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Learning to Teach Writing in the Age of Standardization and Accountability; Toward an Equity Writing Pedagogy

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The ability to write clearly and convincingly is critical for academic achievement, is an essential job skill, and can prepare students to participate in the “new capitalism” which will become increasingly innovative and technologically driven (Wagner 2012, 2008; Gee, 2000; Alvermann, 2002; Atwell, 1999). Much of the seminal literature on teaching and learning writing has called for teachers to develop better understandings of how particular instructional strategies foster specific student learning outcomes (Hillocks, 2003; Huot, 2002; Murphy, 1997; Smith, 1991; Durst, 1990). Voices in the literature have also specifically advocated research that describes how particular approaches to writing instruction address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Bunch, 2013; Ball, 2006; O’Neill, et al. 2006; Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003). Yet in the age of new standards and reform, teaching and learning writing are influenced and shaped by the pressure to prepare students for standardized writing assessments (Murphy & Yancey, 2008; Dysthe, 2007; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). On the one hand, the pressure to prepare students for writing assessments has increased the attention and resources for teaching and learning writing (Hillocks, 2003). On the other hand, many of the resources available to teachers encourage one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching writing, which are not responsive to the diverse skill sets of K-12 students. Thus, teachers are faced with a dilemma: many of the available resources are grounded in the same paradigms as the tests that students are failing. Alternatively, some of the more flexible approaches to teaching writing may not support students to succeed on standardized tests, which could negatively impact students’ lives¹.

This dilemma was a recurring theme in two studies that each documented the transformations of five middle school language arts teachers as they analyzed

¹ In some school districts, high school exit exams include on-demand writing. In some cases, scores from standardized tests are used to determine placement in classes needed for graduation. Standardized test scores are often used for reclassification from English Learner programs to mainstream classes. These are just several ways students lives can be impacted by standardized test scores.

a variety of student learning data and sought to balance diverse approaches to teaching writing in a collaborative inquiry project (Pella, 2012; 2011). This present study focused on two of the teachers in those studies: Rachel and Laura (pseudonyms); two middle school teachers who sought to develop their writing pedagogies to be responsive to the needs and interests of their diverse students. This article addressed the following research questions: (a) How did Rachel and Laura define equity in their writing pedagogy? (b) How did the high stakes testing climate shape their development of equity teaching? (c) How, two years after the lesson study were these two teachers operationalizing the Common Core State Standards?

Findings in this present study revealed that Rachel and Laura co-constructed their definitions of equity teaching for writing instruction, or more simply, *equity writing pedagogy* through a process of negotiating balance, or *theoretical equilibrium* between contrasting approaches to teaching and learning writing. Each teacher characterized her equity writing pedagogy as an integrated repertoire of both standardized and flexible instructional approaches. While the classroom contextualized inquiry process promoted experimentation with more flexible approaches, the pressure to prepare students for tests motivated teachers to maintain some standardized instructional approaches. Thus, findings further suggested that the various contexts in which participating teachers sought to understand equity e.g. the collaborative inquiry model, the classrooms, and the standardized testing climate, deeply influenced how teachers defined and developed equity writing pedagogy.

Research Lens

Research on teacher professional development, which draws from situated learning theory, suggests “professional development experiences are particularly effective when situated in a collegial learning environment, where teachers work collaboratively to inquire and reflect on their teaching... [are] situated in practice, focused on student learning... [and] embedded in professional communities.” (Whitcomb, Borko, & Liston, 2009, p. 208). Situated learning theory locates the processes of thinking and doing in particular settings and involves other learners, the environment, and the meaning making activities that contribute to new knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This view of the situated aspects of learning shares a theoretical base with Vygotsky’s (1978) Social Constructivist Theory, which when applied to teacher knowledge development, posits teachers’ co-construction of knowledge as an appropriation and transformation of resources to solve locally identified problems in teaching and learning (Wells, 1999). In other words, participants in a professional learning community construct knowledge from their interactions with other people, the environment, and materials that are

introduced into the environment. Therefore, learning becomes an integrated process that blends various aspects of the situation with the activities of knowledge construction.

Evidence from the interface between writing research and teacher education research has consistently affirmed that the learning contexts, or models of teacher professional development, powerfully influence how teachers appropriate knowledge for teaching writing (Lieberman, & Miller, 2008; Lieberman, & Wood, 2003; Grossman, Valencia, Evans, Thompson, Martin, & Place, 2000; Sperling & Woodlief, 1997). Research on teacher professional development has recognized the nature of social learning in the context of teacher social networks and professional learning communities (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Social learning networks, like the National Writing Project (NWP) and other teacher professional learning communities (PLCs) offer a learning model in which, “new ideas and strategies emerge, take root, and develop, and where competence can be truly cultivated and nurtured” (Lieberman & Miller, 2008, p. 2). Findings from decades of research on professional learning communities and social networks suggests that such learning communities can lead to long term capacity development and gains in student achievement (Cochran-Smith, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2003, 1999; Lieberman, & Miller, 2008; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Lieberman, & Wood, 2003; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

In this present study, teachers’ interactions in various *situations* were both local and socio-political. For example, the learning model was based on the lesson study model for teacher professional development. In the lesson study, settings were composed of participating teachers’ middle school classrooms. The lesson study context also included meetings for co-designing lessons and debriefing observations. In addition to these settings, participating teachers interacted within the broader context in which teaching and learning are shaped by the accountability rhetoric and policies attached to standardized testing pressures. This present study defines *context* and *situation* to include not only the local professional development processes and settings but also includes the socio-political contexts in which these processes and settings are situated. The current socio-political climate of education has been increasingly focused on accountability and has resulted in Common Core State Standards, performance assessments aligned to the new standards, and data-driven accountability. The systematic collection and publication of standardized tests scores for years has become widely accepted in American social and political life (Nichols & Berliner, 2008). In so much as American society has become accustomed to high stakes testing in education, the pressure to prepare students for standardized tests has

long impacted school and classroom culture and plays a role in shaping pedagogy (Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Hillocks 2003; Huot, 2002).

