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Writing and Learning Online: Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Their Development as Writers and Teachers of Writing

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About the Author

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Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education

Writing and Learning Online: Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Their Development as Writers and Teachers of Writing

Kelly N. Tracy, Roya Q. Scales, Nancy Luke, *Western Carolina University*

In the last decade, online learning has moved from the fringes into the mainstream as a viable approach to higher education. The number of college courses and full-degree programs offered online continues to grow rapidly. One survey found over 60% of institutions in the United States offer fully online degrees and around 32% of students take at least one course online (Allen and Seaman 4). Recently, faculty in the elementary and middle grades program made the decision to move our Master of Arts degree (M.A.Ed.) to a completely online format, joining our already fully online post-baccalaureate program, which is designed for students who are seeking initial licensure in middle grades but already hold a bachelor’s degree in a field other than education. As we began this transition, we wondered about the influence on our students’ learning in our graduate-level literacy courses. Specifically, we wanted to focus on our online graduate course in elementary and middle grades writing pedagogy because of the increased attention to writing that the Common Core State Standards bring for K-12 teachers (Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman 10) coupled with research indicating that teachers are underprepared to teach writing (e.g., Graham and Wosley 348; Street and Stang “Improving the Teaching” 37).

As in our face-to-face classes, this course required students to write extensively based on the premise that teachers of writing should write themselves (Arwell 18; Augsburger 548-552; Graves 36; “About NWP”; Routman 35-50; Watts 155); however, because the predominant method of communication, collaboration, and shared understanding in this online course was also in written format, the amount of writing students completed extended well beyond our typical expectations. Given the writing pedagogy content and the online context of the course, we wondered what changes in beliefs and perceptions would occur for the graduate students participating in the course. The purpose of this paper is to share what we learned about the changes in self-perception and how these self-perceptions developed as writers and teachers of writing after completing our course. While it is not within the scope of this paper to explain how to design an online course, several useful sources are dedicated to this topic including current articles (Andrew and Arnold 110-111; Singleton-Jackson and Colella online) and more in-depth books on the subject (Ko and Rossen; Warnock).

Relevant Literature

Teachers’ beliefs in their ability to teach writing are shaped, in part, by their perception of themselves as writers, and both positive and negative experiences affect this perception (Daisley 161). Those who are anxious about their own writing abilities struggle with teaching writing, and lacking confidence means a higher likelihood of giving up when faced with student writing challenges (Bratcher and Stroble 83; Pajares and Johnson 326; Street and Stang “Teacher Education Courses” 83). Teachers’ personal beliefs about their own writing shortfalls can lead to reluctance about teaching certain concepts. For example, Hall and Grisham-Grown found that pre-service teachers who struggled with conventions were hesitant to teach about them (156). Additionally, if teachers think that writing is a talent rather than a learned skill, it influences the value they place on writing instruction (Norman and Spencer 34). Conversely, when teachers have ample opportunities to be successful writers and receive formal preparation on writing instruction, they feel more positive and confident about teaching writing (Chambless and Bass, 159).

How people perceive their own competence is closely related to the concept of self-efficacy, or a person’s belief that he/ she is capable of achieving a specific goal (Bandura 3). As one researcher explains, “[Self-efficacy beliefs] influence the choices people make and the course of action they pursue. Most people engage in tasks in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not” (Pajares). Self-efficacy affects motivation, achievement, and attitude (Ashton and Webb; Brown; Graham and Weiner, 75; Guskey) and plays a role in how teachers teach writing. For example, teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to adapt instruction for struggling writers than those who lack confidence in their ability to change student behaviors (Troia, Lin, Cohen, and Monroe 177). Similarly, self-efficacy helps teachers overcome challenges that they face as writing teachers, such as reaching reluctant writers (Tracy and Headley 182).

When teachers have opportunities to learn about teaching writing among “supportive and committed colleagues,” their relevant literature is more likely to be shared and discussed (Andrew and Arnold 110-111; Singleton-Jackson and Colella online) and more in-depth books on the subject (Ko and Rossen; Warnock).

