will interpret that as meaning they need to be taught separately. Moreover, since teacher candidates learn teaching methods from their field experiences, they also often see formulaic writing in their placements (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016). In sum, there needs to be more of a focus on writing instruction in methods courses, through the integration of reading and writing instruction.

My exploration of the literature on writing instruction confirmed my belief that more needs to be done to prepare teacher candidates. Morgan and Pytash (2014) reviewed the literature on preparing teacher candidates to become teachers of writing. In this literature review, which spans the literature of two decades, the authors found that teacher candidates feel that they do not get adequate instruction in writing but feel that they need such instruction to be better teachers (Morgan & Pytash, 2014). This problem is significant in an era of education which focuses heavily on standards; those standards include effective writing instruction, even though it

may not inherently foster such instruction. Moreover, since this literature review was published, there is still a significant problem with preparing teacher candidates to teach writing, which indicates that more research needs to be done to better prepare teacher candidates for the classroom.

Conceptual Framework

Research on effective writing instruction at the secondary level is not exclusive to the content of English Language Arts (ELA). Fecho (2011) advocates for the dialogical classroom and that can be achieved in any content area. The dialogical classroom is a classroom that students and teachers enter dialogue with the content and the standards (Stewart, 2010). Moreover, writing is an important aspect of the dialogical classroom because it allows students to work with their own ideas and formulate responses based on their own experiences (Fecho, 2011; Stewart, 2010). The process of inquiry, which suggests that meaning is constructed by questioning what we know, plays into dialogism in that we can provide opportunities for students to question what they know and what is happening in the classroom to construct their own meaning (Dewey, 1938). By tying lessons to an overarching theme or essential question that is relevant to students' lives, more effective learning can take place and students can begin to form their own meaning through thinking, writing, talking, and researching (Smagorinsky, 2008). All of this can be done through the process of dialogue, inquiry, and giving students the opportunity to make meaning in their own, but guided, ways (Fecho, 2011).

Reading and writing are often seen as two separate entities. Some secondary English teachers do not incorporate reading and writing instruction together, even if they believe that a good reader can be a good writer and vice versa (McCarthy, 2008). This often happens because some state standards, such as Virginia Standards of Learning, list the reading standards separate

from writing standards (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This is not done to treat these as separate, but for more logistical purposes. I find the common occurrence of treating reading and writing as separate discouraging because writing and reading are better taught together. Teacher candidates can be taught to integrate writing instruction with reading instruction by preparing them to develop conceptual units, lessons, ideas, and methods to use in the classroom (Smagorinsky, 2008). By doing this, new teachers will have the preparation to teach students writing that is not scientific, formulaic, and generic. Moreover, incorporating reading and writing together opens the opportunity for more focus on the skills students need to develop instead of blanket lessons on skills some students may have already mastered.

In methods courses for ELA teacher candidates, reading and writing need to be given equal weight; however, in those courses, and consequently in the classroom, reading is usually given more emphasis; thus, new teachers feel unprepared to teach writing when they enter the classroom for their first teaching job. However, teaching reading and writing together can help students to think more critically and develop their own meaning (Gallagher, 2011). As a result of poor preparation, teachers tend to tie reading and writing together in arbitrary ways that do not allow students to see the connections that are made between big ideas, literature, writing, and their lives.

I approach writing instruction from a conceptual framework that places great value on integrating reading and writing. Often, teachers treat them as separate; integrating reading and writing is supported by Fecho (2011) and Gallagher (2011). Moreover, their ideas align with NCTE's Professional Knowledge from the Teaching of Writing (2016). What I learned from my own teaching experience is that students can connect the readings done in class to their lives if they are given the opportunity to write. Moreover, when reading and writing are taught together,

students have a model to use when developing their own writing (Gallagher, 2011). Teaching reading and writing simultaneously gives students the opportunity to find richer and deeper meanings in their lives and the social relationships around them (NCTE, 2016). Whether students are reading poetry or a classic canonical novel, the act of writing while reading will help them to make meaning of the text in relation to their lives. Without writing, students are provided little opportunity to connect what happens in school with their lives outside of school. Dialogism and inquiry through writing can help students make that connection (Fecho, 2011; Stewart, 2010). While opening the text of their lives and exploring what that means, students are also given the opportunity, through writing, to explore and understand the text of others' lives (NCTE, 2016).

