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Positioning Preservice Teachers as Writers and Researchers

T/W

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In reading the inaugural issue of *Teaching/Writing* I knew that I wanted to write about the methods, theories, and practices of teaching pedagogy classes for preservice teachers of writing. In reflecting on how I organize my own preservice writing courses my thoughts began to coalesce quite organically around a few lessons learned from Wendy Bishop and Diane Holt-Reynolds. In this essay, which is as much a story of personal experience as it is a theoretical and practical excursion into the preservice writing classroom, I will offer several theoretical approaches toward the teaching of writing learned from these two women followed by three assignments I use in my preservice writing classroom that I feel best articulate these pedagogical approaches.

Wendy Bishop

I discovered the writings of Wendy Bishop shortly after her death in 2003. Bishop was a revered teacher/writer working to bring together the traditions of composition and creative writing. She died at the early age of 50 from leukemia, leaving behind an impressively large and impassioned body of work. To read Wendy Bishop is to feel her presence rise from the page. Rather than use academic language and conventions to construct and defend a façade of objectivity and authority, she chose to get close to her readers with earnest inquires and truthful admissions into her writing and teaching life. Bishop's writing and teaching life continues to serve as inspiration to others as most recently evidenced by the edited collection *Composing Ourselves as Writer-Teacher-Writers: Starting with Wendy Bishop* with contributions from several teacher/writers indebted to her work. The most important lesson I learned from Wendy Bishop is that teachers of writing should be writers themselves. The following quote from Bishop articulating this stance is a long one but I believe worth sharing in its entirety:

> …throughout their graduate education, prospective teachers should be trained as writers, composing extensively and gaining an introduction to the many discourses of English studies (and when feasible to the discourses of fields outside English). While doing this they should receive help and encouragement. Teachers shouldn't need to apologize for having a writing strength or a weakness ("I'm never going to be a poet"; "I can't write a critical essay to save my life"; "I don't think of myself as a [creative] writer"; "I write, but I guess the type of writing I do isn't creative") as long as they are willing to explore writing in the same manner and along the same dimensions that I'm suggesting for first-year college writers: as a complex human endeavor, requiring practice and analysis, involving beliefs and emotions, resulting in failure and success. Teachers don't have to profess writing but they should experience it, and that experience, as any graduate of National Writing Project training will attest, is life-changing. It's possible, I guess, to teach writing without ever having felt like a writer, but shouldn't we insist that it be otherwise? (234, Teaching Lives).

This is a core value of the preservice writing classroom that strikes me as rather self-evident, nonetheless I am consistently surprised at how few future teachers of writing (or teachers of writing for that matter) consider themselves writers. The way Bishop defines "writer" here is important too—it's not a definition moored to publication or primary occupation but rather, a felt experience of what it's like to invent, build, revise, and share in the human experience through writing.

A second lesson learned from Bishop is to make explicit connections between the experiences of accomplished writers and writing research. "In our classrooms," Bishop writes, "the results of writing research should be welcome beside the testimonial of expert (and/or famous) writers" (234). This idea that testimonials from expert writers can serve as research data and springboard to pedagogy has dramatically impacted my research trajectory and subsequent approach to teaching writing. For several years I have been interviewing accomplished teacher/writers to further understand writerly invention—one of Aristotle's five canons of rhetoric encompassing the ways we originate ideas with language. These interviews with accomplished writers have also informed my pedagogy and I will be drawing from these interviews within this essay to help illustrate a few of my ideas about the preservice writing classroom.

Diane Holt-Reynolds

Diane Holt-Reynolds was my methods instructor when I was first learning to become an English teacher as an undergraduate. The only weakness in her teaching was she invested too much time and emotion in us—her students. Our development as teachers was paramount: essays were handed back the class session immediately following the due date accompanied by a full page of single-spaced commentary, she was reprimanded for spending dramatically more time teaching than on her own scholarship, and she had difficulty giving our class over to other instructors. Diane Holt-Reynolds died unexpectedly as well in 2003, the same year as Wendy Bishop. I recall what learning of her death signified for me—that none of us were safe if someone as ferocious as Diane could pass

away with such abruptness.

Holt-Reynolds was the first to challenge my assumption that subject matter expertise and teaching were correlated. She drilled into us the idea that teaching was a skill all on its own, requiring study and experience that our Literature courses, unfortunately, did not provide. In her article aptly titled, "Good Readers, Good Teachers?" she shares the case example of Mary, an undergraduate student enrolled in an English education program. "What is striking here," she writes, "is that Mary knew so much about how to read, how to interpret, how to think about text, that she could use the skills she valued to her own reading advantage, and yet she offered none of that expertise as a valuable trait for a literature teacher" (42). Holt-Reynolds concludes, "unidentified, unclaimed, and untapped subject matter expertise has little power. It lies dormant and useless in a classroom" (45). The point that being a good reader does not make one a good teacher of reading parallels the point I wish to make: good writers do not translate *ipso facto* into good teachers of writing.