When teachers have opportunities to learn about teaching writing among “supportive and committed colleagues,” their perceptions of themselves as writers can evolve, and they can gain confidence in their ability to write and to teach writing (Street and Stang “Teacher Education Courses” 83). These sorts of communities can be accomplished within graduate courses (Street and Stang, “Improving the Teaching” 43), including those that are taught in part or completely online through sharing of personal experiences on blogs and discussion boards, frequent feedback loops between students as well as instructors, and
opportunities for supportive critique and peer review. As a result of these course activities, the online learning community can support an increased sense of confidence among its members. When increased confidence translates into better teaching, student writing achievement is positively impacted (Kaminski, Hunt-Barron, Hawkins, and Williams 27-28; Singer and Scoillay 10).

Jang found in her study of teacher candidates that learning theory and practice in the field “online helped pre-service teachers gain a better understanding of the theories and stimulated each of them in their thinking…[and provided] an avenue to ask questions and obtain instant peers’ feedback” (862-863). Of particular interest for online courses that focus on the teaching of writing are the elements that require students to rely on written discourse to communicate ideas and negotiate understandings with peers and instructors. Considerable research has been done with online learning and English Language Learners (ELL), including the use of discourses to encourage language development and the construction of knowledge of theory and practice related to the use of language in writing and speaking. With regard to teaching writing online, Green and Tanner used multiple intelligence theory in an online course as a basis for pre-service teachers to develop an “appropriate metaphor for the ideal writing teacher” (317). This approach helped prospective writing teachers to think about the process of teaching writing including the nature of feedback for students as well as their preferences for responses to their own writing. Ferguson, Littleton, and Whillock assert that online courses have the potential to help students develop “new literacy practices” via open and participatory discourse “that makes use of the affordances of the asynchronous setting and privileges participation, collaboration, distributed expertise, collective intelligence, experimentation and innovation” (118-119). Many of these practices indirectly and directly relate to core principles of the National Writing Project and to approaches to teaching teachers across multiple subject areas including literacy and specifically, writing.

Research in online learning has explored the benefits of this approach for teacher educators and over the usual factors of convenience and access to students (and in spite of) this method of delivery. Online educators have explored gender and the value of anonymity in online learning for female students (Sullivan 138); investigated the role of social presence in online discussion boards as a means to encourage safe collaboration and interaction (Keilwald 98); and assessed the positive impact of online discussion on students’ overall performance in an online course (Chang et al 260). Online courses in teacher preparation have grown in the past two decades and are currently part of many teacher education programs in multiple areas such as literacy. Teacher educators have found good online course design that includes active interaction among students and instructors can lead to positive experiences and deep learning for pre- and in-service teachers, “…as a research of service teachers, …writers as well as teachers of writing” (Barone 24-25).

Methodology

To investigate how teachers’ perceptions of themselves as writers and as teachers of writing changed after completing an online graduate course on writing pedagogy, we employed a collective case study design, allowing us “…to get a richer and more complex picture of the phenomenon under study” (Mertens 265). Such a qualitative design enabled us to understand the complexity (Barone 24-25) of teachers’ writing beliefs and instruction. Indeed, Barone asserts, “…case study research is more complex a picture of the phenomenon under study” (Mertens 265). Such a qualitative design enabled us to understand the complexity (Barone 24-25) of teachers’ writing beliefs and instruction. Indeed, Barone asserts, “…case study research is more complex a picture of the phenomenon under study” (Mertens 265). Such a qualitative design enabled us to understand the complexity (Barone 24-25) of teachers’ writing beliefs and instruction. Indeed, Barone asserts, “…case study research is more complex a picture of the phenomenon under study” (Mertens 265). Such a qualitative design enabled us to understand the complexity (Barone 24-25) of teachers’ writing beliefs and instruction. Indeed, Barone asserts, “…case study research is more complex a picture of the phenomenon under study” (Mertens 265). Such a qualitative design enabled us to understand the complexity (Barone 24-25) of teachers’ writing beliefs and instruction. Indeed, Barone asserts, “…case study research is more complex a picture of the phenomenon under study” (Mertens 265). Such a qualitative design enabled us to understand the complexity (Barone 24-25) of teachers’ writing beliefs and instruction. Indeed, Barone asserts, “…case study research is more complex a picture of the phenomenon under study” (Mertens 265).

