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

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

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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 be writers themselves (Atwell 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 teachers 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 (Daisey 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 to teach 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" 91). 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 increase in 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 Scollay 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 discussions 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 Whitlock 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 over and above the usual factors of convenience and access to include supporting positive learning outcomes for students because (and not 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 (Kehrwald 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, including those learning to teach writing. As a researcher of online writing states "written messages that course participants have composed … endow participants' textual contributions with an interactivity and continuity… there are some interesting consequences for the kinds of thinking, writing, and discursive interaction that take place" (Lapadat). Informed by this statement, a need arises for focused study of these "interesting consequences" as they relate to helping teachers develop as writers as well as teachers of writing.

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 important to our understanding of literacy" (24).

Setting

The first two authors co-taught the *Intensive Study of Writing* Master's level course through a mid-sized public regional institution of higher education 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 journal articles, wrote reflections on the teaching of writing, engaged in online discussions, and participated 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 with the instructors and their peers how they could incorporate these or similar writing strategies into their classrooms. This work was intended to increase students' confidence in their own writing, as well as their ability to teach writing.

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).

Table 1 Participant Information (All names are pseudonyms)

Name	Grade level(s) taught	Number of years taught	Program/Degree
Zoe	2nd grade	2	M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed
Susan	Teaching Assistant for 5 years (4 years in computer lab & 1 in 2nd grade)	Teaching Assistant for 5 years	Post-Baccalaureate Initial Certification, Middle Grades
Sara	3rd grade teacher in another state, 4th & 5th tutoring, 1st, 4th, & 5th Title 1	1 (3rd grade)	M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed
Maddie	4th & 5th	4th grade: 1 year 5th grade: 3 years	M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed
Joy	2nd	6	M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed
Angie	K	Interim - 1 year	M.A.Ed., Elementary Ed
Donna	Not teaching. After-school site coordinator: 1 year		Post-Baccalaureate Initial Certification, Middle Grades
Ella	NA	0	Post-Baccalaureate Initial Certification, Middle Grades

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 participating 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.

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 (Creswell 232) and composed a follow-up email to participants regarding whether changes were sustained through the school year.

We analyzed the data by hand, due to the small database (Creswell 234). We first conducted a preliminary exploratory analysis, where we read the data several times (Creswell 237-239) independently noting themes present in the data. We focused on the meaning rather than coding line-by-line. Thus, our unit of analysis consisted of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that captured the meaning. One week later the first two authors met to discuss the themes based on the text segments selected and completely agreed on the themes present, which decided our categories (Creswell 238-247). Some were collapsed into broader categories, due to redundancy (Creswell 243-247). Quotes from the participants' practice assignment paper, initial blog, and final reflection were used to support the creation of the categories. We analyzed each case before looking across cases for themes (Creswell 243-245). Next, we enlisted the third author to conduct a peer debriefing and invited participants to engage in member checking to provide verification or credibility of the data analysis and interpretations (Anfara, Brown, and Mangione 29-30; Mertens 257).

To aid with transferability, we used multiple cases and thick descriptions in this study (Anfara, Brown, and Mangione 29 -30; Mertens 259). The eight participants from this research study do not necessarily reflect the teaching population as a whole, but the findings may be generalizable to other students with similar backgrounds and experiences who are enrolled in a Master's level writing course.

For dependability in our research, we created an audit trail or research protocol where we documented each step of the research project (Anfara, Brown, and Mangione; Mertens 259-260). The researchers established confirmability during the dependability audit to ensure "…that the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher's [or researchers'] imagination" (Mertens 260). Thus, while examining the audit trail and peer examination, the data were tracked back to the original sources (participants).

Findings

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 how 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 (Cresswell 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 balloon story she won an award for in 2nd grade and a 7th grade research report on lemurs. Sara described her 5th grade book report. For some, like Joy, who won awards for her poetry, creative writing and personal narratives throughout elementary, middle, and high school, feelings about writing were overwhelmingly positive. Joy described her papers as always earning "the highest marks" and she shared how she enjoys writing "very much" and "takes pride" in her writing.

All 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 specific examples of negative writing experiences. Angie described missing recess in 2nd grade in order to finish her writing, "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 the best it could be. Due to that stress, I'm not sure I enjoyed the writing process…I'm not sure that's a great lesson 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 unfulfilling 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 teachers beliefs about writing and that these beliefs affect instruction (Hall and Grisham-Brown 156; Bratcher and Stroble 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." She went on to say, "Due to my personal experiences, teaching writing is not one of my favorites." 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 more than their actual ability or effort. This influence can come in the form of feedback or behaviors that teachers exhibit, such as the time they devote to writing in class or their demonstrated attitudes toward writing (Mathers, Benson, and Newton 294).

