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Negotiating Expectations: Preserving Theoretical Research-Based Writing Pedagogy in the Field

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Preservice teachers entering their field experiences face challenges even when they are well prepared with course work in research-based writing pedagogy. Erika Kramer was one of those preservice teachers. She had completed a full semester course in writing pedagogy with Dr. Virginia Crank before beginning her Teaching and Learning English in the Secondary Schools course with Dr. Margaret Finders. The Teaching and Learning course included a required co-enrollment field experience that was supervised by faculty in the Education Department. At the end of the semester, we (Virginia and Margaret) asked to talk with Erika because she was especially adept at negotiating the competing expectations; while Dr. Finders asked her to teach writing rhetorically, her cooperating teacher wanted her to teach compound and complex sentence worksheets. Erika sat down across from us and remarked, “I was surprised when I first went into the field. I thought teachers would be teaching writing the way I was learning it.” Erika’s admission troubled us.

After conversations, the three of us decided to write together. Given the complexities of the field experience, we asked ourselves what can we do to help our preservice teachers hold to theoretical and pedagogical tools appropriate in the teaching of writing when they face a field context in which writing may be reduced to teaching a set of rules and prescriptions? Erika helped us to think about answers.

My cooperating teacher told me that I was to teach a lesson on simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences for my eighth grade field placement. Since I had to teach at least three lessons to fulfill my education requirements, my cooperating teacher suggested it could become a three-day unit in which I reviewed subordinating and coordinating conjunctions and then moved onto sentence types. She told me that I had to give the students a worksheet and a sheet of notes to be placed in a grammar section of their Language Arts Notebooks. Other than that, I was given a textbook with definitions and exercises in addition to a website which was designed by my cooperating teacher’s colleague at another school. Her end of the unit evaluation stated students would be required to write an eleven-sentence paragraph using at least one of each of the different sentence types. This paragraph was used throughout the entire eighth grade at the school and consisted of an introductory sentence, three sentences consisting of main points, two sentences to support each of the main points, and a concluding sentence.

My assignment for Dr. Finders’ class was to create a language study which would focus on an aspect of language or grammar and explore why it exists in the way that it does. Since I was already dealing with a grammar lesson, I figured it wouldn’t be too difficult to combine the two. I quickly learned this would not be the case. How do you make eighth graders care about sentence types? What importance do sentence types even have? I knew I had learned about sentence types at some point but I couldn’t remember a single thing about the lessons or how it affected me. And I knew that was the problem. If I couldn’t find a lesson meaningful as an educator, there was no way my students would ever remember it or learn it or find it meaningful.

Erika’s surprise with the expectations for her success in the field is disturbing. For new teachers, understanding what is expected of them in the context in which they work is essential for their success and for the success of their students. Yet we in higher education may tend to ignore or degrade the contexts which our preservice teachers enter as they begin their field experiences. We may simply say “don’t do it that way” if we talk about the context at all. We, most often, design our coursework around theoretical and pedagogical research-based writing pedagogy, ignoring the realities of the contexts into which they enter. It is important to note that each field’s context may be different: some preservice teachers may find a rigid environment while others find they have a cooperating teacher who provides a rhetorical approach to teaching writing; many may find themselves somewhere between. Most will have varied expectations throughout their field experiences through student teaching and into their first years of teaching. Erika and other preservice teachers like her must negotiate these competing expectations with or without the help of university teachers. We should not let them meet the field with surprise and without the tools needed to negotiate any nonalignment. Certainly there are many cooperating teachers who employ a theoretical research-based approach to writing pedagogy, and perhaps we have provided enough

support for those preservice teachers who work with them. But preservice teachers will likely face nonalignment in expectations at some time throughout their early years of teaching. In this article we will address how Erika, one preservice teacher, attempted to confront this nonalignment. Promoting a more complex view of writing in the school contexts can be quite a challenge and is one that we are attempting to meet as teacher educators. The purpose of this article is to share the complexities that Erika faced. More specifically, what we offer here is an account of her instructional approach as she attempted to teach writing meaningfully. And finally we will reflect on what might happen in a content pedagogy course to better prepare preservice teachers to meet the challenges and be better prepared to navigate any nonalignment in more pedagogically sound ways.