Setting

The first two authors co-taught the Intensive Study of Writing Master’s level course through a mid-sized public regional institution located in the rural mountains in the southeastern United States. This online course occurred over a 4.5 week time period during the first summer session and was taught using an asynchronous format. The course design was based on a National Writing Project’s core principle: Understanding how to teach writing comes from a mix of theory and research, analyzing practice, and the experience of writing (National Writing Project). Students completed daily readings from the course text and assignments on the teaching of writing, engaged in multiple writing tasks in which their own students might engage, including the choice of an I-Search or Social Action paper. Instructors focused much of the course on helping students learn to integrate writing into their teaching of the content areas and expected students to write daily utilizing the techniques about which they were learning. Additionally, students reflected on and discussed the complete directions for these three tasks as well as follow-up questions, please refer to Appendices A – D. All students, regardless of participation in the study, completed the tasks. Only after the course was completed did we engage in data analysis with the participants’ responses.

Data Analysis

The first two authors met several months after the course was completed and agreed to independently read each participant’s practice assignment paper, initial blog, and final reflections in that order. During the meeting we organized the data on a National Writing Project’s core principle: Understanding how to teach writing comes from a mix of theory and research, analyzing practice, and the experience of writing (National Writing Project). Students completed daily readings from the course text and assignments on the teaching of writing, engaged in multiple writing tasks in which their own students might engage, including the choice of an I-Search or Social Action paper. Instructors focused much of the course on helping students learn to integrate writing into their teaching of the content areas and expected students to write daily utilizing the techniques about which they were learning. Additionally, students reflected on and discussed the complete directions for these three tasks as well as follow-up questions, please refer to Appendices A – D. All students, regardless of participation in the study, completed the tasks. Only after the course was completed did we engage in data analysis with the participants’ responses.

Data Sources

At the start of the semester, the instructors established a series of tasks designed to get students comfortable navigating the various tools used in the online course, including a reflective writing “practice task.” Students also completed an initial blog reflection in the first week of class and then wrote a final reflective blog entry on the last day of class. These three writing tasks, which were designed with our research questions and course content in mind, were the primary data sources for our research. Additionally, participants received a follow-up questionnaire via email one year after their participation in the course. For the complete directions for these three tasks as well as follow-up questions, please refer to Appendices A – D. All students, regardless of participation in the study, completed the tasks. Only after the course was completed did we engage in data analysis with the participants’ responses.

Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education

Table 1 Participant Information (All names are pseudonyms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade level taught</th>
<th>Number of years taught</th>
<th>Program/ Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>2nd grade</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Teaching Assistant for 5 years (4 years in computer lab &amp; 1 in 2nd grade)</td>
<td>Teaching Assistant for 5 years</td>
<td>Post-Baccalaureate Initial Certification, Middle Grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>3rd grade teacher in another state, 4th &amp; 5th, 1st, 4th &amp; 5th, 1st &amp; 4th grade</td>
<td>1st grade (4th grade)</td>
<td>M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modie</td>
<td>4th &amp; 5th</td>
<td>4th grade: 1 year 3rd grade: 3 years</td>
<td>M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Not teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td>Post-Baccalaureate Initial Certification, Middle Grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elin</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Post-Baccalaureate Initial Certification, Middle Grades</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants

A total of nineteen students (all were female) from both the Master’s and post-baccalaureate programs enrolled in the course. Our study consisted of eight participants: Five Master’s students who were already certified elementary teachers with classroom experience and three post-baccalaureate students whose undergraduate degrees were in a field other than education and who were seeking initial certification in middle grades education. Of those seeking initial certification, two had classroom experience in a role other than the primary teacher (see table 1). Thus, ours was a convenience sample because the participants were readily available (Mertens 325).

