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# Navigating Collaborative Teaching Waters: Professors Go Back and Pre-Service Teachers Move Forward to Embody the Promise of Story

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# Navigating Collaborative Teaching Waters: Professors Go Back and Pre-Service Teachers Move Forward to Embody the Promise of Story

## **Cover Page Footnote**

This article is in MLA format.

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“The world needs more and better teachers” (103), wrote Arthur Levine in his report *Educating School Teachers*. As English education professors and pre-service teachers, we couldn’t agree more. The question, of course, is how to accomplish this goal. Many pre-service teachers perceive field experience as being pivotal in their development as teachers. However, some research has shown that, “Experience alone is not enough. It is the thought and subsequent action associated with the experience which determines its value in the learning process” (Johnston 207).

Collaboration could be one key to unlocking a successful teaching career. In her book *What Keeps Teachers Going?* Sonia Nieto wrote, “Teaching can be the loneliest of professions” (77). We all know it doesn’t have to be, for we know that “Creating communities of learning among teachers is necessary if they are to remain connected to their profession, their students, and one another” (124). These connections may come through a variety of communities, including those collaborations between professors and their pre-service teachers. In a time when it’s widely known that half of new teachers leave the field within the first five years, this support system is vital for the development and survival of new teachers: “If teachers are to improve what they do and gain more satisfaction from their work, building critical and long-standing relationships with their colleagues is essential” (Nieto 78).

It was with these ideas in mind that we seized an opportunity to unite to teach future high school freshmen in an academic summer camp held on our campus. Our group consisted of three English education professors and secondary English education students who were completing their high school field experience during the summer months. We started building the relationships during our planning session for the camp. Possibilities, parameters, and principles were discussed as we prepared for our 3-week class. The transference of course work-influenced theory became a practical reality as we figured out a final project, determined curriculum, and implemented backwards design along the way. Thus, our reality had become “an adventure to be created and studied together” (Weaver and Stanulis 35).

### **UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS GOING BACK TO “WALK THE TALK”**

Professors of education...never lectured on how to handle flying sandwich situations. They talked about theories and philosophies of education, about moral and ethical imperatives, about the necessity of dealing with the whole child, the gestalt, if you don't mind, the child's felt needs, but never about critical moments in the classroom.

-Frank McCourt, *Teacher Man*

There are harsh criticisms for education professors who seem out of touch. Arthur Levine's report *Educating School Teachers* noted that "Students and alumni criticized courses taught by professors with limited real-world experience for being out of date, more theoretical than practical, and thin in content" (Levine 46). As one student in the study stated: "Most of the professors had no idea what was going on in today's classroom. Yeah, they may have visited a classroom a few weeks in a row or for a semester. But they don't know what it is really like until they live it day to day...You need professors with that kind of experience, not the kind that taught for two years in the 1980s" (45).

With this academic camp teaching experience, we aimed to provide our pre-service teachers with enriching field experience connections that provided strong teachers/great mentors who would allow the future teachers to plan and collaborate with all aspects of the course. We would share our realities with them, and would no longer wonder about Ruth Vinz's question: "Is it possible that the professional literature shows us too many success stories and not enough stories of the messy and chaotic work...?" (171). Moving back into the classroom forced us to fine tune our own teaching and mentoring skills and negotiate space for reflection as well.

### **Sometimes You Have to Go Back in Order to Move Forward**

*Dr. Jill Adams*

Since my very first semester of teaching full time at the collegiate level, I have longed to return to teach at the secondary level. Simply put, I miss teaching teenagers. Crazy? You bet. True? Absolutely. There is a magical and exhilarating energy about the working with teens that is not easy to replicate in a university setting. In college, there usually is a zest for knowledge present, and a general enthusiasm entering and making a difference in the teaching profession, but it is difficult to have that same intense level in a collegiate classroom where the responsibilities are often tempered with classes, work, and family.

In the field of English education, it is easy to become out of touch quickly. I last taught in the public schools in 2005. In the eight years I have been teaching at the collegiate level, the secondary world has changed dramatically: state standards were devised and tested, charter schools grew exponentially, digital writing became common place, and Common State Standards prodded us to examine academic goals once again. Sometimes it is difficult to believe that these paradigm shifts all occur within a decade.