A flexible research lens was needed in order to study a variety of interrelated contexts. In some instances it was necessary to focus narrowly on the settings, participants, and materials in order to focus on ways in which the lesson study protocols and the dissimilar classroom contexts influenced Rachel and Laura's developing equity writing pedagogy. It was also important to widen the lens to include the larger socio-political contexts in which these teachers operated in order to focus on how the climate of reform framed these two teachers' developing understandings of equity in their writing pedagogies. Throughout this study, the situated learning theoretical framework was adopted in order to connect teacher learning to the various contexts that shaped such learning.

Foundational Literature on Equity Teaching

This study was informed by the research literature that located equity in the classrooms, pedagogy, and perceptions of individual teachers. The literature sources that guided this study share the premise that equity teaching engages and supports *all* students in knowledge construction and critical thinking. For example, the types of skills that are regarded as critical for success in an increasingly technological and innovative workforce include the ability to think critically and work collaboratively (Wagner, 2013, 2008; Gee, 2000). Affording all students access to rich learning opportunities includes language support, scaffolding, and building on students' diverse language and background knowledge (Bunch, 2013). Whichever term is applied: equity teaching, equity pedagogy, authentic pedagogy, etc. these widely recognized ideas in the equity literature share the premise that equity teaching involves providing access to high quality instruction for *all* students.

Equity Teaching

Accessing students' prior and experiential knowledge and extending this knowledge beyond the classroom has long been a recurring theme in the foundational literature that has focused on equity teaching. As one of five dimensions of multiculturalism, equity pedagogy includes a wide range of multi-modal strategies that engage students in knowledge construction. According to Banks and Banks (1995), equity pedagogy "challenges teachers to use teaching strategies that facilitate the learning process. Instead of focusing on the memorization of knowledge constructed by authorities, students in classrooms where equity pedagogy is used, learn to generate knowledge and create new understandings" (p. 153). Equity pedagogy can be adopted in any classroom context where the teacher believes that opportunities for critical thinking should

be provided to *all* students, from *all* backgrounds. The difference between equity teaching and any “good” teaching is that equity teaching recognizes and seeks to reverse unequal access to high quality teaching and learning.

Equity teaching advocates knowledge construction, higher-order thinking, and respect for cultural knowledge where it has been notably absent: in classrooms of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. Equity-oriented teaching begins with an understanding of students’ strengths and needs in order to design varied learning opportunities, which have also been referred to as authentic pedagogy. According to Wehlage, Newmann, and Secada (1997),

Authentic pedagogy involves students in the construction of knowledge by engaging in activities that promote higher-order thinking, substantive conversation that places special emphasis on cognitive complexity, and is focused on teaching for conceptual understanding. Authentic pedagogy engages students in disciplined inquiry into the connections and relationships within and across disciplines and promotes connections to the world beyond the classroom. (pps. 32-33)

This selection of foundational studies is just a slice of the large body of research that has contributed to the understanding that equity teaching is located in the teacher’s ability to access the diverse knowledge of students, extend that knowledge through constructivist, higher-order learning opportunities, and respond to the strengths and learning needs of a diverse student population. Thus, for the purposes of this study, equity teaching is understood as a teacher’s ability to provide high quality instruction to *all* students. Further, according to Secada, Gamoran, & Weinstein (1996),

The absence of inequality...does not guarantee equity, for by equity we mean equal access to high-quality instruction. This standard for equity addresses the problem that can result when equity is defined only as the absence of unequal treatment among groups categorized along lines of gender, race, social class, ability, language, or some other demographic characteristic. Under this common definition it is possible to achieve equity merely by providing equal levels of low-quality instruction among groups of different backgrounds. Our standard of equity entails equal access to high-quality pedagogy; there can be no equity without excellence. (p.229)

If there can be no equity without excellence, then developing high quality instruction, which affords equal access to students, should arguably be the objective for teacher professional development in any content or grade level.

Professional Development for Equity Teaching

Although equity teaching refutes one-size-fits-all notions of teaching and learning for students, teachers are often required to attend didactic professional development events that do little to access the diverse perspectives of teachers. Many top-down transmission models offered by teacher professional development facilitators use pre-prepared presentations in which teachers do not engage in critical thinking, negotiating, and synthesizing diverse approaches to teaching and learning. These trainings typically provide resources, materials, and ideas for teaching that are often shelved in the classrooms of participating teachers with little if any actual use.

On the other hand, professional learning community models that are responsive to the needs and interests of teachers and their students, may promise a more authentic and generative learning experience for teachers, particularly as teachers seek to develop their notions of equity teaching. According to Darling-Hammond (2002),

Building a repertoire of strategies for equitable teaching depends not only on learning content-specific teaching strategies for students with different language backgrounds, learning styles, and experience bases; it also depends on working within a community of practice where new insights can be sought and found. (pp. 201- 212)

The teachers in this present study were part of a unique professional learning community that was inquiry based, teacher-driven, and sustained for three years. This voluntary collaborative inquiry was based on the Japanese lesson study model for teacher professional development.

