

## Poets with a Purpose: Using Autobiographical Writing to Engage Pre-service Teachers

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Teacher educators strive for student engagement in their pre-service curricula. Recent studies of university-level engagement have focused on the need for active learning pedagogies. Grounded in anti-deficit approaches that are relevant, responsive, and sustaining for diverse cultures and literacies, this article discusses the use of autobiographical writing as a strategy for active student engagement in college Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and English Language Arts (ELA) settings. By creating these opportunities, teacher educators can encourage their students to cultivate community and a sense of belonging while they explore teacher identity. When college classrooms are transformed into spaces to expand the imagination, the implementation of such writing exercises has the potential to enhance teaching and learning now and in the future.

In a recent study of using arts-based curriculum and methods with pre-service teachers, McLaren and Arnold (2016) found that the process of writing poetry to synthesize important topics in teacher preparation encourages the development of a risk-taking pedagogy while generating inclusive teaching and learning practices. Autobiographical writing such as poetry has the power to make the pre-service experience transformative, wherein engagement with the arts helps to foster confidence and competence in developing teachers (Russell-Bowie, 2012). Due largely to issues of funding, experimental and inter-disciplinary art integration has become increasingly difficult to implement at the secondary level (Barton, Baguley, & MacDonald, 2013). As a result, pre-service teachers are arriving at universities with limited exposure to writing-for-self, which has partly discouraged teacher educators from embedding poetry within instructional units (Lemon & Garvis, 2013).

Inspired by the potential for writing to enrich the pre-service experiences of our students, we blended autobiographical exercises with our instructional design in two separate teacher education courses. The first was a Sheltered English Instruction course required for pre-service teachers seeking Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Bilingual Education endorsements, and the second was a secondary English Language Arts (ELA) methods course featuring students completing practicum study in the semester prior to their student teaching. In this article we aim to convey the impact that writing had on the engagement of our students. In particular, we wish to further the discussion of what poetry can do for teaching and learning: to articulate the mystery of what writer Matthew Zapruder (2017) argues in his book, *Why Poetry*, “just by being alive you already do” (p. 14).

### Literature Review: Reaching Disengaged Students

Engagement levels are determined by students' observable levels of involvement in academic and

extracurricular activities (Astin, 1999). Predictably, university students who feel disengaged from their coursework and programs of study are at risk of underachieving and, in some instances, dropping out altogether (Messhaum-Muir, 2012). A major response to these conditions from scholars and practitioners has been to analyze engagement with regards to the various instructional practices that instructors use in their teaching (Hunzicker & Lukowiak, 2012). Numerous engagement strategies have been explored at the undergraduate level including technology-based interaction (Matthews & Johnson, 2017), collaborative note-taking (Orndorff, 2015) and integration of traditional management systems with digital tools such as Twitter (Williams & Whiting, 2016). An underlying theme in these techniques is an emphasis on growing communities wherein students can flourish in the college environment through active learning.

Active learning involves methods that privilege learner participation over teacher lecture (Prince, 2004). Practitioners have leveraged an increasing interest in teaching methods within colleges and departments to transform their pedagogies with instruction that facilitates higher levels of student engagement (Hyun, Ediger, & Lee, 2017). Instructors who feature active learning scenarios in their curricular design increase engagement with course content while also improving retention rates (Stover & Ziswiler, 2017). Placing students at the forefront of creation and participation and asking them to construct original content rather than consume information can have profound effects on their engagement in pre-service settings. This factor has been observed to be especially relevant to teacher educators preparing students to meet the needs of language learners in the areas of TESOL and ELA (Ramanayake & Williams, 2017). In light of this research, teacher educators have the opportunity to be innovative in how they underscore their curriculum and instruction with the principles of active learning.

### **Theoretical Framework: Anti-deficit Approaches in Teacher Education**

For decades, researchers have laid bare the ways in which education policy and practice in the United States have been plagued with deficit thinking, a perspective by which ethnic minorities and students living in poverty and their families are seen as the root cause of their own lack of educational attainment and low socioeconomic status (Harrison, 2014). Valencia (1997) defines deficit thinking as the following:

[...] a person-centered explanation of school failure among individuals as linked to group membership (typically, the combination of racial/ethnic minority status and economic disadvantage). The deficit thinking framework holds that poor schooling performance is rooted in students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are held exculpatory (p. 9).