Winter/Spring 2014
We discovered four major themes, or categories, in the data. The themes were as follows: (1) Past experiences shape perceptions of writing; (2) Perceptions shape writing instruction; (3) Perceptions are malleable; and, (4) Course design impacts students’ perceptions. We describe each of the four themes below and then discuss the implications of our findings.

Past Experiences Shape Perceptions of Writing. To better understand our participants’ perceptions about writing developed, we asked them to describe their experiences as K-12 students. After a cross-case analysis of the data (Creswell 243-245), we found a mix of positive and negative experiences that seemed to influence our participants’ feelings about themselves as writers, as well as about writing itself.

Overall, the participants had vague memories of their own writing experiences as K-12 students. However, most of the participants recalled specific projects and/or awards that stood out positively. For example, Angie described a balcony story she won an award for in 2nd grade and a 7th grade report on lemons. Sara described her 5th grade book report. For some, like Joy, who was an avid reader and writer and personal narrative writer, her teachers’ positive comments and encouragement made her feel good about her writing abilities. However, a number of the participants, like Maddie and Ella, shared how being asked to write during recess was overwhelming positive. Joy described her papers as always earning “the highest marks” and she shared how she enjoyed writing “very much” and “takes pride” in her writing.

Other participants also described negative experiences with writing. Some were general, such as a feeling that no one explicitly taught them how to write or that grammar instruction seemed irrelevant to their actual writing. Other participants described specifics of negative writing experiences. Angie described missing recess in 2nd grade and a 7th grade experience in which her writing was rejected. She commented, “I remember feeling that struggle of being put on the spot to find the ending to my story and really stressing over how to make it make sense.” Maddie shared, “I’m not sure I ever had the urge to start writing in my mind for a 2nd grader to learn.” Susan remembered copying lines as punishment and described writing as “painful and pointless.”

While most participants had a mix of positive and negative memories of writing, Maddie could remember no positive experiences prior to college. She stated, “Since I have always felt somewhat discouraged when it came to writing, the subject was never fun for me.” Like Maddie, Donna and Ella struggled with writing and lost confidence in their abilities to write. Donna shared, “I know from personal experience that when you are not confident in your ability as a writer, writing is tedious and unfufilling work.” Ella saw writing as a chore and lacked confidence in her writing.

Perceptions Shape Writing Instruction. Our analysis shows support for previous research findings that experiences shape beliefs about writing and that these beliefs affect instruction (Hall and Grisham-Brown 156; Bratcher and Snowle 83). Maddie explained, “I do not remember liking writing too well because I never felt like I was very creative or could put sentences together well.” Due to her personal experience, Maddie believed that writing should be a personal exercise. Participants also described conflicting influences on their feelings about writing. Zoe, who identified herself as a person who loves to write, shared, “I am excited about teaching writing and I integrate writing in all subject areas…” but she went on to say, “Because I had some discouraging times regarding the structure of writing tasks in elementary school, I struggle to know exactly how to help all students organize their writing without putting them in a particular – and, for many, discouraging – box.” Zoe shared that her current confidence in her writing ability came from later teachers and professors who valued her writing. Others expressed similar sentiments, supporting the notion that external factors, most often a person’s teachers, seem to influence students’ beliefs about themselves as writers, as well as about writing itself.

More specifically, she discussed how tapping into those interests could be powerful for her students as developing writers. “The role model for her students in order to be a better teacher of writing. “One of the most important pieces to being a good writing teacher that used to hold me back from engaging my students is enjoying writing myself and modeling for my students. This class has helped me understand the importance of writing and the joy that can come of it and it is crucial that I show this to my students.

Participants discussed how course assignments influenced their views of writing and motivation to write. Zoe stated that her “…thoughts about and understanding of teaching writing have developed more fully as a result of the assignments in this course. I feel that writers must actively participate in writing - daily and to communicate with other people and in conjunction with other subjects. Writing would be a personal exercise.” Donna became more engaged about writing and the teaching of writing. “I am truly excited about teaching writing. I can’t wait to try the writing workshop and encourage students to explore topics they enjoy. Before this class I was a little uneasy about letting students choose whatever topic they want. Now, I feel more confident in guiding them to find a topic and exciting topic. I know this approach will help my students have more fun with their assignments and even get caught up in their writing just like I did!”