Lesson Study

The features of a traditional lesson study have been shown to contribute to the knowledge base and pedagogical development of teachers (Chokshi & Fernandez, 2004; Fernandez, Cannon, & Chokshi, 2003; Fernandez, 2002; Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998). In a lesson study, teachers select topics to investigate in teaching and learning, design lessons around these topics, and observe each other delivering the lessons across various classroom contexts. Immediately following each observation, lesson study teams debrief the lesson, analyze student learning outcomes, revise or extend the lesson, and repeat the cycle several times throughout the year. As discussed earlier in this article, collaborative, inquiry-oriented social learning networks and professional learning communities have been recognized as effective learning contexts for teachers for several decades. Lesson study is one such model that could be adapted to fit any particular group

of educators. Lesson study can serve as the main professional development model or could be designed to extend from another type of professional learning. Topics for investigation are based on the needs and interests of participants and vary according to the community. In this present study, the lesson study model afforded opportunities for participating teachers to investigate and co-construct their definitions of equity and build their knowledge for teaching writing. Participating teachers were afforded opportunities to learn in ways that paralleled the collaborative approaches they designed for their students.

Methods

Research Design

This research project was funded by a grant from the Cooperative Research and Extension Services for Schools (CRESS) Center in partnership with a northern California research university, and a division of the National Writing Project (NWP). The grant paid for substitutes so teachers could collaboratively plan and observe model lessons and to engage in the debriefing meetings that immediately followed each observation. The project involved nine cycles of lesson study each cycle lasting from four to six weeks. Each lesson study cycle included collaborative topic selection, lesson design, observation of a lesson, debrief of the observation and the analysis of student learning outcomes. The project began in August 2008 and continued through June 2011 with follow-up interviews with participating teachers in 2013. Participation in this project was voluntary. A small stipend was provided for each participating teacher at the end of the first year only. After two years, all five participants elected to continue for a third year and were able to secure school site-based funding for their release days.

Participant Selection

Following the National Writing Project (NWP) institute fellows model, participants were recommended by NWP teacher consultants and school site administrators. From a larger pool of potential participants, five participating teachers were invited that demonstrated a compelling and passionate interest in improving their writing instruction and a willingness to engage in critical self reflection. Participating teachers were selected from dissimilar school districts in order to provide opportunities for teachers to learn in different community contexts. This present study focused on two of the five participating teachers: Rachel and Laura. I selected this focus because Rachel and Laura's school demographics were dissimilar, and yet they shared a strong desire to define and develop equity writing pedagogy.

Representative data in this article includes the voices of Gary, Elizabeth, and Talia. These are the pseudonyms for the other three middle school language arts teachers that participated in the lesson study. Laura and Rachel were NWP teacher consultants before joining the lesson study team. Gary, Talia, and Elizabeth were later invited to the NWP summer institutes and at the time of this publication are all active teacher consultants with the local affiliate of the NWP. All names of people and places in this study are pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Qualitative methods within the tradition of ethnographic research were employed in this study. I took extensive field notes across three years between 2008-2011 and transcribed over one hundred hours of observing participants in the context of their collaborative learning environment. All lesson study group discussions were audiotaped and transcribed; several research lessons were videotaped. Data were also collected from structured interviews of participants at the beginning and end of each school year, focus group meetings at the end of each school year, written reflections, teacher created artifacts, and student writing samples. Data included follow up interviews in 2013 with Laura and Rachel.

Data Analysis

In order to study how Rachel and Laura defined equity in their writing pedagogy and to describe how it was developed in the context of a high stakes testing climate, I used the “Content analysis and analytic induction method” as well as the “Constant comparative method” (Merriam, 2003). For example, in my coding process, I assigned codes to my field notes, teachers’ lesson planning discourse, and the discussions that took place during participants’ analysis of student learning outcomes from the lessons. My initial codes revealed patterns in discourse and in lesson plans where standardized forms of teaching writing were prevalent. In other words, teachers primarily discussed and designed ways to support students through the use of structured templates and outlines that were rigid and formulaic from test preparation materials. These approaches were usually connected to teachers’ concern for students’ standardized test performances.

Throughout the second year of the lesson study, my data began to show different approaches emerging more and more often so I coded these data for instances where the focus of instruction was on critical thinking, student choice, collaborative, and multi-modal activities. These codes became much more evident in the data as the lesson study progressed. However, the presence of the previous codes were also instantiated in the data, which suggested that Rachel and Laura

broadened their writing pedagogy to include divergent approaches to teaching writing.

Some teaching approaches were connected to Rachel and Laura's desire to make writing fun, build upon the interests and background knowledge of their students, encourage critical thinking, and to build students' confidence for writing. Other teaching approaches were connected to preparation for standardized, on-demand writing assessments. As I continued to compare these codes, a recurring theme emerged that I coded as negotiating *theoretical equilibrium*. For example, I consistently found evidence for participants' active engagement in negotiating and ultimately integrating divergent approaches to teaching writing. As I triangulated data from this recurring pattern with participants' reflections, focus group, and interview data, I was able to uncover and describe participants' developing understanding of equity teaching as a balanced and integrated pedagogy. Follow up interviews two years later confirmed that Rachel and Laura felt far more prepared for operationalizing the Common Core Standards for the English Language Arts (CCSS) because of the balanced and integrated writing pedagogies they developed in the lesson study.

Positionality of the Researcher

At the time of this project, between 2008-2011, I was a practicing, full time eighth grade English language arts teacher. I was also a teacher consultant with the NWP, and at the time of data collection and preliminary analysis, a doctoral student researcher. I took on the role as a participant in the lesson study and sought to define equity for my own teaching in a diverse urban middle school where I too, felt the pressure to prepare students for high stakes tests. Like any researcher, I entered this process with my own biases and values. I regularly resisted the temptation to either encourage or discourage any particular approach to teaching writing. My goal was to uncover and describe the processes of the collaborative inquiry, situated in various contexts, with impartiality.

During my analytic coding, I engaged in consistent member checking in order to confirm that my interpretations of participants' intentions and learning outcomes were accurate. My efforts to remain neutral allowed me to carefully document how participants sought to balance, integrate, and synthesize wide ranging theories for teaching and learning as opposed to aligning with any particular "party line." In my experience, teachers are faced with a constant stream of accountability rhetoric and pressure to focus on test preparation. Furthermore, many teachers have shelves full of materials from top-down professional development models which have never been used. These resources are often grounded in varying and sometimes contrasting philosophical paradigms about teaching and learning. I found the participants' efforts to establish what I

called *theoretical equilibrium* between divergent instructional approaches far more common among teachers than unique to this study.