In this assimilative blame-the-victim perspective, cultural and linguistic differences are viewed as individual and social deficiencies to be corrected and as a source of individual failure instead of a valuable foundation for learning by building on background and prior knowledge. Scholars in education remind us that these deficit views and their resulting lists of pernicious labels used for students who are seen as problems to be fixed have a long and persistent history (Bartolomé, 1999; García & Kleifgen, 2010; Valencia, 1997, 2010).

While this perspective disproportionately attributes achievement levels to individuals' membership to certain groups, anti-deficit thinking shifts the focus to shortcomings within the structure and operations of educational institutions (Valencia, 2010). Anti-deficit approaches in education enable critical analyses of the contexts surrounding student success as the need for pluralistic approaches which sustain diverse social, racial, and ethnic identities persists.

As teacher educators, in our undergraduate and graduate courses we have the opportunity to work with future teachers whose mindset may be imbued with the prevailing deficit views based on negative biases based on students' ethnicity, cultural background or socioeconomic status (Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001). In many cases, future teachers have internalized these negative assumptions towards members of their own cultural and linguistic groups (Bothelo, Cohen, Leoni, Chow, & Sastri, 2010; Darder, 2012; Freire, 2007). Breaking this cycle requires debunking the underlying myths which contribute to its persistence. In our bilingual and multicultural setting we embrace a multi-pronged critical approach which involves a culturally

responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010), a politics of caring (Valenzuela, 1999), and a carefully built curriculum which bridges the distance between the findings of current research and teaching practices, and specifically making connections between our own research and our teacher education classrooms.

In recent decades, teacher education programs have increased their awareness of the need to embrace pluralistic anti-deficit approaches both in their curricula and in their practice. Several models have emerged in critical educational theory as part of a broader effort to counter the earlier pervasive view of cultural and linguistic differences as problems to be overcome (Paris, 2012). The critical perspectives of culturally relevant education, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, and culturally sustaining pedagogies share a basic impetus to replace the mainstream deficit approach in education with a belief that all students are capable of learning if given the opportunity (Banks et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Paris, 2012). Beyond responsiveness and relevance, culturally sustaining pedagogies go a step further in their call to sustain and extend "the richness of our pluralist society" by including "all of the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being that our students and communities embody—both those marginalized and dominant" (Paris, 2012, p. 96).

### **Belonging and Community**

The creation of spaces where students develop a sense of belonging and agency is one of the central characteristics of a culturally and linguistically responsive classroom (Gay, 2010). For college students, a sense of belonging has been recognized as a determining factor in their persistence in school (Williams Pichon, 2016). Strayhorn (2012) proposes the following definition:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers) (p. 3)

In her urgent call for teachers to recover their own imagination while cherishing their students', Greene (1995) envisions the emergence of teachers who care to make a community and to instill in their students a sense of possibility. In contrast to the general tendency to push marginalized students' voices to invisibility, these teachers are moved by a firm conviction that the students in their multicultural classrooms "have something to say about the way things might be if they

were otherwise” (Greene, 1995, p. 34). These learning communities are in constant construction, are forward-looking, and are based on solidarity as their members develop empathy for each other’s stories within a group that is committed to embracing a sense of becoming. In such classrooms students reach beyond the fixed categories they would otherwise be placed in as individuals and as a group. Here students find safe spaces where their unique voices are valued and allowed freedom of expression through dialog and creative writing. For future generations of students to be able to project themselves in this forward movement by expanding their imaginations, their teachers will also need to have had opportunities to set their own imaginations free (Greene, 1995, p. 38).

### Teacher Identity

As part of the theoretical underpinnings of her culturally relevant model of education, Ladson-Billings (1998) includes the significance of teachers’ conceptions of self and others. For novice teachers to become culturally responsive requires of them not only to learn about their students and their communities, but also to learn about themselves (Banks et al., 2005). In teacher education programs, this exploration of self includes the development of a healthy teacher identity.

In multilingual environments, pre-service teachers who are themselves bilingual may experience a sense of insecurity about their linguistic competence (Pavlenko, 2003). Given the dominant discourse of second language acquisition theory, often bilingual adults have internalized the labels of “non-native speakers” and “permanent L2 learners.” In the context of the Southwest, bilingual prospective teachers may be subject to a double linguistic oppression as well, as sometimes a low regard for their competence as English speakers may be combined with a devaluing for the varieties of Spanish spoken regionally (Ek, Sánchez, & Quijada Cerecer, 2013). Pavlenko (2003) proposes exposing bilingual teacher candidates to an alternative perspective so that they may discover their place in a community of multilingual speakers. This may allow them to replace their longing for an elusive native-speaker status with an appreciation of their own multicompetence and bilingualism.