Both Fecho (2011) and Gallagher (2011) believe that writing should be connected to a larger context for it to be meaningful for students. Gallagher (2011) emphasizes the use of mentor texts for students to use when learning to write in a new genre. By using mentor texts in the classroom, students have an example of the ways that writing can be different when it serves different purposes (Gallagher 2011). While Gallagher (2011) and Fecho (2011) have more of a practical application for their writing instruction, this same idea can be used in a methods classroom to help teacher candidates realize the importance of connecting writing to students' lives and using modeling and mentor texts to enrich their writing instruction.

Literature Review

Standardized testing and field experiences have a strong influence on the ways teacher candidates feel about and learn how to teach writing. Beyond field experiences and university coursework, teacher candidates have a strong influence from their background as students (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Lorte, 1975). Many teacher candidates in methods classes have

grown up with standardized testing and will enter field experiences and student teaching during this era of testing, which can impact their teaching identities.

Standardized Testing

Methods courses at many universities tend to focus heavily on reading literacies. According to Grisham and Wolsey (2011), “in teacher preparation programs, a strong emphasis on teaching reading has relegated writing instruction to a less important status” (p. 348). Reading comprehension is important in the secondary classroom, but that does not mean writing instruction is less important. This emphasis on reading can be attributed to the strong emphasis on standardized testing and the decline of the writing workshop in English classrooms (Grisham & Wolsey, 2011). Moreover, teachers spend more time preparing students for the state reading test, especially in states which have abolished end-of-year writing tests or do not use the scores of the end-of-year writing tests for their school report card (McCarthy, 2008).

Recently, congress has abolished No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and replaced it with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The changes in this act reflect what is happening with standards-based instruction and its effect on school funding. Most important to this change is that the federal government has handed over control of accountability from testing to the state and local governments. The state of Virginia’s Standards of Learning for 9-12 English separate the standards for communication, reading, writing, and research into their respective categories (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This separation may cause teachers to see each of these standards as separate, linear entities in the way that math standards are linear because each skill builds on the previous. However, the standards for English are not meant to be taught separately. The standards for English may be separated for convenience of organization and planning, but the curricular framework prepared by the Virginia Department of Education

suggests that reading and writing can and should be taught together (Board of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia, 2010).

While well-written prose is what is assessed by the state-mandated tests, it does not have to be separate from reading. Moreover, extended-response essay questions are effective in assessing higher-order and complex thinking skills (Miller, Linn, & Gronlund, 2009). Standardized tests in writing can measure these complex skills, but when teachers focus on one genre (the five-paragraph persuasive essay, for example), it becomes an ineffective way to teach writing. If methods courses do not demonstrate the ways teachers can incorporate writing into their lessons, we run the risk of teachers only teaching to the test because they have no other basis on which to teach writing (Miller et al., 2009).

Additionally, Hillocks (2002) asserts that the more teachers focus on teaching to the test, the less inquiry plays a role in the classroom and the less students learn to deal with situations outside the classroom. When teacher candidates enter into field experience, they may be paired with cooperating teachers who have fallen into what Hillocks (2002) refers to as “the testing trap.” Without a pedagogical foundation for writing and language instruction, teachers will gravitate toward the culture of the school—emphasis on test scores—and will rely on their own judgment based on their perception of students’ needs. (Hillocks, 2002; Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Smagorinsky, Wilson, & Moore, 2011). When students are given the opportunity to write, they are given the opportunity to think and question, which is what the standards express but are not blatantly obvious unless they are unpacked and deconstructed (Hillocks, 2002).

