



2020

## Modeling Adaptive Expertise Together

James E. Fredricksen  
*Boise State University*, [jimfredricksen@boisestate.edu](mailto:jimfredricksen@boisestate.edu)

Amber Warrington  
[amberwarrington@boisestate.edu](mailto:amberwarrington@boisestate.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte>



Part of the Higher Education and Teaching Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Fredricksen, James E. and Warrington, Amber (2020) "Modeling Adaptive Expertise Together," *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

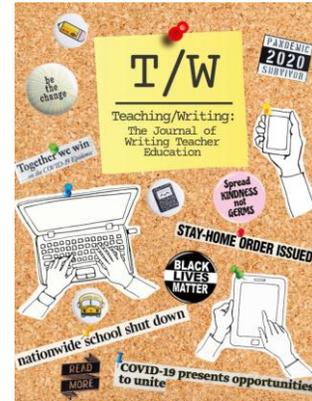
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol9/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



## Modeling Adaptive Expertise Together

James E. Fredricksen, *Boise State University*  
Amber Warrington, *Boise State University*



As a pair of English educators at Boise State University, we work with preservice teachers as members of the English department. During the Covid-19 semester we taught largely the same set of students in two different undergraduate courses, (1) Teaching Writers in Secondary ELA Classrooms and (2) Assessing Readers and Writers in Secondary Classrooms. Amber led 27 students in the Assessment course, while Jim led 37 students in the Teaching Writers course.

Here, we consider the question, “How did we respond to the emergency remote teaching situation during Covid-19?” We hope that reflecting in public will help us be more intentional and responsive to the work we do with our students in the future, and we are excited to learn from other colleagues who share in this issue of *Teaching/Writing*.

### Adaptive Expertise

Our initial responses to our question led us to name some aims, often in single words — flexibility, relationships, focus. The more we talk and write, the more we see how our decisions link these concepts and principles through the framework of adaptive expertise. We should point out that when we moved to remote teaching, the two of us did not have a conversation where we said, “Oh, we should model adaptive expertise for our students.” It is only now, weeks after the semester when we make connections between our response and the adaptive expertise framework.

Adaptive expertise differs from routine expertise. Routine expertise focuses on the predictable, certain situations educators face; it is an expertise about “applying a core set of skills and routines with improved fluency and efficiency” (Anthony, Hunter, & Hunter, 2015). Adaptive expertise, on the other hand, focuses on uncertain and ambiguous situations educators face. Adaptive experts are those who use knowledge flexibly in new situations to change existing procedures or invent new ways to approach novel problems; they can appropriate conceptual and practical tools from one context and make use of them in new contexts or for solving new or novel problems (Grossman, et. al., 1999; Martin et. al, 2005).

Although we hope the preservice teachers we lead develop routine and adaptive expertise, we highlight adaptive expertise here since it is about those unpredictable, uncertain moments — like teaching and learning during a global pandemic. In this piece, we focus on three features of adaptive expertise that we might have modeled this semester:

1. Considering a situation from multiple perspectives
2. Linking immediate situations to a conceptual framework
3. Understanding how decisions have implications for meaning and action

### **Considering a Situation from Multiple Perspectives**

As we redesigned our courses, we emailed students to learn how they were doing, and we discovered they experienced the shift in dramatically different ways. Some lost jobs; others were working many hours before a furlough. Some stayed in apartments, others moved home to live with parents, and some moved back to different cities and states. Other students had no stable or safe home to return to. Some of our students are older, married, raising children, and/or in the midst of career changes. Some had unstable or no access to the internet, while others had to negotiate the work and school schedules of multiple people living in their homes. Students were caring for grandparents and younger siblings, one had been exposed to the virus and needed to quarantine, and a few were dealing with health issues and scares of other kinds. Several of our students faced challenges in connecting with medical providers who could treat their physical and mental health needs. As we connected with each student, we learned more about their unique circumstances and responses to the changes that come with a global pandemic.

In response to the students and their varied life situations, both of us chose to simplify our syllabi for the last two months of the semester. We realized our students needed individualized options for deadlines, tasks, and communication. We deleted initial assignments in order to focus on the most significant learning for the semester. Amber removed a final project, knowing that students would have opportunities for similar kinds of work in other courses. Jim's class moved from weekly due dates and tasks to more flexible deadlines based on what individual students felt would be most helpful.

We considered students' perspectives as we thought through the different supports they might need to complete the semester. This perspective-taking was possible because of the relationships we had built with students both in our courses and across program experiences. The trust among us made it easier for students to share their experiences and for us to understand and empathize with their struggles. We had placed importance on building these relationships previously, but the pandemic situation emphasized the value of that approach to our work.

We wanted to continue fostering those relationships as our classes moved online. It was daunting and overwhelming at times, but we made the decision to meet with students in varied ways across our two courses (one-on-one, small groups, large groups, emails, and videos) because those multiple structures allowed us and our students to consider our collective experience through many perspectives.

### **Linking Immediate Situations to a Conceptual Framework**

For us, a "conceptual framework" focuses on the relationships among key ideas (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Smagorinsky, et. al, 2003). The Teaching Writers in Secondary ELA Classrooms course began with a focus on the Connected Learning framework

(<https://clalliance.org/about-connected-learning/>). In this framework, “connected learning” sits at the intersection of three main concepts — interests, relationships, and opportunities.