Findings

Participant Profiles

Rachel and Laura had each participated in the National Writing Project (NWP) invitational summer institute and three years after attending the institute, both teachers wanted to further develop their capacity to support the writing development of their students. Although Laura and Rachel expressed their frustrations with high-stakes standardized testing, they believed the tests were not going to go away and were only going to become more impactful with the CCSS. Rachel and Laura each expressed that it was their responsibility to prepare their students effectively for on-demand writing as well as other forms of standardized tests. Both teachers knew from experience how high-stakes tests could impact students' lives. Nonetheless, both Rachel and Laura felt that their district-adopted curricula and the test preparation materials limited their ability to engage their students in meaningful writing experiences.

Laura began this project in her fifteenth year of teaching seventh grade in an affluent suburban community. She expressed that many of her “honors” students were highly knowledgeable about writing conventions and needed opportunities to be challenged beyond the grade level writing expectations according to the California content standards. Students in Laura’s seventh grade honors and mainstream English Language Arts (ELA) classes scored well on most tests including on-demand writing assessments, yet Laura believed that her students needed more opportunities to develop their voices and writing styles as well as to engage in collaborative and critical thinking activities.

Rachel began this project in her eighth year teaching English Language Development (ELD) in culturally and linguistically diverse seventh and eighth grade Language Arts classes. Rachel’s students were primarily early intermediate and intermediate English learners as indicated by their California English Language Development Test (CELDT) and typically scored below basic on the California Standards Test (CST). Rachel’s school was located in a low-income urban community where the majority of her students qualified for free and reduced price lunch. Rachel believed that her culturally and linguistically diverse students deserved the same opportunities as Laura’s affluent students to develop their voices and writing styles as well as to engage in collaborative, multi-modal, discovery-based, and critical thinking activities. According to Rachel, these activities were necessary to remediate past inequities, such as labeling and tracking; practices that she believed had prevented her students from equitable instruction. Rachel explained, “my kids all have critical thinking skills, they need

to collaborate and problem solve, but when they come to me it is the first time in their lives that they ever got to do that in school.”

Both teachers taught in schools where the pressure to prepare students for standardized tests was intense. In Laura’s view, the desire to preserve a prestigious reputation drove the pressure to maintain high test scores at her school site. In Rachel’s view, the pressure to raise scores at her school site was intensified by the prospect of sanctions against the school for consistently underperforming on standardized tests. Albeit for different reasons, both Rachel and Laura were resolute in their desire to define and develop an equity writing pedagogy; they wanted to build a repertoire of tools, strategies, and activities that could broaden *all* of their students’ writing skills.

Rachel and Laura’s definitions of equity teaching evolved significantly over a three-year period. Their engagement in the lesson study; designing lessons together, observing the lessons in action, and discussing students’ learning outcomes, provided a unique context for investigating issues of equity in their writing instruction. The opportunity to observe students in dissimilar classrooms perform the same thinking and writing tasks was a critical means for learning about equity teaching. Additionally, the high-stakes testing climate was among the most influential contexts for developing equity writing pedagogy: the testing pressure motivated participants to establish balance between divergent instructional approaches. These findings address the following research questions: (a) How did Rachel and Laura define equity in their writing pedagogy? (b) How did the high stakes testing climate shape their development of equity teaching? (c) How, two years after the lesson study were these two teachers operationalizing the Common Core State Standards?

Negotiating Theoretical Equilibrium: Balancing Approaches

Rachel and Laura gradually integrated contrasting approaches to teaching and learning writing through a process of negotiation that I termed *theoretical equilibrium*. For example; over the three years of the project, Rachel and Laura shared experiences, knowledge, resources, and interests in defining equity within the context of an immense social pressure to prepare their students to perform well on standardized tests. They introduced and negotiated a wide variety of resources that represented contrasting approaches to teaching and learning writing. Rachel and Laura sought to establish *theoretical equilibrium*; a balance between competing approaches to teaching writing. As a result they developed an integrated writing pedagogy that they believed would provide the most access to the broadest range of talents in their classrooms. Rachel and Laura came to believe that the more integrated their writing pedagogy, the more equity-oriented, and accessible their instruction would be.

The divergent instructional approaches ranged from standardized to flexible. Some of the more standardized approaches were highly structured, rule-based, and formulaic. The more flexible approaches were more collaborative, discovery-based, and open-ended. The standardized approaches were typically focused on preparing students to respond to on-demand writing prompts. Although some of these instructional approaches were teacher created, most were drawn from test preparation materials and structured writing resources from the district adopted curricula². Several of the resources introduced paragraph structure in a strict order: one topic sentence, followed by three supporting sentences, followed by a concluding sentence. Lessons from the standardized resources also suggested structured formats for expository essays which included an attention grabbing opener, followed by a thesis statement, followed by three body paragraphs (each containing the aforementioned paragraph structure), and followed by a conclusion.

These standardized approaches included writing prompts that were similar to the state and district on-demand writing assessments, graphic organizers, explicit modeling, fill-in-the-blank writing templates, revision checklists, and standards-based rubrics similar to the scoring rubrics from test preparation materials.

Although Rachel and Laura found merit in standardized approaches to teaching and learning writing, they did not want to be limited to such methods. Laura expressed that a structured and standardized approach to writing instruction limited her “high achieving students from experimenting with a variety of styles of writing.” Laura’s frustrations were reflected in her comment, “When I suggested alternative approaches to teaching writing, like critical thinking and more exploratory activities, my principal said, ‘if it isn’t broken, why fix it?’ So I just do what I do (introduce other genres and writing activities) and hope nobody has a problem with it.”

