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The Journal of Writing Teacher Education

T/W

Conflict, Politics, and Self-Censorship: PSTs and their Struggles with Writing as Civic-Engagement

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Given the current system of neoliberalism, accountability, and "meritocracy" and because teaching is an inherently political act (e.g., Nieto, 2006), it becomes important to examine the ways teacher education can support teachers' work to interrupt inequities and oppression impacting their students and communities (Schneider, 2013). Also requiring our attention as English Language Arts (ELA) and literacy educators is the current moment in which we teach and live. Since mid-March of 2020, folx have been forced to shelter in place and take all precautions to prevent the spread of an already deadly pandemic. These experiences have shined a brighter light on inequities in health care, in education, and in employment. Additionally, following the senseless murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, among others, at the hands of police officers, we have experienced ongoing nation- and world-wide protests and movements against systemic racism and anti-Blackness.

As a whole, the context in which we live, learn, and teach is rife with inequities in dire need of action. Teachers, we believe, are positioned well to contribute meaningfully, and teacher education, ELA and literacy education in our case, must take up this call. Aligning with Freire's (1970) and others' calls for a liberatory education, it is more important than ever that literacy practices and spaces be leveraged for social change. English education presents a robust space to begin this work. Morrell (2005) and Yagelski (2006), for example, called for a critical English education, and Johnson (2018) argued for a Critical Race English Education (CREE), where ELA classrooms and curricula promote activism, progressive views of literacy, viewing ELA teachers as public intellectuals and change agents. While 'civics' is traditionally associated with social studies, one

area in which all teachers can serve as public intellectuals and can use their voices to promote change is writing. ELA and literacy teachers are teachers of writing and have the opportunity to position the writing they and their students do as relevant in and impactful on the world around them. Thus, one way teachers and students can contribute to social discourse and push for change is through civically-engaged writing.

In conceptualizing civically-engaged writing for this study, we draw heavily on two concepts from the ELA and literacy literature. First, Garcia and O'Donnell-Allen (2015) discuss civic engagement as "having the individual power to understand and take action in areas of personal and social concern that affect one's life and the lives of others in the community and in the broader world" (p. 59). Second, Mirra and Garcia (2020) theorize speculative civic literacies as "expansive, creative forms of meaning making and communication aimed at radically reorienting the nature and purpose of shared democratic life toward equity, empathy, and justice" (p. 297). We, then, define civically-engaged writing as harnessing the power of the rhetorical situation and using one's composition process and products to interrogate, draw attention to, and/or interrupt issues of inequity, injustice, and social concern. As such, civically-engaged writing is inherently political in its efforts to influence and impact the broader world, and it positions student/teacher authors as political beings within those change efforts. Because of the fact that authors compose and deliver pieces of composition intended to effect change, we view civically-engaged writing as a form of activism. To those ends, this study seeks to respond to the following questions:

- In what ways does a composition course focused on writing as civic engagement impact PSTs' views of civically engaged writing?
- In what ways does a composition course focused on writing as civic engagement impact PSTs as writers of civically engaged texts?

Literature Review

The current study seeks to explore the ways ELA pre-service teachers (PSTs) use writing as avenues for civic engagement. A number of scholars (e.g., Feigenbaum, 2012; Garcia & O'Donnell-Allen, 2015) have discussed writing as civic engagement. Others have written about the connection between the teaching of writing and responsible citizenship (Bennett & Fessenden, 2006), perceptions of teachers as activists, particularly in composition classrooms (Ervin, 1997), and reading and writing to promote critical thinking and democratic participation (Wile, 2000). Others still have described critical ways to support PSTs and K-12 teachers in curriculum design intended to foster and address resistance to antiracism (Galman et al., 2010; Pollock et al., 2010) and to support teachers and students in their understandings and development of political awareness and teacher activism

(Picower, 2013). What follows is a review of the literature within which we situate our own work and a discussion of how and where we add to the discourse.

Education and Civic Engagement

To guide our inquiry, we draw on the scholarship describing the role(s) of civic engagement and activism within education. Any approach to civically-engaged and activist writing with students first suggests viewing education, as Ritchie (2012) describes, "as a vehicle for change." Similarly and also framing such work in writing classrooms is Freire's (1970) idea of a liberatory education and of education as inherently political. The idea that education can be liberatory and can foster equity and justice begins with re-visioning traditional models of activist and civics education, which Heggart and Flowers (2019) suggest do not often take into account contemporary methods of public engagement. Rethinking the traditional models of civic education and preparing students to act in and on the world, the authors argue, involves establishing schools as "sites of resistance" (p. 5), empowering teachers to take justice oriented approaches, creating partnerships between schools and communities, and advocating for systemic change.