As we shifted the course from face-to-face to remote teaching, the decisions I (Jim) made about the course, as well as my explanations to our students for why we were making those changes, mirrored not only the Connected Learning Framework’s focus on interests, relationships, and opportunities, but it also mirrored the many stories we read in *Teaching in the Connected Learning Classroom*. In those stories, teachers often shared how they enacted a principle of connected learning, as well as the successes, tensions, and questions that arose for them and students as they did so.

I hoped the shift to remote teaching during an emergency would allow students still to pursue their interests, to see possibilities in multiple opportunities, and to know that our relationships to each other and our learning community still mattered. For a host of reasons, this fostering of community is what proved most difficult for us in revising this course mid-semester, and in their end of the semester pieces, many students wrote how they believe “community” will be a central classroom feature they create for the writers they lead.

As the semester progressed, I continued to refine the course, because what was working for some students did not work for others. In the beginning, for instance, I tried to create weekly, asynchronous sessions that mimicked our previous face-to-face sessions. When many students reported that this structure no longer worked in the intended ways, I revised the course so that students saw not a list of tasks to complete, but a set of pathways to meet some of the course goals. I dispensed with weekly sessions, and replaced them with one-on-one conferences with each of the 37 students. I spread these meetings over the course of 2-3 weeks, but they became central to working toward a connected learning experience for each student. They could work toward their individual goals, had multiple opportunities to confer with me about their work, and to work at a pace that worked for them, me, and the people in their lives. The Connected Learning framework served as a stable anchor that we could return to together as we faced a sudden shift.

### **Understanding How Decisions Have Implications for Meaning and Action**

In thinking through the shift to an online format, I (Amber) had many potential paths for course structures, assignments, and communication. As I chose each particular path, I considered what those decisions would mean for students and me as learners, teachers, class members, and human beings living through a pandemic. Throughout the last two months of our class, I made multiple decisions and revisions: removing a final project to lessen students’ workload, adding a weekly Zoom meeting for students who reported missing social connection with peers, changing the format of Blackboard discussions to allow for more student autonomy, and talking honestly with students about my teaching inquiries and challenges.

Because we were now in different time zones, and students had various family and work responsibilities, I thought an asynchronous format for class discussion would be most accessible for students. During the first week of our online class, however, students requested we have Zoom meetings during our regular class time to talk through ideas from

the readings “in person.” In response to students’ requests, I revised my syllabus a second time to include a synchronous option for participating in each week’s discussion.

The Zoom calls allowed for different conversations among my students and me; students had opportunities to ask about my perspectives on teaching during a pandemic and my thinking about quickly shifting a face-to-face course to an online format. I explained to students why I had made particular decisions, and I shared uncertainties as well. For example, I wanted our class to remain dialogic in our responses to readings and application to classroom practice, yet I felt unsure of how to create that same classroom community in an online space. I admitted to students that I didn’t have the online version of the course completely figured out in March—I changed and adapted our plans in response to their ideas and changing contexts. By being transparent about tensions in my decision-making, I hoped that I could model a planning process that responded to students’ needs and contexts.

By making the decision to talk honestly about my teaching challenges, our relationship shifted from teacher/students to thinking partners collaboratively inquiring into a difficult teaching situation. We talked through our use of Blackboard discussion forums and ways we might restructure online conversations in the future. We thought about how we might have kept the final project in the syllabus but added additional supports from peers and me. We considered together the ways that curricular decisions have meaning for a group of learners and the actions learners would take in response to those decisions.

### **Closing**

The adaptive expertise framework helped us name what is most important in our teaching. In applying the framework to our decision-making during the pandemic, we saw the ways in which we considered multiple perspectives, linked the immediate situation to a conceptual framework, and understood the implications of our decisions, but this framework revealed other aspects of our teaching that we value, such as care, dialogue, community, and listening. In our reflection, we have been able to make explicit what was implicit in our hurried adaptations to our courses. We are now thinking about how we can build on what this reflection has revealed as the context continues to change--in building courses that are fully online and in developing program-wide community when we have no face-to-face contact with students.

At a programmatic level, we are reminded how valuable and critical it is to develop relationships with students. Our students would have received our responses this semester differently had we not begun developing relationships with them prior to this semester. They knew us and we knew them — not only from our four-semester sequence of courses, but also from our application and interview processes, advising sessions each semester, quarterly newsletters, and occasional social events.

While we present “adaptive expertise” as a framework here, we recognize that when times are uncertain and overwhelming, educators and students alike need stability. For us, trusting relationships were the stabilizing force and guiding light in our response. As we move forward, we wonder how we can create programmatic conditions for our students to

develop, deepen, and sustain broader networks of support, because it will be their networks that support our students as they begin to lead young people in classrooms and school communities.

## References

- Anthony, G., Hunter, J., & Hunter, R. (2015). Prospective teachers' development of adaptive expertise. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 49, 108-117.
- Connected Learning Alliance. (n.d.). What is connected learning?  
(<https://clalliance.org/about-connected-learning/>)
- Garcia, Antero, ed., 2014. *Teaching in the Connected Learning Classroom*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.  
<https://clalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/teaching-in-the-CL-classroom.pdf>
- Grossman, P.L., Smagorinsky, P., & Valencia, S. (1999). Appropriating tools for teaching English: A theoretical framework research on learning to teach. *American Journal of Education*, 108(1), 1-29.
- Martin, T., Rayne, K. Kemp, N.J., Hart, J.M., & Diller, K.R. (2005) Teaching for adaptive expertise in biomedical engineering, ethics. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 11(2), 257-276.
- Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Smagorinsky, P., Cook, L., & Johnson, T.S. (2003). The twisting path of concept development in learning to teach. *Teachers College Record*, 105(8), 1339-1436.