The Field Experience: What the Research Says

Those of us who work with preservice teachers from English Department settings most often have little or no say in the field placement of the preservice teachers. We teach the content courses and content specific pedagogy courses, but Offices of Field Experiences and Departments of Education, for the most part, determine the placement, oversee the experience, and evaluate the preservice teachers. Simply put, we have little or no say in either the quantity or the quality of the placement. Yet, as research shows, one of the greatest challenges that preservice teachers face has been the nonalignment often found between the theoretical and pedagogical strategies taught in university classrooms and those utilized in schools and classrooms (Gutiérrez and Vossoughi, 2009). If we as content specialists are not involved in helping preservice teachers to negotiate this nonalignment, then they are far more likely to resist their university experience and simply conform to the field experience setting.

Equally important is the fact that more field experiences will not necessarily lead to stronger teaching. Grossman (2010) notes that while the trend in American teacher education has been toward longer and earlier experiences in schools, “It does not necessarily follow that more experience is always better. Rather, the research suggests that the value of clinical experience depends at least as much on the quality of the experience as on the quantity. More time in a problematic setting is not necessarily better than less time in a high-functioning classroom with strong mentors” (3). Likewise Darling-Hammond (2006) writes, “the success of field placements in developing knowledge for productive practice depends on the expertise of cooperating teachers or other professionals at the site, their capacity to explain what they are doing and why, and the extent to which novices’ perceptions can be elicited, analyzed, and extended” (225).

Similarly, in a review of current research on the methods course and field experiences, Clift and Brady (2005) indicate that across-contexts tensions exist between expectations of the field and the methods course, and prospective teachers often remain resistant to theory and practice taught in the methods course. They note that the qualitative studies they reviewed reinforce the importance of providing support for learning and practice that includes theory as well as multiple opportunities to attempt desired practice and to ask questions about those attempts. They document a trend in the research that emphasizes the importance of planned, guided, and sustained interactions with learners within early field and student teaching settings. Reflecting on learning by working with individual or small groups can produce changes in preservice teachers’ ideas about teaching, learning and the competence of learners but only if the prospective teachers are engaged with teacher educators who support theory- and practice-based reflective analysis in relation to what was taught or advocated by the methods course (316). Thus, preservice teachers like Erika who face extended periods of time in problematic settings need support not surprise. Pedagogy cannot be left to cooperating teachers or Education faculty who may have little expertise in writing pedagogy.

Historically, content and pedagogy have been treated as separate and distinct entities. This pattern has been evident in the separation between content specialists and educators as each group typically operates within its own domain. Yet, it is only through pedagogical practices that require conversation, exploration, inquiry, and what Shulman calls “making the internal, external,” that learning occurs. Shulman (1986) introduced the phrase “pedagogical content knowledge” which includes a “deep” knowledge of the subject itself, and knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogy within that content. Content knowledge includes the “structure of knowledge”—the theories, principles, and concepts of a particular discipline. Especially important is content knowledge that deals with the teaching process, including the most useful forms of representing and communicating content and how students best learn the specific concepts and topics of a subject. This kind of understanding provides a foundation for pedagogical content knowledge that enables teachers to make ideas accessible to others (Shulman, 1987). Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, et. al. (2005) cites research in cognitive psychology which indicates that teaching expertise is developed within the various domains, rather than generically.

While field experiences are essential to the success of preservice teachers, the challenges are well documented in current research. More and longer field experiences may intensify the problems. The nonalignment between university courses and field experience may create resistance on the part of the preservice teacher. Without multiple opportunities to practice and ask questions with the guidance of mentors with pedagogical content knowledge, preservice teachers have no recourse but to draw on their own experience as learners or simply conform to the expectations of the cooperating teacher.