This idea of choice in writing, which was modeled during the course through assignments, came up repeatedly in participants’ reflections. Participants explicitly enjoyed having the opportunity to choose topics and allowing their own students choice in the future even if they were previously skeptical about it. Joy reflected on the I-School writing project, which was a required task for this course. While doing so, Joy addressed students’ interests and capabilities. More specifically, she discussed how tapping into those interests could be powerful for her students as developing writers. “The research was not some time-consuming tedious exercise but a fun, exciting quest of knowledge. If I view writing like this, why have I stifled my students? Oh sure I can go with the standard I did not know any better but deep down I did. I find something boring then my students will find it boring as well. I need to get over the, ‘My students are only in 2nd grade’ mindset and allow for my students to explore with their writing. I realize that I have held them back for fear of them failing but now I know that it is no longer acceptable. I have to be there to pick them up, brush them off, and allow them to succeed.” Joy’s statement is yet another example of participants’ views of themselves influence their belief in their ability to help students succeed.

Although only two of our eight participants responded to the follow-up questionnaire we distributed one year after the course ended, those responses indicated that the shifts in participants’ thinking were sustained into the school year. For example, Ella shared that she was still feeling more confident as a writer and this confidence helped her “attempt new challenges.” Zoe explained, “I was willing to try new things – like carousel writing, partner writing, and a more formal writer’s workshop – because I felt that I had the understanding to do so.”

While participants explicitly mentioned the online format, the amount of writing that they engaged in was likely a factor in their growth as writers. Maddie described it this way, “I have had the opportunity to reflect on my reading, respond to my classmates, receive feedback on my writing, and have been able to express my honest thoughts about writing.”

“...I genuinely love writing more and I have found a reason to write for myself through this course.” Donna summed up her change in perception of herself as a writer through this following explanation: “At the beginning of this class I considered myself a writer, but it hasn’t been until now that I feel like I could seriously write for publication. What changed? I gained confidence in who I am as a writer. I realized that with a little work and time it is possible to create something that is worth reading and maybe even create something that makes me think, writer and have a purpose. I have found that is how I am able to stop writing as a chore and allow my students to explore with their writing. If this process can do this for me, I know my students can gain the same confidence in their writing.” Donna’s explanation indicates that she more strongly believes in her students’ capabilities as well as her own, and she understands that she can influence her students’ confidence; thus, Donna’s self-perception seems to have influenced her confidence and self-efficacy for teaching writing.

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Our data do not indicate that this online format was more or less effective than a face-to-face course, but simply that the format appeared effective based on students’ feedback and reflection on their own growth as writers and teachers of writing.

Findings

Course Design Impacts Students’ Perceptions. To understand the effectiveness of the course, we asked participants at the end of the term to reflect on the perceived effect the course had on their writing instruction. They discussed how their ideas about how those changes would directly influence how they teach writing. The data demonstrate that the teachers’ personal experiences with writing during the course affected how they thought about the teaching of writing. Many of them mentioned the importance of modeling their own writing for their students as they actually teach (rather than assign) writing. For example, when reflecting on her writing instruction, Maddie came to the realization that she needed to be a positive writing role model for her students in order to be a better teacher of writing. “One of the most important pieces to being a good writing teacher that used to hold me back from engaging my students is enjoying writing myself and modeling for my students. This class has helped me understand the importance of writing and the joy that can come of it and it is crucial that I show this to my students.

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Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education
Discussion and Implications

Overall, the findings of our study support previous research indicating that teachers’ perceptions of themselves as writers influence their confidence and sense of self-efficacy for teaching writing, thus shaping their writing instruction (Bratcher and Stroble 38; Hall and Grisham-Brown 156; Tracy and Headley 182), and that external factors influence these perceptions (Matthers, Benson, and Newton 294), both positive and negative (Daisey 161). Additionally, the malleability of the teachers’ perceptions based on various experiences, including participating in an online graduate course, demonstrate the complexity of how teachers learn to teach writing (McQuitty 381).