In Rachel’s site, the over-focus on test preparation resulted from the low achievement status that the school endured due to low test scores. Rachel was deeply frustrated by the “standardized stuff that keeps me from doing what I should be doing...like making writing fun for kids... and meaningful.” Rachel reported that, “It (test pressure) corners you. I don’t have the freedom to develop

² It is not my intention to advocate or disparage any particular curricula so I am not naming the district adoptions that were used in this study. Some of the standardized resources were also teacher created and some were acquired by attending workshops provided by the local affiliate of the National Writing Project. Teachers in this study found both positive outcomes and challenges related to tightly structured and more flexible resources, which prompted their interest in establishing equilibrium between them.

the kinds of skill sets that will make them (students) upwardly mobile in the workforce- skills like thinking, and problem solving...”

Rachel and Laura sought to balance standardized instructional practices with more flexible, open-ended and student-centered writing activities. To this end, they planned lessons to build students’ confidence and enthusiasm for writing; they designed what they called, “flexible” writing activities that they characterized as having “no right or wrong answer.” These flexible approaches engaged students in investigating different ways that writers communicate to different audiences and for different purposes. The flexible approaches included the analysis of various texts in gallery walks, writing groups, free writing exercises, reflective writing, activities where students were encouraged to choose their own topics, multi-modal activities, collaboration, and activities that engaged in critical thinking about various criteria for effective writing³.

Early in this study, both Laura and Rachel separated standardized and flexible approaches according to separate purposes. They used standardized approaches to teach the standards-based writing text types and to prepare students for on-demand writing assessments. The flexible approaches were used when teachers wanted to build their students’ confidence for writing, make writing fun, and to promote critical thinking for and about writing. Laura and Rachel felt that both standardized and flexible approaches were necessary in order to be responsive to the variety of tasks, purposes, and audiences that their students would face in school and beyond. Therefore, Rachel and Laura’s interests in establishing theoretical equilibrium between these divergent approaches became central to their developing definitions of equity teaching.

Defining Equity; Negotiating Divergent Values

Rachel and Laura, along with the other participating teachers, set two main goals for the lesson study. They wanted to build students’ confidence by making writing fun and they wanted to prepare students for on-demand writing assessments. These values emerged early in the first year of the lesson study as teachers selected topics for their collaborative inquiry. In the following example, participating teachers were sharing their goals for the lesson study:

Talia: I want them to enjoy writing. I want them to choose a topic that they care about so that ultimately their writing says something

³ Two of these “flexible” activities are discussed in this article: the gallery walk activity and the student writing groups that teachers designed to provide peer feedback. It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate in detail each of the activities designed as “flexible” activities. It is important to note that these flexible activities were not all teacher created. Some were adapted from various standards-based curricula as well as from workshops that were provided by the local affiliate of the National Writing Project.

about them. How do you get them to pick a topic that they can write about that can actually make them grow as a person? I don't think they will have confidence unless they have some say in the topic. The tests don't do that, there is no choice there.

Laura: Well, the reality is they don't always get to pick a topic and I want them to be a good writer even if they get a crappy topic. They have to be prepared for that. But how can we get them to have enough confidence to know that they can do it (respond to an on-demand prompt) even if the topic is horrible? I want them to see that it is the writing that is fun even if the topic isn't that fun. That is something they need, the confidence.

This example illustrates a baseline early in the first year of the project in which participants had cast confidence building and test preparation as divergent, yet equally important values. Laura expressed her interest in building students' confidence for writing so that students would see the writing process itself as a worthwhile endeavor. At the same time, she framed students' performances on the tests as a critical goal. She expressed her interest in achieving both of these ends and as such, began to balance the time she would dedicate to both purposes.

Toward the middle of the first year of the lesson study, Laura described her developing equity writing pedagogy as providing equal time for activities "where there is no right or wrong answer" with structured activities "where there is a right answer." Laura's initial notions of equity teaching involved the equal distribution of time spent on separate writing activities that would respond to the various learning styles in her classroom. In the following example, Laura discussed a writing activity that she designed to build her students' confidence for writing:

Laura: Time is always a problem for me...fitting it all in... so before I had to think about testing, I started the second day of school with a lesson that I call, 'My Brilliant Writing Career.' Students come up with this whole scenario where they create their life as a famous writer and describe their awesome life. They collect pictures and make a collage or some sort of visual about their life as a writer. It can be video, PowerPoint, art, really anything...then they write about two to three pages about where they travel to, what they write about, what inspires them to write, how writing has made their life awesome...They share it on the smartboard with the document camera and each of their classmates asks them questions like they are famous. I give them some ideas but really, there are no structures and they really can't do it wrong if they try and I tell

them that. This sets up the year so that they see themselves as confident writers before we get to the hard stuff...before we have to start thinking about the tests...

Rachel: I need to spend more time on getting my kids to learn how to enjoy writing...how to be confident about it. I can see how your students would be confident if they think more about themselves as writers because I think my kids hit a wall because everything is so structured and sometimes their voice and even their ideas get squashed.

Over the first year of the lesson study project, Rachel and Laura separated their two most salient values for teaching and learning writing. They valued building students' voice and their confidence for writing and they also valued preparing students for standardized tests. Both teachers addressed these values with separate writing lessons and tasks, each requiring separate allocations of instructional time and attention. Both Rachel and Laura applied what they considered "flexible" approaches to the confidence building activities and they applied standardized approaches to teaching the standards-based writing text types, which they believed would best serve as test preparation⁴.