Productive Reductionism: Praxis for the Preservice Writing Classroom

Teaching necessitates decisions. I recall a meeting with Diane Holt-Reynolds that took place fifteen years ago during my student teaching that illustrates this point. I had been talking myself into circles for several minutes, thinking aloud through the several different strategies I could employ in my classroom the next morning. "In the end you must make a decision," she said. "Teaching, like brain surgery, requires action." Having incubated in a humanities tradition that valued perpetual reflection and self-analysis for four years, the realization that teaching required action and finality of thought was liberating as I was empowered to cut through my own Gordian knot and begin preparing for tomorrow's chosen lesson rather than continue vacillating between tomorrow's possibilities. Gerald Graff's challenge, "Dare to be reductive" (40), is this essential pedagogical move that takes us from theory to practice (i.e., praxis). So let us revisit the theoretical concepts covered thus far as precursor to sharing some of the assignments I've created to help articulate these concepts to preservice writing teachers. These theoretical concepts include: teachers of writing should be writers themselves; testimonials from accomplished teacher/writers are valuable texts in the preservice writing classroom; and subject matter expertise and teacher expertise are discreet skill sets. While numerous assignments can stem from these theoretical concepts, I will outline three that I use in my preservice writing classroom: *Digital Poetry, Qualitative Interview Study,* and *Embedded Research*.

Digital Poetry. The preservice writing classroom is defined in large part by its transitory nature—one foot planted firmly in graduate or undergraduate studies while the other foot reaches tentatively toward teaching high school or first-year composition. Offering a clinically rich, hybrid experience helps facilitate this transition from student to teacher. As an example, I've partnered my preservice writing courses with first-year writing classrooms and, most recently, high school classrooms. What does this partnering look like? In its latest incarnation my graduate students partnered with a high school classroom around a digital poetry project. The graduate students completed this project first—an original poem coordinated with sound, image, and text by way of a movie-making program. After the graduate students had completed their own digital poems they helped the high school students write drafts of their poems and then later met with them for a one-day workshop to help digitize these poems. We then held a final celebratory "premiere party" in which we showed the films the high school students had created to an audience of family and friends. An immediate benefit of this collaboration was an increased engagement with instructional objectives. For the preservice writing teachers authentic adolescent audiences lead to greater motivation in the form of time and commitment. As one graduate student attests, "Every response I wrote, I knew the students were going to see them…they knew that they were coming from a group of graduate students. I needed to make sure that what I wrote helped them." This type of hybrid experience helps to facilitate a paradigmatic shift away from the "island-thinking" of being a student and toward the teacher-thinking of being concerned with the development of others.

Clinically rich, hybrid experiences also enhance the writing skills of both the preservice writing teachers and the adolescent writers. This "simultaneous renewal" (Goodlad 23) takes shape as the preservice writing teachers experiment and learn how to effectively respond to adolescent writers and as the adolescents increase the complexity of their writing based on the feedback they receive. A comment made by an adolescent student illustrates simultaneous renewal at work: "They're using their skills to help us and then we're like also needing the help. It's like a back and forth situation." And a comment from a preservice writing teacher: "It was like 'I'm learning from you and you're learning from me.'"

The link between creating a clinically rich, hybrid experience for preservice writing teachers and the lessons shared earlier from Wendy Bishop and Diane Holt-Reynolds are plentiful. Perhaps the most clear connection is the lesson from Holt-Reynolds that subject matter expertise and teaching expertise are discreet skill sets. I have had success in getting preservice writing teachers to experientially understand that their subject matter expertise isn't much help to their teaching unless they are willing to unpack and begin to understand their own writing habits, rituals, and strategies and then translate these skills effectively to an adolescent audience. As an example, when the preservice writing teachers in my courses first respond to adolescent writers they most often speak in a language that is distant and at times altogether inaccessible to the adolescents. They routinely begin with statements such as, "watch for subject-verb-agreement," "avoid cliché," and "perhaps a stronger metaphor here?" Fortunately they learn to cater their comments to the adolescent writers more effectively by maintaining a significant back-and-forth correspondence over the course of a writing assignment.

Qualitative Interview Study. When I first began teaching preservice writing courses I was hesitant to make strong ties between curricular design and my own research agenda centering around qualitative interview analyses of accomplished writers.

Recently, however, I have decided to make this connection more explicit by positioning preservice writing teachers as researchers. In an qualitative interview assignment I ask my students to interview two or more writers whom they admire. The types of questions I want my students to grapple with and come to answer include: (1) What is your rationale for interviewing these people? What makes them strong writers in your eyes? (2) Why have you asked these questions? What are you trying to understand? (3) What are the major insights learned from your interviews? (4) What are some links between your interview data and course readings you've done? (5) What are the links to teaching? How do you plan to pass along what you've learned to your students?

This assignment works at the nexus of the lessons learned from Wendy Bishop and Diane Holt-Reynolds. Drawing from Bishop, having students conduct their own interview study privileges the testimonial knowledge of writers. Again drawing from Bishop, positioning preservice writing teachers as active researches provides greater ownership over the subsequent writing event, helping to promote the experience of being a researcher/writer/teacher. In line with the call from Holt-Reynolds to make explicit the knowledge of teaching, having preservice writing teachers conduct their own research and then graph the knowledge attained onto teaching makes explicit the need for an ongoing, self-directed inquiry model to facilitate one's pedagogical development.