Field Experiences

Methods courses are only one place where teacher candidates are given exposure to writing instruction. However, many teacher candidates believe that they get more useful information about teaching while in the field (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016). When teacher candidates are working in the field, they gain more experience with writing instruction, but the writing instruction learned during these experiences may not be the best way to teach writing. What many preservice (and in-service, for that matter) teachers do not typically realize is that students write, and they write every day (Kist & Pytash, 2015). Students do not see what they do as writing because tweeting or posting a Facebook status does not fit their idea of “in-school writing,” but tapping into that resource is useful in the writing classroom and field experience in schools that use these modes of discourse can provide teacher candidates with that experience.

When teacher candidates are in the field, whether they are teaching or observing, they are taking in all that they can to prepare themselves for their first jobs (Grossman, et al., 2000). When cooperating teachers are focusing on the tests that students are expected to pass, this instills in teacher candidates that this will be what is expected of them when they get their own classrooms. However, the success of preparing teachers to teach writing is dependent on their ability to implement what they learned in methods courses (Grossman, et al., 2000). Field experiences allow for just that—teacher candidates can practice what they have learned and learn new teaching methods for writing instruction. Additionally, Smagorinsky et al. (2011) found that field experiences can intensify the way new teachers are influenced by the school in which they work and the environment of that school. Field experiences are impactful in giving teacher candidates more tools to use in their classrooms, and many new teachers will rely on the tools they have seen and used in field experiences (Smagorinsky, et al., 2011).

Integrating Reading and Writing

The integration of reading and writing instruction is often done using writing workshops and bridging in- and out-of-school literacies (Daniels, Hornby, & Chen, 2015). The use of writing workshops allows teachers the opportunity to give students more time to develop their writing, emphasize that writing is a process, and reiterate that writing and reading go hand-in-hand (Gallagher, 2011). When teachers use the writing workshop that includes writings they do out of school (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, journals, etc.), the dialogue about writing begins to develop (Worthman, Gardner, & Thole, 2011). Furthermore, writing workshops can provide opportunities for students to learn to write as readers and read as writers (Hansen, 1987). The connection between reading and writing becomes blurred through workshopping, and students begin to understand that these two entities are not separate, but infinitely connected (Hansen, 1987; Gallagher, 2011; Daniels, Hornby, Chen, 2015).

By understanding the state of the field, it becomes ever more important to have a model or template of integrating reading and writing instruction in the classroom. By developing a template, teachers, both new and veteran, can implement and modify units and lessons to fit their students' needs. When veteran teachers adopt this model of integration, teacher candidates have a better chance of seeing the theoretical and ideal classrooms discussed in methods courses in practice.

An Example of Teaching Reading and Writing Simultaneously

When preparing teacher candidates to teach above and beyond the standards and state-mandated tests, it is important to prepare them with lessons and ideas they can use in their student teaching and eventual teaching experience. By using the ideas of Fecho (2011) and

Gallagher (2011) and their emphasis on making writing instruction meaningful to students' lives, methods courses can incorporate more dialogical conversations. In conjunction with Gallagher's (2011) use of mentor texts, methods courses can model what they are teaching. When teacher educators model in methods courses what they expect teacher candidates to do, the ideas become more concrete (Clark & Marinak, 2011). Additionally, methods courses can model ways new teachers can connect the seemingly dull and uninteresting texts and standards to students' lives. In this section, I provide an example of a strategy that can be used by practicing teachers to emphasize the preparation teacher candidates need before entering the classroom, and to also give them something to use as a template or for direct implementation in their future teaching experiences.

To begin, not all writing has to be high-stakes writing assignments (Jensen, 2009; Smagorinsky, 2008). Some writing can be an ongoing process to be used to further develop students' writing skills. One of the hardest aspects of teaching writing for ELA teacher candidates is writing has become second nature. I struggled with this as a new teacher because I had forgotten what it was like to learn how to write; I had to re-learn how to write to teach my students. Often, this sentiment is left out of teacher education methods courses because it has become seemingly understood that if you are a writer, you can teach writing. Many ELA teacher candidates are experienced writers who have forgotten what it feels like to struggle with seemingly simple writing tasks (Rush, 2009). In order for teacher candidates to remember that struggle, they need to experience what their students will be doing (Reid, 2009). One way to do this is through a narrative workshop that can run for however long or short is appropriate for your classroom and students.