In the foreword to Leila Christenbury's book *Retracing the Journey: Teaching and learning in an American High School*, Deborah Appleman noted that "Critics of teacher education assert that those who teach teachers are out of touch with the realities of today's classrooms and ill-prepared, both experientially and intellectually, to the challenges of preparing tomorrow's teachers" (xi). Returning to the classroom would accomplish the task, but it would enable me to "walk the talk" (Hynds and Appleman 273) as well.

Others in the college area have faced similar feelings and have returned to the classroom for a variety of reasons—to practice theory, to find a connection between "the ivory tower and the trenches, the educational front lines" (Fairbrother 27), or to prove they could still teach (Hudson-Ross and Mcworter). Other professors tried entering the secondary classroom for the first time, as Don Daiker did, noting that "...it was guilt that drove me to high school teaching" (3).

I wanted—needed—to practice being a secondary teacher again. I knew my college students treated me extremely well and also knew that the future high school freshmen would be as challenging as the middle schoolers I used to teach. (Don Daiker had a similar experience when a colleague told him that "high school students will not be impressed by your degree, your publications, or your experience. Get used to it" (Daiker 10). I did get used to it, and I still loved it. And although it wasn't the "most intense teaching experience in the last decade" (Thompson and Louth 158), it was still a deeply engaging, energetic, and exhausting thrill ride. And I am a better English educator because of it.

### **Negotiating Space for Reflection**

*Dr. Kathleen Deakin*

When I was teaching high school people would often ask me what I did for a living. My reply that I was an English teacher was often met with *Oh...I hated English!* or *How can you stand teaching teenagers?* I would humor them with a response, of course, but it never ceased to amaze me how few people held our profession in high regard. I loved—and still do—teaching English. More importantly, I loved teaching teenagers. They are smart. They

are funny. And they will one day change my world. Thus, when given the opportunity to work with them again, I jumped at the chance. This experience, while allowing me to once again work firsthand with young writers also afforded me the opportunity to co-construct that experience with my methods students.

Teaching, for me, is a negotiation of space. Enacted between my students and myself, this negotiation allows me to situate experiences in my classroom and foster learning. What was especially interesting about this summer camp the re-positioning of traditional teacher and student power hierarchies and how those hierarchies helped engage in reflective practice.

Prior to embarking on the College Readiness Camp, we (the methods professors) constructed a proposed path for the curriculum aptly entitled *Everyone has a Story*. During our initial meeting with the pre-service teachers we invited them to create daily activities. Hillocks denotes this stage of planning as the “frame experiment”, a period of time where the educator plans curriculum, anticipates activities, and projects student response. This stage was not a novelty to our students, many of whom were in their third and final field placement and had completed several lesson and unit plans throughout the course of our program. And yet, it was this process that would set up the reflective nature of this experience.

At the end of each day—and often during the course of the day—we would de-brief with our pre-service teachers. If necessary, we would adapt curriculum and activities. This reflective process made visible the flexible and often raw nature of teaching. Things don’t always go as planned, a valuable and humbling lesson. One that few teachers experiences until they are in the classroom because “most of the reflection that occurs...is not available to anyone other than the teacher” (Hillocks 202). Each day we revisited and we revised with student goals in mind and we collectively engaged in what Hillocks calls “reflection in action” (206). Our dialogue was equitable and our pre-service teachers were privy to our vulnerability as veteran teachers. Many pre-service teachers witness well-planned lessons taught by experts in the field. And in reality, we often make teaching look easy. Reflecting on our practice during and after contact with these student writers helped to foster a productive dialogue while also providing our pre-service teachers with opportunities seldom experienced until they become practitioners. Seldom is the pre-service space negotiable; field placements and student teaching afford little negotiation of power because the student *is* the student, and therefore privy to the hierarchal structure set forth by the educational system. In this instance, however, our pre-service teachers were

co-constructors of curriculum and knowledge through the reflective nature of our discourse.