At our institution, preservice teachers spend extensive hours in field experiences. Schools are selected based on their proximity to campus, and cooperating teachers are selected by their building principals. Supervisors who most often have no content knowledge and no pedagogical content knowledge of writing guide and assess our preservice teachers. While this may appear bleak, it is the context in which we work.

While on our campus we have attempted to work across Departments to better prepare our preservice English teachers with pedagogical content knowledge, we face many roadblocks, roadblocks that seem to exist across many Institutions of Higher Education. While the roadblocks and collaborative opportunities are certainly important to examine in order to provide for stronger teacher education programs, this is not the focus of this article. Assuming that many face similar policies and institutional strongholds, we will address what might be done within the Department of English, specifically within content pedagogy courses.

Virginia and Margaret often have students at their office doors asking for help as they face head-on the nonalignment of what they are learning in the university classes and what they are asked to prepare to teach in their field work at local middle or high schools. “I taught an instructional sequence on argumentation and now the grading criteria that he gave me are all surface level features.” “She wants me to teach the parts of speech, what should I do?” Erika was one of those students.

Erika’s Experiences

I decided to focus on why sentence types are significant and attempted to relate it to everyday life. In creating the actual lesson, I did use the definitions from the textbook and printed a simple note sheet of definitions from the website. The students also played two different games from the website throughout the course of the unit. Since I had to create a worksheet, I tried to utilize a three-level study guide which I had learned about in my Education class. Students had to fill in parts of definitions, label sentences, and discuss different situations one might encounter different sentence types and why.

I knew worksheets would not cut it for this lesson because I had failed to learn grammar that way myself. As a student I had failed to connect the grammar concepts on the worksheet with how I used language in everyday life. Filling in the blank on a worksheet did not improve my writing or speaking skills; therefore, like many students, I considered it “busy work.” Realizing that my students would also consider the worksheets “busy work”, I tried to incorporate aspects of a language study so they could start talking about why we had to talk about sentence types. My attempt was to move away from labeling and introduce situations in which students might encounter different sentence types being used for different reasons.

In Dr. Crank’s class on teaching writing, I learned that grammar should be taught in the context of writing to make it more meaningful. Because my students were not writing anything, and only had experience writing eleven-sentence paragraphs-- which were utilized throughout the entire eighth grade and mimic the five paragraph essay while using fewer words-- as opposed to whole texts, I had to think of activities which would require them to write in order to apply what we had been talking about in class. My students engaged in sentence combining exercises, wrote their own sentences from scratch using the different sentence types, and participated in a warm-up writing activity which required them to write several sentences about their spring break while utilizing different sentence types. It became apparent, especially when I asked students to write their own sentences from scratch, that none of them were used to learning grammar through writing activities. Many students said it was “too hard” to write a compound-complex sentence without help, even though they had been completing them from sentence fragments in an earlier lesson. However, the fact that my students were struggling with the application of the grammar concepts alerted me that I needed to do some re-teaching. Had my students only been required to complete worksheets this need for re-teaching may not have been as apparent.

Though writing is a major context for grammar, I also wanted to present sentence types as bearing importance in spoken language; this led me to focus on power dynamics in both written and spoken language. To begin working in different contexts, I asked students to work in groups and pick one of three different scenarios and write a short script to be performed for the class. Each scenario presented characters with differing levels of power, for example, two athletes and a coach. Students were to use at least three of each of the sentence types and write a short explanation as to why they gave each type of sentence to each character. I had also hoped that this would be a good transition from my lessons into their pre-planned final assessment for the unit, which was writing an eleven-sentence paragraph using a variety of the sentence types.