Tying in with Fecho (2011), Smagorinsky (2008), and Gallagher's (2011) idea that each lesson should be tied to an overarching theme that students can relate to their lives, this narrative unit asks the essential question: "Where can beauty be found in the ugly?" Using this essential question and Fecho's (2011) example of students making more meaning of history lesson on the Holocaust, readings can be chosen that are both narrative in nature (tell a story) and where a character learns to find the beauty in the ugly that is the Holocaust. There are two easily accessible texts that are perfect for this unit: *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Even though the latter has a sad ending, Anne Frank still is able to find the beauty in the ugly through the family that allows them to hide in their attic. Elie Wiesel finds the beauty in the ugly by focusing on taking care of his elderly father and fighting to stay alive until he is rescued by American soldiers. These two memoirs can serve as a mentor text for students (Gallagher, 2011) for them to develop their narrative which discovers the beauty in the ugly. Using these memoirs as mentor texts for students' own narratives acts as a scaffold for students who struggle with writing and for students who may need help getting that first sentence started. When students write while reading these memoirs, they will be able to connect to their lives something that seems disconnected and irrelevant.

To begin the unit, you can discuss the essential question with students. Beginning with a discussion will open dialogue in the classroom and shows students that they have valuable ideas to bring to the table (Fecho, 2011). This discussion will help students to understand that there is something greater than just reading a book and writing an essay. To begin a discussion of what a narrative is, you can use movie clips, such as a clip from the holiday classic *A Christmas Story*. The scene where Flick sticks his tongue to the flag pole after the dreaded triple dog dare is an easily accessible scene. Students connect well to this scene because most have probably seen the

movie and will enjoy being able to work with something they enjoy while in school. After the clip, ask students to write the story from the perspective of one of the students watching (none of the main characters, though, because that perspective is too easily seen from the clip). This is an example of a low-stakes writing assignment. There does not need to be any grade attached to this story and student do not need to be given length requirements (unless that is what they need), but instead, teachers can use this as a formative assessment to gauge where students are in their understanding of a narrative (Jensen, 2009). This piece is the catalyst to enter into storytelling. Once you give students five to ten minutes of writing time, you can ask students to share their retelling of the movie clip to show the variations in the perspectives and writing styles the students use to retell the story. This will create a rich conversation on what makes a story. Moreover, this will, once again, open the dialogue needed to have a meaningful experience in your classroom. This dialogue can also begin to scaffold what you expect from students when they are discussing the stories they will read and write—the teacher is able to take a backseat and let the students construct their own learning through dialogue (Daniels, Hornby, & Chen, 2015). Once class guidelines for the elements of a story are developed, give students the prompt on which they will write.

In direct connection with the essential question, the following prompt can be used: Write about something ugly--war, fear, hate, cruelty, etc.--but find the beauty (silver lining) in it. Once you present the prompt to your students, open the dialogue once more, so students can discuss other fears that are more relevant to their lives. Students may come up with fears and ugliness such as ignorance, spiders, and death. Once you have a strong list of fears/ugliness, students can be given time to start brainstorming ideas for their narratives. Since the writing process is different for every writer (Fecho, 2011), expectations for length do not need to be given at this

point but can be useful for some students who may need that structure; you can modify the instructions and length requirements based on the needs of your students and individual classes.