Students in the course engaged in opportunities to make connections between theory, practice, and personal experiences with regard to both the teaching and learning of writing. As shown in the results, participants grew both as teachers of writing and as writers themselves. What is interesting in light of these findings is the role that learning online may have played in the success of these students since all interactions, assignments, and shared understandings were made in written form. Writing as a way of making meaning, forming connections to the content and to each other, and producing work for assessment was essential as it was the only form of communication in this asynchronous online course. The online blogs and discussions were a shared space for meaning making and for professional development as writers and teachers; they were also a rich source of data for analysis of emergent themes. Because these were spaces in which students collaboratively engaged in what Ferguson, Littleton, and Whitlock (118) call “exploratory dialogue,” it seems noteworthy that the online discussions were an essential part of supporting the students’ development both as writing teachers and as writers. Explicitly investigating this through focused interviews and perhaps comparisons between face-to-face and online contexts may be the next step in understanding how online courses in writing pedagogy may best meet the needs of developing teachers.

Although more research is needed, our findings about the shifting perceptions of our participants as they embraced the online course concepts and experiences have implications for at least three audiences: (1)K–12 teachers of writing, (2)Higher education writing methods course developers, and (3)Administrators.

First, teachers of writing need to consider the message they send to their students about the purposes of writing and the value(s) of writing based on their own attitudes and methods of teaching. Do we want teachers to convey that writing is “punishment,” associate with pain, or a “pointless” task (Susan)? Do we aim to teach students to “...crank out a dry, structured answer to a prompt on the [state mandated] tests” (Anthie)? Or do we “allow students to become apprentice writers so they can learn first-hand what writing should look like, sound like, and feel like” (Donna)?

Our second audience is higher education writing methods course developers. The findings from this small-scale study indicate that course content paired with engaging writing tasks designed to explore a variety of formats and genres can influence university students’ perceptions of writing and their plans for teaching writing in their own classrooms. This influence is thought provoking for designing writing methods courses for teaching at the pre-service teacher (undergraduate) level as well as in-service teachers through professional development opportunities and/or graduate level courses. While this particular study was conducted solely online, we believe the implications reach out to hybrid course designs that offer face-to-face and online sessions, as well as traditional face-to-face courses.

Our third audience is the school administration. Principals, curriculum specialists, and other advocates for effective teaching for students’ learning in the area of writing should seek out and provide professional development opportunities for their K–12 teachers. It is critical for teachers to understand their own perceptions of writing, how their methods influence their students’ learning, and gain real experiences with alternatives to methods that may not be producing a truly literate society.

School administrators can be the instructional leaders in their schools and school districts, guiding the thinking and practice of writing as a necessary part of developing engaged, democratic citizens as well as literate ones. We recognize that our study cannot be generalized beyond our limited sample and acknowledge that the Hawthorne Effect or “reactivity” (Maxwell 108-109), where participants could share information they think the teacher/researcher wants to know (Mertens) may influence our data. However, the study does offer a starting point for considering how online courses on writing can benefit teachers as well as students. Given the increasing numbers of online courses and degrees, the need for more professional development in writing, and even political decisions such as whether to eliminate pay raises for teachers with advanced degrees, understanding how courses such as ours affect instruction is important.

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please briefly describe the following in a short paper (1-3 pages) and upload it here.

1. what do you really believe your students are capable of as writers?
2. what kind(s) of writing are your students expected to do?
3. what kind(s) of writing are your students expected to do?
4. what do you really believe your students are capable of as writers?
5. what would hold you back from engaging students in the writing process or student choice during writing (i.e., what are the constraints of your context)?
6. how can you overcome these constraints?
Appendix C: Directions for the final blog reflection
Consider your learning about writing and the teaching of writing over the course of this semester. Has your thinking changed? Please address the following questions in a thorough and thoughtful way. Be sure to use examples to illustrate your ideas and to provide clarity.
1. What does it mean to be a writer?
2. How do you view yourself as a writer? What connection, if any, does this have to do with teaching writing?
3. What kind(s) of writing are your students expected to do?
4. What do you really believe your students are capable of as writers?
5. What would hold you back from engaging students in the writing process or student choice during writing (i.e., what are the constraints of your context)?
6. How can you overcome these constraints?