Additionally, this assignment asks preservice writing teachers to self-identify the type of writers they are motivated to learn more about, a move which promotes a personal vantage point. Such personal investment helps to sustain interest and involvement over the life of the project and can ultimately exemplify the importance of deliberately infusing personal investment within writing and teaching. Such personal, intrinsic motivation is what sustains good writing and teaching. In my own interviews with writers I have come across this sentiment time and again. James Gee writes "because it's fun." Deborah Brandt calls writing her "favorite state of being." Mike Rose shares that "it has given me an identity" and "this way to touch the world, to engage the world, to fiddled around in the world in way that can give pleasure both to me and to other people." In interviewing accomplished writers or writers whom they admire, preservice teachers of writing invariably discover the importance of cultivating an intrinsically rewarding, positive atmosphere around writing instruction within their own classrooms.

Embedded Research. A way to cross the line effectively between academic and creative writing is to purposefully juxtapose genres representative of each. As an example, I have my students complete a writing assignment in which they use the knowledge attained from a recently composed research paper to inform a short story. Juxtaposing genre is an effective means to highlight the notion of genre itself—the fact that genre carries with it values actively shaping the writing and the writer. In juxtaposing genre—in this case the research paper and the short story—preservice writing teachers come to understand how genre acts upon and subsequently produces different texts even as the content knowledge infusing each genre is held constant.

This is a move taken directly from Wendy Bishop's playbook. Bishop knew well the power of crossing the line between academic and creative writing, arguing, "we may want to eliminate the line altogether" (221). There are several avenues of thought related to this notion of crossing the line between academic and creative writing that I wish to develop, the first being that in my interviews with accomplished teacher/writers an emergent theme was the persistent move from strict genre convention toward more creative organizational structures. Generally, early careers were marked by strict adherence to traditional academic genre conventions while later years were marked by more creative and personal organizational approaches. Julie Lindquist, for example, says that she has come to rely on academic genre conventions "less and less I think because most of what I write is sort of lyrical and narrative and personal. I tend to do that with most things because I think that it works best; it's the way I can feel most inventive and most effective." James Gee speaks at length to this idea as he recounts his personal history as a writer:

> I've been two different types of academic writers in my career. I started my career as a theoretical linguist in a straight discipline and then I moved to a thing like education which is really not a discipline but a field. In a straight discipline like linguistics, what you write is very ritualistic in the sense that there's a format for how you do it and you pretty much can't deviate from it which is true of a thing like physics or disciplines like sociology. In fields, since it's not defined by one strict discipline, the recipe you follow is less strict. The other thing is that as I've gotten older I've gotten a wider audience and written more for that wider audience which allows me more chance for creativity.

Lindquist and Gee view such crossing of the line between academic and creative writing as a natural progression of their development as writers. Nancy Sommers speaks to this same trajectory. After moving from academic genres to creative non-fiction and essays she says, "I didn't want to go back. I was not going to go back to the straightforward, dry academic essay." The reverse trajectory is certainly possible as well. My own writing background, for example, lies in fiction writing which, of course, carries its own genre expectations. I have since moved from fiction toward more academic, non-fiction writing. The point I wish to make is the preservice writing classroom should embrace an enlivened view of what constitutes appropriate genres by "crossing the line" as Bishop urges.

The students I most encounter in preservice writing classrooms are adept at reading and writing responses to a text. They can write about a text through a Marxist, Deconstructionist, or Feminist lens and pick out themes and illustrate said themes with quotations pulled from the text. It is not a stretch for them to apply these same principals to composition readers such as Victor Villanueva's *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*. It may be new content but it's the same game: read the text for main ideas and then summarize these main ideas in writing using paraphrase and quotations. It is entirely different, however, when I ask students to use the research they've done to inform a short-story. Practicing writing that is not about showcasing reading ability is something many of them have not done for several years and it's a challenge students both welcome and fear. Sondra Perl shares her related experiences with crossing the line between academic and creative writing: "They know how to analyze literature but now you're asking them to write a short story or a narrative, a personal narrative, which they've not done before. All of a sudden they're reading short stories not as literary critics but from the eyes and the point of view of a writer." For Perl, a benefit of having writing teachers work within the creative genres is this adoption of "the point of view of a writer," a much different and less familiar perspective than that of the literary critic.

Final Thoughts

Wendy Bishop and Diane Holt-Reynolds continually inform my preservice writing classrooms because they taught me that teachers of writing should be writers themselves, that testimonials from writers should help shape the preservice writing classroom, and that knowing your subject matter and being able to teach it are two different things. The three assignments presented in this essay—*Digital Poetry, Qualitative Interview Study,* and *Embedded Research*—seek to articulate these theoretical ideas by way of practical assignments. It is my hope that these theoretical underpinnings and subsequent assignments move readers to view their own preservice writing classrooms in new light.

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