### **The Co-Construction of With-it-ness**

*Dr. Gloria Eastman*

Like most English educators, I have spent many hours sitting in the classrooms of generous host teachers while I watch my student teach his or her first lesson. I take detailed notes and afterward we spend an hour or more debriefing my notes as well as the student's questions and reflections. And yet: somehow we've missed the teachable moment. How often I've wished that I could be a tiny voice in my student's ear, advising him that the kids at table four have missed the point (or even the graphic organizer or the copy of the poem). I have wished that I had secret hand signals to advise her to speak more loudly or restate the directions more strongly. Alas, in that situation, it's not my classroom and, furthermore, I don't want to undermine my student's already shaky confidence.

What a powerful experience it was to share *our* classroom with mentor teachers as we worked with our summer college readiness future 9<sup>th</sup> graders. I *could* be that quiet voice in the ear of my students—and they in mine—as we moved around the classroom to help students. We could give each other hints about who needed further attention in order to stay on task and sometimes those hints were a non-verbal lift of an eyebrow or a tilt of a chin. Although the other professors and I had years of secondary experience and a huge body of language arts knowledge among us, neither we, nor the university students, had worked before with these particular 8<sup>th</sup> graders or this readiness camp structure. We collaborated to reach the established goals for the students we had invited to our campus. Some days were particularly difficult; we bonded over our shared difficulties.

One afternoon the most challenging section of eighth graders began to work on a task that we had redesigned over lunch. The university students had created the work groups, based on their knowledge of the teens' learning styles, with only a little input from me, but none of us had a clear idea of how long the new task would take. I was able to quickly share with them the veteran teacher's skill of listening for the change in verbal tone that signals that students have moved from work to socializing. Once I pointed it out, each university student was able to distinguish that change of tone. I'm sure that I was several years into teaching high schoolers before I discovered the skill of with-it-ness myself.

### **MOVING FORWARD: PRE-SERVICE STRAYING FROM THE “SAFE ZONE”**

In Shosh Leshem’s examination of mentor/mentee relationships, he noted that pre-service teachers “might have avoided taking risks and preferred taking the ‘safe zone’ attitude” (418). This makes sense, for the pre-service teachers are working under others’ tutelage and often times do not want to challenge the person of authority. Knowing this, we strived to relinquish some of the power right from the start at our initial planning meeting. “So, what do you think we should do?” was the first question asked. The bewildered response from the pre-service would have been laughable if we three English education professors hadn’t experienced similar emotions during our initial moments of teaching. And while we did not want to create an aura of anxiety, we also wanted to push the threshold of risk among our pre-service teachers. Their “safe zone” (Leshem 418) attitudes were challenged and what followed shaped a group of budding educators into a field of professionals.

### **It's True! Two Heads Are Better Than One**

*Brianne Barker*

Collaboration. They keep saying that word like it's a motif. Referencing my past education, I immediately think back to *Lolita*. "Why," you scream? Well, it offers a great example as to how repetition indicates importance. In the novel, written by Vladimir Nabokov, Nabokov continually repeats the name Lolita. A name that is derived from a word that translates to "darling" in some cases and "idler" in others, depending on the context. Nabokov intentionally leaves this information out. However, by understanding the importance of the name, due to its repetition, then researching its meaning, the reader has developed a deeper understanding of the text and the story of *Lolita*.

It was as if Nabokov planned it himself, the word "collaboration" kept popping up. While listening to an episode of Ed Chat Radio, I hear professional educator, Tom Whitby say, "The whole idea of collaboration through professional development...is changing things and you're seeing differences in people today." Finally, the word has been said too many times for me not to trigger it as a motif and become interested. If collaboration is a key word to successful teaching, then I needed to pursue the meaning.

After spring semester, when given the opportunity to participate in a summer educational program, I recognized the offer as a potential valuable learning experience--one where I had an opportunity to learn from the best, who, in my mind, were my professors. Within the first few hours of my participation, I was shown a valuable tool. We started the program with a

meeting of the minds. We went over our summer course unit and make any adaptations and decide on the more difficult details. After a few minutes into the meeting, I realized how little I knew and how much there was to learn about teaching. So I listened and watched while my three professors and a few students decided on the final assessment. It only took a couple hours and the group had organized a summative assessment that included visual literacy paired with narrative writing, multimedia text, and a presentation. All I could think was: Jim Burke would be proud of all the activities we had planned for our class objectives.