Almost three decades ago, Darling-Hammond (1992) called for rethinking teachers and teaching to focus on policy and political development. More recently, others (Heggart & Flowers, 2019; Lieberman & Mace, 2010) echo and add to Darling-Hammond's call by pushing to make teaching methods more public and to create opportunities for activism and advocacy. In ELA specifically, Mirra and Morrell (2011) posit that part of this critical and democratic work must include engaging teachers and communities in collaborative efforts to foster change. Additionally, Yogev and Michaeli (2011) suggest positioning teachers as "organic intellectuals…who are not detached from the very thin fabric of public life but strengthen the dimension of knowledge within it" (p. 316). To this end, it becomes important to create networks of (and for) teachers who empower one another to develop as politically-active, public intellectuals who work as change agents (Morrell, 2005; Smylie & Eckert, 2018) and to continue exploring ways power and democracy are and can be enacted in classrooms, including writing classrooms (Friedman et al., 2008). With this broader view of civic education and activism within education in mind, we next turn to the literature on civic engagement and the teaching of writing.

Teaching Writing and Civic Engagement

The participants in our study were tasked with using their writing (and the ways in which they conceptualized their future writing instruction) to actively address inequities they recognized in society. That is, they were asked to leverage their writing to become civically engaged. With regard to civic engagement in the classroom, scholars (e.g., Spiezo, 2002) have continued to argue for rethinking the

roles of teachers and the curriculum in innovative ways that foster political engagement. Such a rethinking opens unique possibilities for teachers of writing and for writing classrooms. For example, Bennett and Fessenden (2006) and House (2015) push for approaches to teaching writing that foster citizenship and critical engagement with the world. This engagement, through writing, with the outside world presents powerful methods for preparing an engaged democratic citizenry.

It is thus important to engage students with real, external audiences, as focusing only on in-class writing can lead students to believe that in-class discussion and writing for the teacher is itself engagement with the world (Ervin, 1997). It is, however, vital for students to have more accurate and realistic conceptualizations of what civic engagement can and should look like and to understand their role(s) within that construct. Singer and Shagoury (2005), exploring one teacher's implementation of a unit designed to provide students with more nuanced perspectives and understandings of activism, found that high school students developed "grounded definitions of social activism" (p. 338) and began to perceive themselves as agentive and capable of influencing meaningful change. Teachers implementing civic engagement within their writing instruction holds promise for both students and society. Kohl (1995) and Feigenbaum (2012) point to the power of civically-engaged, community writing to help challenge hegemony and existing rhetorics of power and activism.

Coupled with a democratic vision of pedagogy, where students are empowered to enter socio-political discussions (Wile, 2000), creating time, space, and support for students to write to and for the world can foster meaningful democratic involvement. We situate our research at this intersection of democratic vision and pedagogy. By exploring the ways in which ELA PSTs engage in civic-minded, activist writing, how those PSTs perceive civically-engaged writing and themselves as activist writers, and the ways a teacher education course designed around writing as civic engagement, we can better understand the beliefs and experiences these teacher candidates take with them into their own careers and classrooms. Similarly, our work helps us to better understand the role(s) teacher education can and should play in preparing writing teachers who use their own instruction to foster civic engagement in their own students.

Theoretical Framework

Our goal with this study was to better understand the ways ELA PSTs viewed and participated in civically-engaged writing. To frame this work, we draw on critical literacy to guide our analysis of participants' writing. Critical literacy provides a lens for looking more closely at if/how PSTs used their compositions to analyze and critique manifestations of power and power dynamics surrounding them.

Stemming from socio-cultural understandings (e.g., community and social capital) of literacy (Luke, 2000), critical literacy positions readers as active participants and offers them a lens of power relations (Freire, 1970) through which to question and challenge language, authority, dominant discourses, the world, the ways in which power is socially-constructed (Behrman, 2006; Harste, 2003). To this end, we view 'reading' and 'texts' broadly to include social and political structures, educational and other systems, and manifestations of power, dominance, and oppression that surround us in the world. Similarly, throughout the course and study, we positioned critical literacy as a lens and tool for expanding how we define 'texts' and how we analyze the power dynamics at play in and through them. Participants in this study used their public writing to question and interrupt the inequities and problematic power dynamics they recognized in society. Critical literacy, as a theory, allowed us to explore the PSTs' attitudes and practices in their efforts to act in and on the world (Freire, 1970; Luke, 2000; Morgan & Wyatt-Smith, 2000) and their use of textual critique as a form of activism (Morrell, 2002). This research adds to existing scholarship on critical literacy by specifically examining if and how ELA PSTs utilize civically-engaged writing to impact their world.

