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Kristen Turner
Fordham University

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Competency vs. Achievement: Why Connections are Important in Writing Teacher Education

Kristen Hawley Turner, Fordham University

“How is this going to increase student achievement?” The assistant superintendent looked at me expectantly, and I struggled to find the words that would challenge her beliefs and maintain my credibility as a professional service provider. I had been working with middle school teachers in her district that morning in a workshop that was designed to engage the teachers as writers, to ask them to reflect on their processes, and to consider what their experiences as writers means for their teaching of writing. The teachers and I had written together for over an hour. After we had created multiple starts that were sometimes prompted and sometimes free form, I sent the group on a mini writing marathon (Louth, 2002) throughout the building. While the teachers were writing in new spaces, the administrator provoked me with her question that inherently equates writing with test scores. How is this work, where teachers engage as writers, going to increase student achievement?

I inwardly cringed at the question. I wanted to explain that being a writer is about practice, not performance. I wanted her to understand, as I do, that to teach writing effectively, teachers must engage as writers themselves. Most of all, I wanted to tell her that she was asking the wrong question. This administrator, like so many others who are focused on scores by a societal discourse where assessment and achievement are inherently linked, has lost sight of what matters in the teaching of writing. She has forgotten, or perhaps she never truly understood, that teaching writing is about building competence, not about increasing achievement.

Fortunately for me, I did not enter the teaching profession in the age of accountability. Though test scores mattered in my life as a young teacher, they did not carry the pejorative weight that they do today. Perhaps it was a different era that allowed me to explore the teaching of writing by taking risks in my classroom. Through trial and error I learned what worked for a particular group of students – and I learned to adapt my instruction for each class. My goals were never about increasing test scores; from the first day I entered a writing classroom, I hoped to create competent writers. Unfortunately, I missed opportunities in my early years to develop competence. Focused only on form, particularly the form of the five paragraph essay, I urged the teenagers in my classroom to conform to a prescribed structure rather than to explore their ideas and create sound arguments. I subverted their thinking, valuing a single process and a uniform product.

Though I regret those lost opportunities, I do not blame my younger self for missing the mark. Like so many institutions of teacher preparation, my undergraduate university did not train me to teach writing. I entered a high school classroom in the fall of 1998 relying only on my own story as a writer in order to teach the students in my charge how to become writers themselves. From my experience of learning to write in school, I erroneously thought that the teaching of writing involved conformity in structure and teaching grammar out of context. Over a decade of dedicated study has helped me to better understand the multiple contexts of teaching writing, but my teaching was transformed the moment I connected with other teachers in the National Writing Project (NWP).

My summer as a fellow in an NWP summer institute brought me together with colleagues who cared about students, who cared about writing, and who cared about improving their practice. By sharing my own writing

with them and by listening to their struggles and successes as writers and teachers of writing, I began to understand that learning to write is about being a writer, not about mastering a formula. It is about receiving feedback from others and developing competence with language to express ideas. Most importantly, my conversations with my colleagues that summer helped me to see that *my* process wasn't *the* process of writing. All writers create products by following unique paths. It was important for my growth as a teacher of writing to identify my own path and to connect with other writers who composed differently than I.

As an NWP teacher, I understand what the administrator who questioned how the workshop would increase student achievement did not. I know that as teachers engage as writers, they experience a writing process in a way that transforms their own writing. In that transformation they also reflect on what it means to be a writer and the challenges the young writers in their classroom face. Teachers who connect with other writers in a community receive feedback that helps them to build their own competence; these writers, in turn, can connect with their students, creating communities of readers and writers inside of their classrooms.

The social nature of writing has been well documented, and the use of peer conferencing has been promoted for quite some time. Creating real connections between readers and writers in a classroom, however, takes practice and patience. Teachers of writing must understand how relationships of power play out in a writing group, and they must work to develop trust among the writers in their charge. In order to achieve community, they must first see their students as writers, not as test takers.

*It is my hope that **The Journal of Writing Teacher Education** will invite conversation and collaboration, that it will highlight the voices of students, teachers, and teachers of teachers, and that it will foster a community of writers who support all members' growth toward competence.*

The word achievement relates to accomplishment. It is something worked toward, something attained. It is about product. Competence, on the other hand, is linked to ability. It is something that is developed over time. It is about process. For teachers of writing to develop competent writers, they need to look away from achievement, away from success on a test. They must “fight the fear of failure” (Turner, 2010) and focus on students' thinking. It is by participating in a community of writers and teachers that they will find the support to take risks in their instruction. The connections I made with teachers through the NWP have been lasting, and I continue to add to my network of writing teachers through NWP and through other professional organizations. Writing teacher education invokes knowledge from many sources. It includes stories of trial and error, trial and success. It includes personal accounts and empirical investigations. It is a field where conversation matters, and connections build competency. It is my hope that the *Journal of Writing Teacher Education* will invite conversation and collaboration, that it will highlight the voices of students, teachers, and teachers of teachers, and that it will foster a community of writers who support all members' growth toward competence. In developing competence as writers, teachers and their students will develop confidence, and it is through competence and confidence that they will realize the highest achievement possible.

Works Cited

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