Throughout the first year of the inquiry project, Rachel and Laura negotiated the amount of time they would spend addressing their divergent values. They planned more efficiently in order to fit in more flexible writing tasks. By the end of the first year, both teachers began to define equity in terms of their ability to provide equal time in their instructional calendar for both standardized and flexible writing activities. However, as they continued to explore equity in their teaching, equal time for separate writing tasks evolved into an integrated approach that was evident throughout the final months of the study.

This shift toward integration occurred in the early months of the second year of the study. In the beginning of the second year, Rachel and Laura wanted to further investigate what they called, "flexible" activities. The lesson study had

⁴ The main standards-based writing text types for both Rachel and Laura's school district adopted middle school language arts curricula included: persuasive essay, response to literature, research report, technical directions, and a personal narrative essay. The seventh grade CST writing prompts were randomly selected from these text types each year. The new Smarter Balanced Assessments, aligned to the Common Core State Standards, draw from three main text types: Narrative, Informational/Explanatory, and Argument. It is not clear at the time of this publication which of these text types will be assessed which academic year by the Smarter Balanced Performance Tasks or whether these or other assessments will be used in each state.

afforded them opportunities to design and observe a variety of lessons that they investigated and revised in their observation debriefing meetings. The following is a brief excerpt from a debriefing meeting that immediately followed an observation of Rachel teaching a lesson that they had collaboratively designed. The lesson engaged students in analyzing various pieces of writing on the smart board. Rachel elicited responses from her students about what made some of the author's arguments stronger than others. This activity was a preview into what the group later designed as a "gallery walk," which will be detailed in the next section.

Talia: I thought they did really well... really well. I liked how you did a lot of inductive talk. You I asked them question after question after question...They really had to think...

Rachel: because I want them to be engaged in figuring it out I don't want to just tell them the answers.

Laura: I liked how you broke it down. I think I will slow it down when I start off next year. I am definitely going to slow it way down.

This exchange illustrated how the lesson study processes of experimentation and observation motivated participating teachers to further investigate a variety of approaches. As their comfort level increased with the lessons they had designed, observed, and revised, they continued to build flexible lessons into their pedagogical repertoire.

By the middle of the second year of the lesson study, participating teachers had more fully integrated flexible activities into the standards-based writing tasks that they were required to teach. Instead of competing for time in the instructional calendar, the more flexible approaches were gradually built into each of their standards-based writing lessons. In this way, Rachel and Laura established theoretical equilibrium by integrating both standardized and flexible approaches into their entire instructional program. This process will be detailed in the next section.

Integrating Instructional Approaches; Toward an Equity Writing Pedagogy

By the second year of the lesson study, Laura no longer defined equity teaching as a way to equalize instructional time among divergent teaching methods. Although balancing time for a variety of writing activities remained an objective for Laura, her vision for equity teaching was more oriented toward integrating critical thinking activities into her entire writing program. She wanted to, "challenge them [her students] to think more critically and to be more in charge of their learning." Laura wanted to engage all of her students, including her academically advanced students. Laura was concerned that, "their (her

academically advanced students) writing potential may not be realized through formulaic and standardized instructional approaches.” Laura began to articulate equity writing pedagogy as a more student-centered process of knowledge construction that should be integrated into the standardized approaches that she had previously prioritized.

Rachel’s vision of equity also emphasized integrated approaches and methods. Rachel was concerned with negotiating between the support she wanted to provide her English learners to pass the CELDT, district quarterly benchmark tests, and the state mandated writing assessments, and the freedom she wanted to provide her students to build their language in naturally occurring discussions around writing. Rachel, like Laura, believed that a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction could not meet the needs of all of her students.

Both Rachel and Laura agreed that explicit instruction had an important place in teaching and learning writing aside from its potential to prepare students for structured writing tasks. They did not want to as Laura stated, “Throw out the baby with the bath water...kids are in school to learn things that we have to teach them, not to figure everything out for themselves.” This viewpoint is consistent with groundbreaking work on educating diverse students. For example, Delpit (1988) argued that for students who are not immersed in the language and assumptions of school, explicit instruction makes it easier to acquire the knowledge necessary to participate in the dominant culture. “Unless one has the leisure of a lifetime of immersion to learn them, explicit presentation makes learning immeasurably easier” (p. 283). Rachel echoed Laura’s concern about moving entirely away from explicit directed instruction, “my kids need step by step support and scaffolding and they also need their ideas tapped and valued. We need to do it all somehow...” Both Laura and Rachel sought an integrated approach to teaching and learning writing which included direct explicit instruction, standardized approaches, flexible, open-ended, discovery, multi modal and opportunities for critical thinking. Throughout the second year of the lesson study, they designed, observed, and investigated student learning from writing lessons and tasks, which involved both flexible and standardized writing approaches. One notable lesson for integrating such activities was through the design of peer writing groups.

Peer writing groups became the focus for the second and third years of the lesson study. Participating teachers designed the writing groups to engage students in peer feedback and various multi-modal activities to think about and discuss facets of writing. According to the lesson study team, writing groups would provide opportunities for collaboration and critical thinking for and about writing. Students would share their writing with their peers, provide feedback to each other, and would use this feedback to revise their work. Participants engaged

in over forty hours of planning lessons, observations, debriefing meetings, and analysis of student engagement and student learning outcomes from writing group activities.

The next few examples represent ways that Rachel and Laura negotiated theoretical equilibrium in the instructional approaches that they designed for student writing groups. For example, Rachel's methods in the beginning of the project were more didactic than toward the end. The first excerpt was from a lesson planning meeting toward the middle of the second year of the lesson study project as Rachel explained how she had been using writing groups. This excerpt is from a lengthy discussion about structuring writing groups in a way that standardized some writing tasks while allowing for some flexibility and student choice. In the following exchange, Gary, another participant from the larger lesson study ethnography is included. In this exchange, Rachel and Laura discussed how they each integrated explicit instruction and modeling into a student-centered writing group activity:

Gary: Are kids able to catch each other's errors in sentence structure and grammar? Are they able to give suggestions that relate to the rubrics?