While reading one or both memoirs mentioned above (I suggest choosing one, as two may be too much to do in one instructional unit), you can have students free write about the ways that beauty is found in these novels, free write about the ideas they have for their narratives, free write about ideas that come to mind that is personal to them, and draft their own narratives over time. Moreover, these free-writes can be used for students to develop their ideas before entering a class dialogue about the connection between the story and the essential question. Since this is a narrative workshop, you can allot time in your weekly and daily schedules for students to work on their writing periodically, and they should be able to write in their own style (Jensen, 2009). I have learned that forcing students into a formulaic box only hinders their personal writing styles, and they create pieces that are devoid of interest and passion; this is unideal and counterproductive to the ideas of dialogism and the writing workshop. Using the workshop format, students will be able to develop their stories on their own schedules and in their own ways.

Additionally, you can incorporate interviews of grandparents or other family members and extend the opportunity for students to write about the history of their lives (Fecho, 2011). Students can use these interviews in their narratives or as their narratives. Most of the time grandparents and older family members tell the stories of their lives to teach the younger generations to overcome the bad and find the good, which ties directly to the theme of the narrative unit. Having students talk to their own family members or close family friends gives them the opportunity to connect the reading and writing done in class to their lives (Rush, 2009).

Since this is a narrative workshop, students should have the opportunity, throughout the length of the unit, to develop their own narrative. You can assign flexible guidelines that give students the opportunity to develop their stories in their own ways, so that it is meaningful to their lives (Rush, 2009). As you work your way through the unit, mini-lessons can be used to provide students with instruction on writing skills (it may be different for each class and for each student) to help them develop their narratives. Giving students the opportunity to work on this over time emphasizes that writing is a process and that process is different for everyone (Jensen, 2009). Moreover, this will give you the opportunity to grade students on each step and not necessarily on the entire final product, so students see that writing is not just for a grade but also for the reader and the writer (Stockinger, 2007). The use of dialogue and free writing throughout and allowing students the opportunity to develop their writing over time can be used as formative assessments for the aforementioned mini-lessons, but the final product, even if it is not given a grade, can be used as a summative assessment of all the ideas discussed throughout the unit.

Discussion and Conclusion

The ideas of the dialogical classroom and essential questions are not new (Fecho, 2011; Gallagher, 2011; Smagorinsky, 2008). However, more often than not, teacher candidates are only introduced to these ideas in a theoretical manner (Smagorinsky, 2008). Instead of presenting these ideas as a theory, this narrative unit provides a template for methods courses that practicing teachers can use and modify to their needs. Moreover, by presenting teacher candidates with a template, they can put the theory into practice, which is essential in the classroom (Smagorinsky, 2008).

To battle the problem of students learning to write B-essays (Smagorinsky, et al, 2010) and generic pieces of writing, teachers can tie literature to writing and tie the lessons to students'

lives using the essential question. Just as Fecho (2011) and Gallagher (2011) assert, students will find little meaning in the lessons if they cannot find a way to connect them to their lives. When students can connect what they are learning to their lives, it teaches them the critical thinking skills they will need to be active citizens outside of school (Eisner, 2003). Since we are teaching in a standards saturated era, it has never been more important to show students that there is more to school than just passing a test. Essentially, if teachers want to reform education, they must do it at the ground level—in their classrooms (Eisner, 2003).

Methods courses are one place where education reform can begin. If we better prepare teacher candidates to integrate the teaching of reading and writing, they can enter schools with innovative strategies they can share with their colleagues. Moreover, teacher candidates will have more confidence in their teaching of writing because they will have something to implement immediately and a model to follow for future units and lessons (Smagorinsky et al., 2011; Daisey, 2009). Since standards and standardized testing are such important aspects of education, I do not advocate for completely ignoring the standards or the tests students must pass to advance to the next grade or to graduate. What I do advocate for is teaching above and beyond the standards, so that students are able to think and problem solve in ways they will be expected to once they leave school (Eisner, 2003).

What I have provided is a conceptual framework and template for the integration of reading and writing instruction; however, the ideas are there for any teacher candidate or practicing teacher to be changed and implemented as needed for different teachers and different classes. Just as Eisner (2003) asserted, educational reform cannot happen at a theoretical level; it needs to happen in the classrooms.

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