Methods

We made use of collective case study (Stake, 1995) to examine the experiences of 5 ELA PSTs. Collective case study, as Yin (2003) describes, allowed us to engage in an in-depth analysis of multiple PSTs, who were bound together by the classroom (in this case, a writing methods course), and to study the multiple cases jointly in an effort to more thoroughly examine and understand their experiences. Additionally, collective case study, especially in the context of a writing course for teachers, allowed us to consider participants as part of a larger community of learners, teachers, and writers, a notion that aligns with the National Writing Project (NWP) ethos of fostering a community of teacher-writers. For this study, we were interested in how civically-engaged writing in the context of a writing methods course impacted PSTs' perceptions of themselves as civically-engaged writers and future ELA teachers.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at a large land grant, research university in the Southeast. At the time of the study, approximately 85% of students at this PWI were white and attended the university from mostly affluent and white backgrounds and spaces, bringing with them a variety of (albeit limited) understandings of whiteness, privilege and oppression, and systemic inequity and racism within schooling. Greater than 95% of students in the ELA program identified as white and approximately 88% as women. The ELA program itself, including all required

courses, is framed by antiracist and anti-oppressive ideologies and pedagogies. The four program instructors—two faculty and two graduate students—meet weekly to proactively plan meaningful learning opportunities for students and to be responsive to issues, concerns, etc. as they arise. This, we find, allows for cohesiveness across the program and ongoing dialogue about how to (re)frame the program, including individual courses, around the antiracist and anti-oppressive approaches we know to be necessary in teacher education. One major goal of the program, and of the course in which this study was conducted, is to help mostly white PSTs examine their own identities and positionalities, including the ways those identities inform their thinking, choices, and actions. Additionally, we want PSTs to, throughout their coursework and field experiences, develop and enact agency in and activist approaches toward the teaching of English language arts.

Among the outcomes that have stemmed from these weekly collaborative meetings include (1) a common book (e.g., Reynolds and Kendi's YAL Remix of *Stamped*) listed on every course syllabus and program-wide book discussions; (2) a mechanism for ensuring that each course includes not only social action assignments and explicit, semester-long focus on addressing educational inequities but also a framing in critical scholarship, authors of color and queer authors, and teachers' experiences engaging in educational and personal activism; and (3) regularly reflecting on and revising, even mid-semester when necessary, each of our syllabi and courses. In addition to classroom-based coursework, the PSTs also complete field placements and service learning experiences in local schools and organizations. As part of these experiences, ELA students are placed in a variety of schools and school systems, with the goal of experiencing both city and county districts, schools with new and antiquated facilities and technology, and schools that range widely in percentages of students and faculty of color.

The course in which the study was conducted had a total of 15 undergraduate ELA students, 14 of whom agreed to participate in the study. Twelve identified as women, and two as men. All fourteen identified as white. Because we were interested in using collective case study to conduct a deeper analysis and write up of student experiences, we made the decision to randomly select five participants whose data we would focus on for our analysis. Using a random number generator, we selected every fourth name from an alphabetized list of those who agreed to participate, until we reached a total of five collective case study participants. While all five randomly selected participants were women, we felt comfortable proceeding, especially given that approximately 86% of those agreeing to participate identified as women, aligning closely with current demographics of ELA teachers nationwide.

Alexandra, Allison, Hope, Katherine, and Lindsey (pseudonyms) were first semester juniors and had been recently admitted to the English language arts program. Additionally, all five identified as white, heterosexual, cisgender women.

See Table 1 for participant demographics and civically-engaged writing topics. At the outset of the course, Alexandra openly wrestled with her evolving identity and ideology. Originally, she believed she would return and teach at the high school she graduated from, where she was familiar with the students and teachers, most of whom were white. Throughout the semester, however, she began to articulate an awareness of injustices—mostly focused on gender—in the world and in education and expressed a newfound determination to explicitly address issues of gender in her future teaching.

Allison was a vocal participant from day one, but her vocalizations were not always furthering discussions of activism and justice. When the class, whether whole or small group, discussed issues of equity and oppression, she often made comments, especially early on, that worked to turn the conversation back to more benign topics of teaching (e.g., what principals might expect on lesson plans, how to facilitate a bell ringer activity). With time, these redirecting moves lessened, and she appeared to really listen to her peers and consider what equity might look like in her own teaching.

Hope was largely a quiet and thoughtful student, especially early in the semester. With time, however, she became much more comfortable in the class and with discussing topics of equity and justice and began to regularly vocalize her questions and beliefs. She became a leader among her peers and often advocated for her classmates during class discussions.

Katherine was a kind and caring student and PST. She openly shared her faith as a Christian and clearly wanted to love all her students. Likewise, she expressed an interest in teaching following The Golden Rule. When engaging in conversations around oppression and inequity, Katherine noted often that we should love all our students equally but tended to avoid articulating a belief that all people, and all students, are not seen and valued as equal.

Lindsey made it a point to share early on that she recognized that oppression existed around her and that she wanted to have a positive impact. She often positioned herself as a white woman, one who needs to be aware of how she interacts with students. That said, she regularly shared a concern over how she was to go about 'doing' equity work as a teacher and a person.