Laura: Some my students definitely look at sentence fluency and sentence structure because we focus a lot on those in my class...I use a revision checklist and they go through and provide feedback based on that list.

Rachel: I usually do a mini lesson prior to each writing groups where we analyze a model that I had written to remind them what they are looking for and how to do it. Each time before we get into writing groups I model this again.

This example illustrated several standardized approaches that were included in the design of the writing group activities: modeling and checklists with specific criteria, so that students could be held accountable for responding to each other's writing. Throughout this study, Rachel was engaged in an on-going effort to balance too much structured and formulaic types of scaffolding with the right amount of support for her English learners. She practiced both scaffolding and gradual release in order to find the right amount of support and independence for each of her students. By the end of the study, Rachel had progressed much farther in her efforts to help her students to grow as independent writers.

Toward the end of the third year, the lesson study team observed Rachel teach a multi-modal lesson that they called a "gallery walk." As discussed earlier, Rachel had previewed this gallery walk activity by facilitating the analysis of various pieces of writing on the smartboard. In the gallery walk, students visited

stations around the classroom in their writing groups and analyzed a variety of written arguments. Rachel had selected a variety of texts from published authors of various ages. In their writing groups, students walked around the “gallery,” read a piece of writing and collaboratively answered some broad questions about the author’s argument. Students answered questions such as: What is the author’s argument? What kind of evidence does the author use to support his or her argument? Who do you think the author’s audience is? Why? The questions were open-ended so that students could collaborate and come up with a variety of answers. Answers were to be written down on handouts provided by Rachel. Following the gallery walk activity, Rachel facilitated a whole class debrief where she encouraged students to share their responses and discuss them.

Rachel had clearly shifted from using writing groups for explicit instruction to using these groups to foster critical thinking activities for her students. The following quote, from the debrief immediately following the observed lesson, represents this shift:

Rachel: I tried it differently; I wanted to see what kids came up with themselves before I taught them anything. I wanted to experiment with ways to find out what they already thought about it (argumentation) so I could see where to go next. I did kind of want to see where they would go with it first instead of trying to clearly define it for them.

This quote represented Rachel’s shift toward an integrated approach to writing instruction in the standards-based writing text types (In the CCSS, the three text types are: Argument, Informative/Explanatory, and Narrative). Rachel used some teacher-directed, explicit modeling in order to structure ways for students to provide peer feedback. She also used the collaborative organization of peer writing groups to engage students in investigating various features of written arguments. Writing groups became a way for Rachel to integrate teacher-directed instruction with flexible and student-centered discussions about writing. In other words, as Rachel investigated how critical thinking activities engaged her students, she provided more opportunities for her students to think independently for and about and writing.

Toward the end of the third year of the lesson study project, Laura also began to more fully integrate critical thinking and knowledge construction with standardized approaches to teaching and learning writing. In her efforts to design writing groups, Laura evolved from a teacher-directed process to a more flexible student-driven process. In the following excerpt, Laura used the acronym TAG, which was a three-step process for providing peer feedback. The ‘T’ is for ‘tell something you like’ about the piece of writing. The ‘A’ stands for ‘ask questions’

about the piece of writing to generate thinking on the part of the writer. The 'G' represents 'give a suggestion' about how the writing could be improved. Several teachers in the project began the year using the TAG structure. In the following excerpt from a longer discussion about writing groups, Laura explained her evolution away from the TAG structure:

Laura: In the beginning of the year I started with a very formulaic approach to writing groups with the TAG process. Now they (students) have come to the place where they write in the margins and all over each other's papers and I don't have to structure it at all. ...most suggestions are about word choice and conventions but there are a lot of times where the feedback is about making something more clear or detailed. I am not sure that they are doing each of the components of TAG but I do know that feedback is given and that it is mostly positive.

The final meeting at the end of the third year was loosely structured as a focus group discussion about the lesson study. When I asked specifically about the most important take-away, in terms of developing equity writing pedagogy, Laura shared her interest in engaging students in thinking critically for and about writing:

Laura: the biggest aha for me in terms of equity was when the students took on that role of the evaluator. I think this is hugely, hugely powerful. They got in their writing groups, looked at an essay, and they found what was wrong with it... and then they went back to their writing portfolio. They had an active essay at that time and then they found some things, and revised it. I think it was huge, because I think they don't get enough chances to really think about writing... and I think that was a very powerful thing. That was a huge lesson for me...I needed to give them that power, that chance to think about writing... When students take something away that they learned from looking at someone else's writing, like mine or another peer's writing, and they apply this to their own writing, that is higher level thinking, and that is a major goal for equity teaching.

By the end of the lesson study, Both Rachel and Laura characterized their equity writing pedagogy as the integration of a variety of teaching methods into their writing lessons and tasks. Their definitions of equity also included a shared interest in treating their classrooms as laboratories for investigating features of writing and encouraging students to develop independent ideas:

Laura: Instead of just telling them (students) what to look for, now, like with my sentence fluency activity, I am putting up different models of sentences and I am asking students, ‘what is the author trying to convey with the differences in the lengths of these sentences?’ - I like seeing what students extract first before we go any further.

Rachel: My students feel more respected and valued as people when they are asked to give their input on something, especially when there is no right or wrong answer. They also use their own voice a lot more and sometimes this includes dialectical language and that’s good because they are learning how and when to go from formal to informal voice in writing.

Rachel and Laura had significantly reshaped their writing pedagogy to encourage their students to think more critically and independently about writing. Their efforts to define equity in a collaborative, contextualized lesson study group prompted them to experiment with more flexible teaching methods and move away from a strict adherence to standardized approaches to writing instruction. Nonetheless, Rachel and Laura remained duly influenced by the accountability rhetoric, which pressured them to prepare students for high-stakes tests. As such, they did not eschew test preparation; their equity writing pedagogy reflected an integrated balance –or theoretical equilibrium between standardized and flexible teaching and learning methods.