Sometimes the external influence on teacher beliefs was indirect, like in the case of Angie, who described a lack of enthusiasm for writing until she completed an internship in a classroom where the teacher emphasized writing. She shared, "However, it wasn't the teacher that inspired me; it was the children…4th graders were writing truly good, funny, riveting, focused stories – something I felt like I had never even done in my life…I opened myself up to love writing again." Angie went on to share how she used many of the same techniques she observed in her internship with her own students and how proud she felt of what those students accomplished.

Perceptions are Malleable. Angie's change in attitude during the final year of her undergraduate studies also gives evidence that students' perceptions of writing are flexible. In another example, Ella says, "…as I grew older, writing became more of a chore and I lost confidence in my ability. I compared myself to other writers and didn't feel that I produced the same quality work." Zoe used strong language to describe early writing experience such as *forced, hating, resented, anxiety, discouraging,* and *struggle*, but then shared how later teachers built her confidence back up.

The ability to change was also evident in the analysis of our pre/post data. Participants demonstrated shifts in their perceptions of themselves as both writers and teachers of writing. Sara, Maddie, Angie, and Donna felt more confident in their writing abilities and felt comfortable writing. Sara and Maddie referenced the various writing genres and projects from the course as helping boost their confidence and comfort levels with writing. Angie attributed her growth in confidence in her ability to write to the frequency of writing required for the course. Over the 4.5 week semester Angie explained that her understandings of communicating through writing and thinking through writing improved. Angie gained renewed passion for

writing and shared, "…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 the 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. I can create something not just for a cathartic effect, but to inform myself and others. I can literally take others on a journey with me, through my 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.

Ella, who originally described herself as approaching the course with "trepidation," still considers herself an average writer. However, it is apparent that Ella has started seeing the connection between herself as a writer and her students' writing. She reflected, "My attitude will affect my future students, so I need to make some attitude adjustments...I have learned that I can teach writing. I have also learned the importance of my own writing. I wouldn't look for my name on a bestseller list any time soon, but I will continue to produce and improve my own writing to model for my students"

Susan, Zoe, and Joy, who had strong writing identities prior to the course, did not perceive change as writers but described feeling affirmed and learning about new methods of instruction that they could try in their own classrooms.

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 changed and 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."

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 still feel that writers must actively participate in writing - daily and to communicate with other people and in conjunction with other people. Writing should be a social experience as well as a personal experience." The course helped Donna become more energized 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 an appropriate 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 clearly enjoyed having the opportunity to select writing topics and felt that they should allow their own students choice in the future even if they were previously skeptical about it. Joy reflected on the I-Search 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 event to be endured 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. If 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 ok if they fail. I just need to be there to pick them up, brush them off and guide them to success." Joy's statement is yet another example of how teachers' 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 time – because I felt that I had the understanding to do so."

While none of the 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." 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.

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 83; Hall and Grisham-Brown 156; Tracy and Headley 182), and that external factors influence these perceptions (Mathers, 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 the study and teaching 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 steps 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" (Angie)? 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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Appendix A: Directions for the practice assignment

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

1. Describe your experiences with the writing process and student choice of writing in your K-12 experience.
2. Describe your honest feelings about writing and the teaching of writing.
3. Describe how you see yourself teaching writing to your students.
4. State what you hope to gain from this class.

Appendix B: Directions for the first blog reflection

You will use this blog to engage in the writing process throughout the semester. Click on "create blog" to create your blog.

Please respond to this prompt:

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 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?

About the Authors

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

Leah A. Zuidema, *Dordt College*
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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, Profs, 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.

Authentic Student Writing: It Matters

Student writing is *authentic* when it is composed for real audiences and real purposes. For example, asking twelfth graders to write and send letters to audiences they choose and for the purpose of trying to bring about changes that matter to them is more authentic than asking all twelfth graders to write about property tax hikes by sending letters "to the editor" with the teacher as the only reader. The purpose of the second writing activity, like the first, is to practice the conventions of a specific genre and rhetorical appeals to a precise agent. However, the second activity is merely a practice exercise, whereas a high school senior in the first example knows there is real potential for action from a respondent: a twelfth grader who writes to her principal to argue for more senior rights (*e.g.*, additional opportunities for student leadership; options to leave campus for lunch) knows