It was rather difficult to turn this lesson into a language study without falling back on the “one day when you need to get a job, you have to be able to write like this” idea. For eighth graders a “real” job seems a million years away, so they needed something they could connect to now. Unfortunately, this cannot be taught by a worksheet. Though the worksheets did give the students practice, they were not enough to make the material stick. My attempt to incorporate an acting activity along with several writing activities seemed to make students more interested in the lessons, however I still had to re-teach the material twice and then return from my new placement to teach a review lesson, give a review worksheet, administer the quiz, and grade it. Many students showed a great improvement throughout the unit, but most of the quizzes were not passing scores, which suggested that a combination of the lapse of time between the unit and quiz and an emphasis on worksheets and isolated sentences during the review made it difficult for students to fully grasp the material in a meaningful way.

I think if students had been accustomed to learning the “why” behind grammar then it would have gone more smoothly. Because it was not my classroom, I had to abide by certain requirements like the emphasis on worksheets for practice and the eleven-sentence paragraph, which is to be expected as a clinical student. My attempt to come into the classroom and present the students with a completely different way to learn grammar was foreign, even though the methods behind it were backed up by research presented in both Dr. Finders’ and Dr. Crank’s classes. Not only was I not their real teacher, but I was not teaching the way their real teacher teaches.

Learning from Erika: Implications for the Teaching Writing Class

As a guest in the classroom, Erika faced many challenges. What her cooperating teacher said about her was important, very important. What her students thought about her was important, maybe more important than what her University professor had taught her. Yet she was courageous and vulnerable enough to attempt to teach writing rhetorically, something many of her peers were not. What made that happen and what can we learn from her? Talking with Erika about her experience led the three of us toward a few thoughts about how professors in content pedagogy classes can set students up to make the kinds of decisions Erika made.

First Erika’s personal experience as a learner led her to know that isolated worksheets did not help her to become a better writer. Even though many preservice English teachers were eager and successful students in their middle and secondary language arts classes, they can still tap into memories of their learning experiences to judge the kinds of learning activities which will and won’t be effective in the classroom. Virginia and Margaret, in fact, often hear students in the pedagogy classes expressing surprise at how the pedagogical practices and theories they’re studying make so much sense to them when compared to some of their actual experiences as students. We in our classes often have students write literacy autobiographies, but we can use that writing experience more fully if we guide them to mine those autobiographies in order to examine how they did learn to write well. And we need to juxtapose different autobiographies so they are not left to think there is only one way.

Much of what students reveal in their writing and talking about their own learning experiences is the reality that much discussion of writing in middle and secondary schools has been limited to a set of prescriptions: rules and labels that students simply must learn. Some of the cooperating teachers may have learned to teach writing this way. Asking their students to write for authentic purposes for authentic audiences may not be part of their teaching tool kits. Preservice teachers have often been resistant to teaching writing rhetorically in the school context (whether because of a level of uncertainty with this approach or the persistence of their own memories of learning to write) and this may have been supported by cooperating teachers who teach and test writing by asking students to recall those prescriptions. While Erika was attempting to teach grammar in context, many preservice teachers come into pedagogy courses with a fairly rigid and pessimistic sense of how and why grammar can be taught in the context of writing. They seem to fall into two camps: never teach any grammar or teach grammar in traditional, decontextualized skill-and-drill lessons. To get them thinking differently, Virginia asks them to read Patrick Hartwell’s “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar” and Connie Weaver’s “Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing.” They are challenged by the gulf between the knowledge and teaching recommendations in the texts and the experiences they have had as students or observed in field experiences. Erika’s exposure to these discussions helped her to question the expectations of her cooperating teacher and to seek ways to work with the prescriptions. Just as she did, we can encourage other preservice teachers to work with those prescriptions differently. Rather than ignoring them, we might, for example, work with them when students are writing for authentic purposes. Rather than simply discarding the parts of speech worksheets, for example, and risk offending one’s cooperating teacher, one might ask students to enrich their narrative writing with vivid descriptions.