Teacher educators may be strategically positioned to help their bilingual and multilingual students reconceptualize their teacher identities and develop “a new sense of professional agency and legitimacy” (Pavlenko, 2003, p. 251). Maxine Greene’s call to release the imagination remains relevant. Among the pedagogical approaches available, different forms of autobiographical writing can create opportunities for all prospective teachers to explore “their own lives, which allows them to see themselves as cultural beings, and can

lead to changes in their beliefs about literacy, schooling, and cultural identity” (Banks et al., 2005, p. 266).

### Social and Emotional Learning

Establishing inclusive communities where pre-service students are encouraged to explore their literacy and cultural identities is an extension of social and emotional learning (SEL), the process by which students and teachers practice skills such as managing emotions, cultivating empathy, and establishing positive relationships in learning and life. Often a focus of child-adult interactions in K-12 settings, SEL has the capacity to enrich the lives of learners of all ages by positioning them to develop competence in both social and academic contexts, making them less likely to encounter bouts with depression and anxiety (Brackett, Elbertson, & Rivers, 2015; Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of SEL education, teachers often lack specific strategies for classroom implementation (Konishi & Park, 2017). Applying strategies such as autobiographical writing in multilingual pre-service environments has the potential to respond to individual students’ needs and sensibilities (Mckown, 2017). Subsequently, future teachers may be positioned to extend experiential environments to their own classrooms through culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2016).

### Exploring Personal History with Schooling Through Poetry

In an effort to engage pre-service students in active learning at an HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution), a land-grant university in the Southwest of the United States, we offered TESOL and ELA college students the chance to explore their teacher identities through autobiographical writing that focused on establishing a sense of community. Specifically, we assigned prompts that we either created or adapted from poetry scholars including Hugo (1979) and Koch and Farrell (1982). The writings were not evaluated; rather, they served as vehicles for community building and interaction between participants. Students shared their poems in both whole-class and small-group settings and discussed ways in which the writing process contributed to their developing teacher identities. The details of implementation in each classroom are presented in the following sections.

#### Setting 1: The TESOL Course

Sheltered English Instruction for the ESL Classroom focuses on approaches and strategies to support the acquisition of English as an additional language while learning in the content areas. In this

course, pre-service teachers discover ways of scaffolding language learning in the content areas based on current perspectives in second language acquisition and on a critical multicultural framework. Students are encouraged to further establish connections between theory and practice through a semester-long, on-site service learning experience in the context of a public school classroom. This allows them the opportunity to develop a commitment to a specific classroom community as they continue to deepen a sense of their future role as professional educators. The exploration of creative pedagogical strategies is contextualized and combined with reflection on the underlying issues of language, power, culture, and identity. The writing prompt presented below was introduced in one of the initial units of the semester which focused on building background for lessons and on the importance of teachers' familiarity with their students in order to make their teaching relevant. After reading and discussing two poems on the experiences of emergent bilingual learners written from the point of view of a student and a teacher respectively, fifteen pre-service teachers were encouraged to write about their own experience through this prompt:

We each have our own school history. Write a poem about a moment in your school history that you remember well, that stands out for some reason. You can write about the situation, the setting, or a person. It could be a teacher or a classmate. Someone who helped you or didn't help you. Why do you remember this moment, this setting, or this person?

### **Setting 2: Secondary ELA Methods Course**

Secondary ELA methods is a practicum-based, dual exploration of important educational theory and application of best practices in literacy and language education within years 7-12 settings. Students in this course learn how to design lesson plans that support state and national standards and are comprised of clear learning objectives, textual learning activities, and formative and summative assessment components. An early unit in the course focuses on establishing a nurturing pedagogy that includes equitable access to knowledge and empathetic stances. In the Southwestern United States, this is an important aspect given the need for teachers to support linguistically and culturally diverse student populations throughout the region. Choices made by those in positions of power can have both short-term and long-lasting effects on students and should take into account unique contexts surrounding individual learners. In this course, one of the instructor's primary goals is to model responsive attributes through specific activities within the course's curricular design.

The following prompt asked twelve students to consider the memory of people and places from their past schooling experiences:

Write a poem about someone or something in your school past—about a former teacher, a classmate, a person you once knew, a place, a certain time. Maybe you don't really know why that particular person or time still seems so important to you. Consider the details of your memory, and let that drive your writing as you make them come alive.