Walking back to my car after the meeting, I realized how my professors were mentoring the importance of collaboration. It was my first, recognized experience with professional collaboration and it had just been exemplified through subconscious instruction. The summer program hadn't even started yet, and I was already learning what it meant to be an experienced teacher.

### **Reflection and Revision Across Experience**

*Jay Arellano*

Being a novice teacher, as the word implies, my lack of experience in the classroom is something I am keenly aware of. Throughout the College Readiness camp this summer, I was the only person to work every day, and this provided a unique opportunity to serve as a thread of continuity between the students we were serving and the mentors and peers with whom I was working. This position allowed me to see firsthand how important intentional reflection and revision are to effective practice.

In total, we served six groups of students across two, three-group sessions. Throughout both sessions, I debriefed with my peers and mentors after each class, and as we transitioned between sessions. This process eventuated both in each group receiving a unique focus and in the second session having a decidedly clearer focus than the first. This seemingly rudimentary strategy of reflection and revision, however, developed into something more illuminating for me. Through conferring with my co-teachers as such, I came to better recognize what intentional reflection looks like, as opposed to unthinkingly assigning a value judgment to an outcome.

As we planned for the second session, I realized that my intrinsic tendency was to make a determination about which aspects were successful and which were unsuccessful. I believe this process is what Kelly Gallagher characterizes as “expressive” (though he is specifically addressing writing) in that it is focused on someone’s “thoughts, ideas, feelings, and questions about his or her experiences.” He articulates the counterpoint to this as

“reflective...a vehicle for exploring and discovering new thoughts...look[ing] at the past as a means for looking at the future.” While my professors and I recognized many of the same difficulties with the first session; most notably that the culminating projects (Meograph presentations) did not meet our standards or expectations. However, my processing of these obstacles was comparatively basic.

Where my response was that the lack of performance could be simply resolved with additional time, my mentors perceived that the students had actually been given too much time (and the second session proved they were correct). What I saw my mentor professors doing was utilizing the same, thorough review strategy they had encouraged my peers and I to use in our schoolwork, in making determinations about their own professional work. While success is often characterized as being riddled with failure, a diligent reflection on instructional challenges can help ensure a more effective revision process by reducing or re-characterizing instances of the failure along the way.

While my peers, and certainly I, are neophytes, and my mentors, obviously experts, an observable commonality is that teaching is not effortless for any of us. It was encouraging to see that the adept, experienced professionals whom I look up to and have worked under employ the same basic strategy that they encourage for a pre-service teacher like me—they reflect and revise; they are intentional and diligent in determining: “what went well; what could I do differently?”

### **Using Mentor Texts to Guide Student Writing**

*Andrea Nieto*

As a pre-service teacher, being able to work with more experienced teachers at the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade College Readiness Camp provided me with opportunities to see my professors in a setting outside of the university classroom. The culminating project for the *Everybody Has a Story* class that we were teaching together was a narrative piece that students created using a website called Meograph. The process of composing this visual and auditory narrative taught me the importance of modeling and mentor texts in the classroom. Kelly Gallagher touches on the importance of these tools in his book *Write Like This*. Gallagher says, “In teaching our students to write, we must provide them with authentic modeling- modeling that comes from both the teacher and from real-world texts” (8).

Gallagher argues that we need to show our students how to become better writers and how to accomplish the tasks we have given them. Students in our class were not only asked to write a narrative but they were provided

mentor narrative texts and each professor and mentor showed their own personal Meographs as examples. These model texts that were picked out by the experienced professors helped students understand the components necessary to writing narratives. I remember one of my students told me she wanted to do a Meograph on music. I told her that she needed to think about how she could translate the idea of music into a narrative thread. What did these songs represent? She was reading the graphic novel *Smile* as her mentor narrative text. By probing her to think about the author's techniques, she was able to translate the theme of music into a compelling narrative about her step mom who passed away; just as the author had used the theme of braces to tell the story of a shy middle school student.