To facilitate these authentic “solutions,” we need to move those discussions about disconnects in theory and practice to the center of our University classrooms. Rather than simply saying, “don’t do it this way” we need to rethink and reenvision those prescriptions. If the gap between research-based teaching and the actuality of the English classroom becomes the central point of conversation in the content pedagogy class, preservice teachers will be able to practice negotiating the gap in a safe environment, where they can take risks that they might not feel comfortable taking in their preservice teaching or as new teachers. We suggest that presenting the preservice teachers with scenarios in which they hold varying levels of power (field experience student, student teacher, first-year teacher in small department, etc.) will allow them to think through the multiple ways to negotiate various expectations once they leave the safety of the content pedagogy classroom. A fairly typical scenario to introduce could be one just like Erika’s: “You (the preservice teacher) are asked by your cooperating teacher to create and teach a lesson about sentence types. Knowing from your studies that isolated instruction in grammar and sentence writing is ineffective, how would you develop an instructional sequence that meets the more prescriptivist expectations of your cooperating teacher without ignoring the research-supported best practices?” With that problem an explicit topic of discussion in the content pedagogy class rather than a one-on-one discussion initiated by an exceptional student, the professor can engage all of the students in the development of solutions and approaches. These discussions must turn away from criticism or complaints and toward compassionate, learner-centered explorations of pedagogy.

In addition to the difficulty of cooperating teachers having different ideas about what it means to teach writing, preservice teachers also face the challenge of creating assignments for students who come with little or no experience in writing. Another scenario, then, could include that situation: “You (preservice teacher) are asked by your cooperating teacher to create a lesson on the parts of speech for an 8th grade language arts class. Your students have had much experience and success with worksheets. Knowing that these students have had very little experience with or instruction in writing, how do you create a lesson that meets the expectations of your cooperating teacher while still representing the ways of learning writing that are supported by research?” This type of scenario give preservice teachers the opportunity to practice and then to ask questions and reflect on their attempts.

In addition to working individually and collaboratively through teacher-created scenarios, content pedagogy professors can approximate the challenge of these types of situations by placing limitations on the kinds of instructional sequences their students write for the course. Most content and content pedagogy courses provide students with a great deal of freedom when it comes to

designing the tasks and assignments they submit for evaluation; we allow students to choose what they would like to teach, and we have allowed them to situate those lessons in ideal classroom settings, paying little attention to the kinds of constraints that almost all secondary English teachers operate under. This freedom might actually be a disservice to our students; they may learn more if we create some artificial (or rather more realistic) constraints that they must work within when developing these practice sequences. We could, for example, write assignment prompts that include instructions like, “Design a three-stage instructional sequence for writing academic essays, keeping in mind that your fellow English teachers value and tend to teach the five-paragraph structure for writing. Develop a more research-supported instructional sequence that will not simply dismiss the kinds of writing your students might do if they have had or will have a different English teacher. Another task might ask preservice teachers to address the Common Core Standards in which sixth graders must be able to: “Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence: a) Introduce claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly; b) Support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources” (42) at the same time that their department’s common 6th grade writing rubric includes these traits: 1. Strength of focus; 2. Organization; 3. Development; 4. Syntax/diction; 5. Conventions.