### **Discussion**

Encouraging students to engage with the course curriculum through autobiographical writing developed promising learning scenarios and generated a number of directions for further exploration. In the following section, we give an overview of our students' responses and engagement. We also categorize these preliminary descriptions under potential questions for further research grounded in culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining education.

### **How Can Writing Contribute to a Sense of Community in Pre-service Education?**

Teacher education programs should reflect the notion that teachers are community builders. In recounting significant moments from their past, students wrote about a range of topics such as inspiring teachers, school-wide power outages, and failed but memorable group projects, as well as intimidating tests and the experience of being the outsiders. The emotions connected to these events were also diverse: there was fondness, sadness, anxiety, anger, and excitement. What united their work was the awareness that they each had experienced situations in their past that had in some way shaped how they currently think about schooling. And inevitably, much of the work accounted for a sense of community in how the writers experienced their moments. Characters in the poems were members of families, classes, teams, and organizations with the dichotomous power of inclusion and exclusion. While we were impressed with their writing, we were equally inspired by how they expressed interest in the work of their peers. In response to the prompt, students demonstrated a feeling of empowerment and autonomy in what the activity asked them to reflect on and create. Many advocated for developing similar writing exercises in their own curricular design. Pre-service teachers could potentially embrace writing not only as an act of individual reflection, but also as a way of developing a sense of community and belonging in their own future classrooms across content areas.

### **In What Ways Can Writing Poetry Help Pre-service Teachers Explore Teacher Identities?**

Disengagement in teacher education can result from individual students feeling lost in the college environment. Overcome by coursework and program requirements, in many cases combined with extraordinary personal hardships, many students benefit from the opportunity to revisit their original motivations for pursuing education as a career pathway. Writing about past school experiences seemed cathartic for our students in that the prompts encouraged identity exploration that allowed for reconnection with self. Writers expressed a sense of relaxation with the activity in that it allowed a break from their normalized routine, granting them the freedom to express creative thoughts and genuine emotion, not to check an item off a syllabus, but to write for the sake of writing. By describing the attributes of teachers and coaches, quoting the words of remarkable mentors, and delving into difficult circumstances in their schooling experience, our students pursued their inner lives in ways that traditional assignments such as annotated bibliographies and essays do not facilitate. These writers appeared to rediscover their teacher identities by investigating their unique histories. They also continued to develop empathy as they prepared to embrace diversity and foster pluralism in their own classrooms. Writing poetry is an activity with implications for teacher educators looking to encourage their students to shape powerful, critically engaged identities.

### **How Are Writing Exercises Positioned to Encourage Positive Relationships in Education?**

In their poems, our students explored the impact caring friends had on their lives. They wrote about teachers who made them feel special and administrators who challenged them to succeed. Others explored their feelings of isolation as they navigated new schools, a new language or a difficult subject. Their poems featured evidence of relevant and relatable themes for students of all ages. The activity asked them to tap into their past experience and to consider the perspectives of others: the very behaviors and attitudes they will be asked to model as teachers. Teacher education courses comprise a range of important topics from instructional techniques and assessment strategies to principles of classroom management. Numerous ideas about best practices abound in all of these areas and vary among disciplines. Yet nearly all teaching, it can be argued, hinges on the ability to feel empathy for, and to connect with, others. We strive to prepare our teachers to educate students who are good at math and science and who command an understanding of geography and geology. We foster the development of capable readers

and quality writers. We aspire to promote the growth of effective communicators. Most importantly, we hope to contribute to the education of good citizens who are stewards of their schools as culturally and linguistically inclusive communities. Autobiographical writing exercises have the potential to cultivate these traits. We believe active learning through poetry can position pre-service candidates to socially and emotionally connect with their future students and with one another.

### **Conclusion**

The use of autobiographical writing is applicable across all disciplines and has the potential to impact a wide educational community. College students with low levels of engagement may struggle in their studies and even consider dropping out. As experienced in our courses, the incorporation of autobiographical poetry writing into teacher education classrooms can become a compelling strategy to boost college students' engagement. The adoption of anti-deficit approaches at the university level can take many forms. In this example, poetry not only becomes a powerful vehicle for each student's creativity and imagination but its sharing can also create opportunities for making community, building empathy, and bolstering agency in future teachers. As they develop a sense of belonging, students may also gain confidence and discover the power of language to explore and reimagine their own teacher identities. In Parini's (2008) words, "In this way, poetry becomes useful, helping readers [and writers] to comprehend their lives, to catch their ideas in language, to see through this language to what lies beyond it" (p. 114).

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