I watched this student struggle through the writing process—how to transition between story parts and how best to end her narrative. On the final presentation day when all the other now teary eyed students were linking arms and singing “Every little thing is going to’ to be alright”, as a photo of her stepmom faded into the background I knew that the mentor texts, in class modeling done by the experienced teachers and revision process had positively impacted her narrative. These tools aided her by giving her a new perspective on narrative writing. Through this class I saw the tools that Gallagher said would build real world writers in action. As a pre-service teacher I am now better equipped to implement these ideas into my future classroom and have witnessed firsthand the impact modeling and mentor texts have on student writing.

### **The Mentor-Student Connection: How Mentorship Builds Strong Relationships in the Classroom**

*Eliza Spencer*

Although the time that was spent with students during the College Readiness Camp was not the time that would be spent with students during a regular school year, there was much to learn about the power behind mentoring incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders. Each student I grew close to during this summer camp had a story to tell, and I had an ear to listen. One incoming 9<sup>th</sup> grader in particular who was in the summer camp who told me that she aspired to be a firefighter, illustrator, lawyer, and writer. I was in pure awe that someone of that age had that kind of drive to be successful in her life. As the summer camp continued and my relationship with this incoming 9<sup>th</sup> grader continued to grow, she opened up to me by asking me to review a manuscript for a play she had been writing. It is because of the relationship that I built with this 9<sup>th</sup> grader that she felt comfortable in sharing her thoughts and ideas—a piece of her—through her writing. By simply asking

me to read her writing, I felt more than honored to be included in her journey of becoming a writer.

From this experience in becoming closer to the students at the summer camp, I realized the true importance of building close and trusting relationships with the youth. As a future English teacher, I know that the writing of my students is going to be an expression of their personal lives, and through building relationships with each of my students, I hope they share with me their life journeys. In the text, *Teaching Writing in Middle and Secondary Schools*, Jim Blasingame and John H. Bushman note, “For students to put their egos and their self-esteem at risk, they must trust their teachers and their peers, and teachers must provide students with an environment that makes this possible” (2). Every day, teachers must be cognizant of their students’ self expression through writing in order to form a positive writing environment. Through mentorship and strong relationships with students, together, teachers and students can create a classroom environment that fosters the curiosities and personal expressions of each student in a warm and welcoming way.

### **Conclusion**

We do not learn from experience ... we learn from reflecting on experience.

-John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*

Throughout our summer camp experiences, there were many lessons learned. Some of these reinforced prior beliefs and practices, while others challenged previous thought and action. When we were beginning to plan for the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of camp, we realized that our reflections needed to shift from “questions of *what* and *how* to also consider questions of *why*” (Nieto 124-125). We also needed to gain a better sense of the students as individuals during the first few days of camp, which had been neglected because of the quick time frame of the course. We also had a strong reminder about the power of the group, which Christenbury also reflected on during her time back in the high school classroom:

Successful classes demand mutual student and teacher engagement and activity; if students are passive or unwilling, if what is offered is not engaging or seems to call for more effort than students bargain for, activities that some teachers initiate—or even cherish—will not be effective. (70)

It is imperative during the reflection process that we also consider the successes of our teaching. There were many aspects of the project that worked well:

- Collaborating and creating egalitarian relationships with novice teachers
- Constant revising our lesson plans with the end in mind
- In-the-minute reflection and reaction
- Finding the best adult among us to deal with individual students
- Acknowledging that no one has all the answers; teaching is an invention-in-progress
- Knowing that teachers are most effective when we work together
- Bringing own unconscious knowledge of teaching to consciousness in order to share it with others

At the end of each class session, the teenagers composed a 6-word memoir as a summary of the day's learnings. Some of the memoirs were serious, some were funny, and all of them succinctly wrapped up the content and emotions of the day. It seems fitting, then to utilize one of these group writings to encapsulate the collaborative, challenging, and valuable work that united a small group of university professors with their pre-service teachers: Worked hard. Talked. Learned. Finished. Smiled.

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