Scenes can be created to support learning how to negotiate constraints and shifting expectations from outside the Department. A task might address the kinds of constraints that in-service teachers who teach writing rhetorically may face from community complaints. One could create, for example, a role play scene in which the high school English Department members are meeting to address a parent’s concern that on multiple occasions, she noticed that the teacher had not circled and corrected all errors in her son’s essays, and in one case her son’s use of slang expressions such as “shred the gnar” were not removed before his snowboarding essay was published in the school’s sports essay collection. For another role play, one might create a scene in which a first year teacher who has been very pleased to be in a collaborative Department in which the teachers teach a lot of writing and teach writing for authentic purposes only to be evaluated by a new principal who expects more grammar drills. The scene could include the untenured teacher and her mentor planning a response to the principal’s evaluation that states, “While I have observed you twice and the classroom seems in control, I haven’t seen you teach any grammar and so I need to schedule a third visit. Make sure you are teaching grammar when I come back. I need to come in and observe you again because I want to see how you teach a straight grammar lesson.” In concert with this new more restrictive type of assignment prompt and role play scenes (or as an addendum to the more unconstrained assignment), content pedagogy professors can require students to write reflectively about how they were trying to negotiate the different expectations as they constructed their instructional sequences. If students know ahead of time they’re going to have to write about how their lessons demonstrate a negotiation of the various expectations (of the learners, the cooperating teacher, the methods professor), they can begin to develop the sort of “second-nature” comfort with these negotiations that more experienced teachers have.

It is important to note here that one of major influencing factors Erika cited in describing her ability to negotiate the disparate expectations on her was that she had taken a dedicated course on writing pedagogy, not just a one-semester, all-inclusive English methods course. Given the importance of a stronger emphasis on explicitly addressing the disconnects between research and practice, preservice teachers should be working through these scenarios and difficulties in multiple classes. An all-inclusive one-semester English pedagogy course simply has too much material to cover to allow the depth of discussion, research, and practice that preservice teachers need in writing instruction. Tremmel (2002) asserts, “it is not uncommon for prospective and beginning teachers – despite their best intentions and the best intentions of their professors – to go through an entire field experience sequence without ever becoming fully involved in the teaching of writing and without ever thinking of themselves as writing teachers” (9). Without such background, preservice and new teachers are ill-equipped to promote theoretical research-based pedagogy. Clearly, one can see from Erika’s narrative that she began her field placement with knowledge and strategies, experiences that she would not have had if she hadn’t entered the teaching and learning class with a full semester of writing pedagogy.

This multiple-course approach to writing pedagogy becomes especially important in light of two trends in English: 1) English Education students, like secondary English teachers in general, are overwhelmingly inclined to think of the best or most important or most enjoyable part of their jobs as the teaching of literature. Most undergraduate English departments continue to have a heavy emphasis on literature, which means that most of the teachers who graduated from these departments emphasize (because they have learned a lot about) literature in their classrooms. If writing instruction is only one-third of one course (the methods course), the pattern of English classes neglecting writing instruction in favor of literature (or subsuming writing instruction in literature) will continue. 2) The Common Core calls for more writing. It is explicit about the need to teach writing rhetorically, noting that “to be college- and career ready writers, students must take task, purpose, and audience into careful consideration, choosing words, information, structures, and formats deliberately”(41). Equally important The Core calls for explicit attention for the need to the recursive process of writing, stating the need to “Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience” (46). We now have an ally to counteract preservice teachers who may see theory and research as ivory tower, as too idealistic, too out of touch with how things really are.

We know from over thirty years of research that teaching grammar in isolation does not support better writing, yet this practice remains strong in so many secondary school curricula. We know that preservice teachers often bring a vast personal history of learning to write through isolated rules and memorized prescriptions, and they often bring few models of how to do otherwise. No

amount of pedagogical coursework may counter the kind of bewilderment a preservice teacher might experience upon stumbling into the vast gap between their university preparation and the realities of the high school or middle school curricula: “I was surprised when I first went into the field.” It is hardly remarkable that preservice teachers resist their university learning when they enter the field if they have little or no explicit guidance in how to address the nonalignment. They have to step on one side or the other of the vast chasm. Some preservice teachers conform to the expectations of the field context. Others may alienate their cooperating teachers if they attempt to implement a theoretical model. Neither supports the preservice teacher’s professional development. We don’t expect our students to teach writing without support for learning and practice, we cannot expect them to navigate such vast gaps in competing expectations without similar pedagogical guidance.

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