Lesson Study: A Promising Practice-Based Model

Follow up interviews in spring 2013, two years after the lesson study project ended revealed that Rachel and Laura maintained and expanded what they learned in the lesson study. Additionally, during the two-year period after the lesson study, Rachel and Laura presented ideas generated by the lesson study to outside audiences. For example, in the summers of 2012 and 2013, Rachel and Laura presented weeklong summer workshops that they aligned to the CCSS for the English Language Arts. Their workshops included many of the activities they tested in the lesson study including student collaborative writing groups and methods to engage students in multi-modal critical thinking literacy activities.

Two years after the lesson study, Rachel and Laura sustained and expanded their integrated approach to teaching writing. Their integrated lessons included reading, speaking, listening, and language development through gallery walks, music, arts and technology integration, and student collaboration. Laura explained, “In the lesson study we were already doing much of what the CCSS for ELA called for...we want students to be able to go beyond the text and to return to the text- whatever the text may be: print, video, podcast, artwork, song, etc....”

and cite the evidence to support their claims.” Since their experiences in the lesson study and in several NWP workshops since the lesson study, Rachel and Laura expressed that they did not need to make extensive pedagogical shifts to align to the CCSS. They both described the transition to the Common Core Standards for ELA somewhat seamless from their current practices. Nevertheless, Rachel remarked that her colleagues and other teachers in her district are facing challenges learning and operationalizing the CCSS.

Rachel: One challenge teachers are telling us about is having no curriculum—and not enough informational texts. They worry about selecting texts that are complex enough but not too complex and finding more informational texts that are relevant and support a writing program....a lot of people who come to our workshops have been scripted and paced all these years and don’t know where to begin...especially elementary teachers who have been tightly scripted--that is going to be hard for them--to go back to square one and learn how to select texts, design lessons, it’s like learning how to teach all over again... As for equity, I try to show how our approach to teaching writing can support *all* students from *all backgrounds* to be writers.

Conclusion

Teachers in this project regularly shared stories about accountability rhetoric and the social pressure centered on test preparation. For example, Rachel explained how her principal compiled a list of students’ test scores, separated by teacher’s names, and distributed them at a faculty meeting. One of Rachel’s colleagues left the meeting in tears of embarrassment over her students’ low test scores. Gary described an assembly that was held to reward students for their test performances. In this assembly, teachers were also called to the stage and recognized for their students’ high test scores. While the teachers whose students scored well on tests were still on the stage, the principal announced on the microphone, “Students...Do you see all of your teachers up here?” When students yelled, “No...” the principal announced, “Well students... even your teachers need to work harder!”

In this study, the pressure to prepare students for standardized tests played a role in shaping teachers’ definitions of equity teaching. While Rachel and Laura’s efforts to develop equity writing pedagogy prompted them to design multi-modal and what they called “flexible” writing activities, the test-driven school culture motivated them to maintain their use of various standardized approaches. As a result, these two teachers sought to develop an eclectic writing pedagogy- one that integrated divergent practices. Rachel and Laura defined

equity writing pedagogy as a balanced approach to teaching and learning where both standardized and more flexible approaches were integrated. Both teachers described their equity writing pedagogy as in “its infancy.” Rachel and Laura agree that there were areas in their writing pedagogy which needed continued attention with respect to equity. For instance, both teachers are concerned with the selection of texts that engage and motivate students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as providing opportunities for students to write on a variety of topics, and for a variety of purposes and audiences of their own choosing.

Discussion

The equity writing pedagogy of the teachers in this study is not purported to be complete or fully developed. Nor does this study suggest that equity writing pedagogy is a static entity with a single definition. As the title of this article suggests, participants were working *toward* an equity writing pedagogy and continued their development beyond the three-year lesson study project. In terms of the five dimensions of multiculturalism posited by Banks (1993), Rachel and Laura had begun to investigate 1) Equity pedagogy and 2) Knowledge construction. They had only scratched the surface another dimension: 3. Content integration. For example, at the time of the study, both teachers were in the initial stages of seeking resources for culturally relevant texts and trying out culturally relevant and responsive teaching approaches. Two dimensions were not a focus of in this present study: 4) Prejudice reduction, and 5) Empowering school culture and social structure. These are critical for fully operationalizing equity in K-12 classrooms and schools. Thus, the equity writing pedagogy that was emerging throughout the lesson study is intended to illustrate the beginning of a journey for these two teachers; a journey that was made possible for them by a practice-based, teacher-driven professional development model.

The focus of this study was the collaborative, inquiry-based lesson study model wherein teachers investigated student learning, negotiated theoretical equilibrium among various teaching approaches, and constructed definitions of equity teaching. As they participated in the collaborative inquiry, Rachel and Laura observed firsthand how their students engaged in critical thinking and collaborative learning. Observations and discussions about lessons fostered new understandings about the individual assets, interests, and needs of their own and each other’s students. Such understandings are necessary in order to access and build upon the diverse knowledge and skill sets of students. According to Noguera (2008), “An effective teacher who is able to inspire students by getting to know them can actually do a lot to overcome anti-academic tendencies (p.15).” In the age of new standards and assessments, professional development that

promotes learning about students' assets and responding to students' individual and collective needs is an imperative.

Professional development models must respond to the challenge of defining and operationalizing equity teaching as it is situated in the socio-political climate of accountability and reform. Teacher-driven collaborative learning models that are focused on issues of equity, and are contextualized in classroom practices, hold promise for steering the reform movement away from another set of scripts and toward developing pedagogies that support *all* students to thrive.

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