Appendix D: Follow up email questions
1. How did the course impact your writing instruction during the current school year (if applicable)?
2. Did you seek out further resources on writing instruction after taking the course?
3. What are you currently doing as a writer?

Directions for the final blog reflection

We’re writing teachers; we teach writing teachers. And we’re parents of young writers. We can’t help but notice how writing education matters. We have seen when a child abandons writing because she isn’t given the freedom to create beyond the formulas given to her.

We have seen the pride in a teenager’s face when his audience laughs at his anecdotes and gets his message.

We have heard from countless college and graduate students who remember the teacher who had incredible impact on their relationship to the written word.

From implicit curricula to planned pedagogies, writing lessons make a difference—for better, or for worse. We’re convinced that student writers—all of them, not just our sons and daughters—deserve the best possible writing education. We care how writing gets taught. Our personal experiences, our research, and the knowledge we’ve gained as parents, as teachers, and as teacher educators all compel us to believe that the best way for students to learn is through authentic writing.

Because we believe so strongly that writers develop through authentic writing instruction - and because we see policies that drive practices away from these goals - we have decided to speak up and to speak out. The blog Teachers, Profes, Parents: Writers Who Care (writerswhocare.wordpress.com) was born from our frustration with current mandates that limit teachers and students to reductive writing. We know what good writing instruction looks like, and we want to share that knowledge with an audience beyond academia. In doing so, we hope to redefine what it means to be an academic writer and to encourage others to contribute their knowledgeable voices to a very public dialogue.

The development of Writers Who Care brought challenges that we document here with the following purposes:
- For those interested in leading or participating in other advocacy blogging efforts, the window that we offer into our rhetorical decisions may serve as a roadmap to the kinds of choices and decision points that you, too, may potentially need to navigate. We hope that by sharing our rationale, our work may help you effectively connect with your desired audiences for the purposes you have in mind.
- For those who wish to join our collective efforts by submitting blog entries for possible publication on Writers Who Care, the behind-the-scenes background that we share may provide more nuanced insight about the rhetorical considerations that can help you to shape an effective entry. We hope to equip you to write submissions that fit well with the genre, audiences, and purposes for our blog, as we would very much like to be joined by many others in effectively reaching friends, neighbors, teachers, board members, administrators, and politicians who need to be informed and motivated to advocate for authentic writing instruction.
- For those who are writing teachers, writing researchers, and/or writing teacher educators, our reflections about our composing choices are meant to lay bare some of the writing work that blog writing entails. We seek to emphasize that blogging is indeed a significant form of writing that merits our attention, and to illustrate the complexity and potential power of blogging— as a genre, as a recursive rhetorical process, and as an authentic means of creating and reaching audiences for advocacy writing.

Any genre, any form of writing begins with purpose. So we, too, begin with ours.

Appendix E: Rhetorical considerations
Consider the following questions:
1. Why does this writing matter?
2. Who is the intended audience?
3. What is the genre of your writing?
4. What is your purpose (to inform, persuade, entertain)?
5. How does your writing contribute to existing knowledge?
6. What is the effect of your writing on your audience?

We hope these questions will help you think about your writing as a genre-specific, recursive process that has the potential for creating authentic writing instruction.

About the Authors

Kelly N. Tracy is an assistant professor of literacy education at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, NC. Her research focuses on elementary and middle grades writing pedagogy and writing professional development.

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About the Editors

Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education

Writers Who Care: Advocacy Blogging as Teachers - Professors - Parents

Leah A. Zuidema, Dordt College
Sarah Hochstetler, Illinois State University
Mark Letcher, Purdue University Calumet
Kristen Hawley Turner, Fordham University

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