As part of this discussion, it is also important for us—as teachers and researchers—to unpack our own positionalities. Mike, a faculty member in the ELA program and instructor of the course in which this study was conducted, is a cis-het, white man. Gail Harper is a white, cis-het woman. She is a doctoral student who teaches courses in the program. We both identify as activists who engage in a variety of forms of civic engagement (e.g., public letter writing, protests and marches, community involvement, advocacy), and we attempt to make our activism visible to our students. We fully recognize that our identities and privileges, especially with regard to activism, influence not only the ways we teach but also

the ways we define activism and civic engagement—that is, the ways we engage in activism and navigate the world influence what we understand to be active, civic engagement and what we fail to view as such.

As instructor of the course, Mike's experiences and beliefs informed the course design, including the ways activism and civic engagement were defined, the types of writing students were asked to compose, the mentor texts used in class, and the support and feedback students received throughout the semester. Similarly, both of our conceptualizations of civic engagement shaped the ways we perceived student approaches and writing and how we applied our analytical lenses to the data. To mitigate these limitations, we worked to reflect intentionally and regularly, both throughout the semester and across our data analysis; to engage in continuous learning; and to actively participate in civic engagement alongside the PSTs. Moreover, we strive to always learn from and with our students, to remain aware of our own positionalities and their influences on all we do, and to utilize a systematic process for analyzing and reporting data.

Table 1--Participant Demographics and Project Topics

Preservice Teacher Name (Pseudonym)	**Gender Identity**	**Racial Identity**	**Letter to the Editor topic**	**Letter Writing Campaign topic**
Alexandra	Woman	White	Appointment of Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court and sexual assault	Policies influencing women's decisions on abortion
Allison	Woman	White	Fiscal budgeting and mayoral spending (international travel)	Argument for banned books class/club at local high school
Hope	Woman	White	Transgender student/ lawsuit	Importance of new building for the College of Education
Katherine	Woman	White	Fraternities use of hate speech in game day banners	Funding for new building for the College of Education
Lindsey	Woman	White	Viewing HS band/half-time show as equal to football team/game	New state law on abortion and women's choice

Data Sources

This study was conducted in an undergraduate writing methods course for secondary (grades 6-12) ELA majors. Generally, although not always, PSTs take this course during their first semester in the program (i.e., as first semester Juniors). The course was designed to (1) introduce future ELA teachers to methods for teaching composition and (2) engage PSTs in civically-engaged writing as students and to foster considerations of such compositions in their future ELA classrooms. The PSTs read a variety of texts about teaching writing and about civically-engaged writing. As part of the course, they were also asked to craft a variety of public-facing compositions, including a Letter to the Editor, a Letter Writing Campaign, both of which were delivered to their intended audiences, and a composition of visual activism (e.g., activist artwork, poster/advertisements, photography) which was shared via social media.

The goal with making assignments public-facing (i.e., asking them to deliver their compositions to their intended audiences) was to engage participants in dialogue with the world and with those they deemed capable of influencing the issues they, as students and future teachers, were passionate about. Crafting and submitting compositions to outsiders also creates an opportunity for PSTs to grapple with and reflect on their experiences making their voices public. As a way to mitigate the challenges that can accompany writing for the outside world, especially when the target of that writing is to promote equity and justice, the PSTs chose for themselves the topics/issues they composed around and the audiences they delivered those compositions to. All compositions were workshopped with classmates and with the instructor to ensure PSTs went through multiple drafts before delivering a piece of writing to its intended audience. As a way to model and provide scaffolding for students, the instructor also composed each assignment alongside the students, used think-aloud, and participated in all peer reviews. As a program, we have implemented iterations of this approach for about four years now, reflecting on successes and challenges each time the course is taught and making thoughtful revisions to the syllabus based on our experiences, student products, and student feedback.

In this paper, we focus specifically on students' compositions, their subsequent reflections, and their ongoing writing journals as data sources. Examining student writing provided a view of how students applied what they learned and discussed. Focusing on reflections and writing journals offered insight into not only how the PSTs composed, but also their changing values and attitudes toward activist writing and their self-efficacy or the ways they perceived themselves to be (or not to be) activist writers and future teachers of such composition types.

Data Analysis

We drew on qualitative methods to guide our data collection and analysis. All student data—a total of fifteen compositions and composition reflections (3 of each for the 5 participants) and fifty weekly writing journal entries (10 for each of the 5 participants)--were coded individually and collaboratively by both members of the research team. This collaborative approach helped us establish relevant codes and themes within the data (Saldaña, 2016). First, we individually coded (Mertens, 2010) one participant writing journal, meeting after to discuss our initial codes. We then each individually applied our initial code list to a second writing journal, meeting again after to revise our code list and to resolve any discrepancies. Next, we drafted a code book, along with definitions for individual codes (Saldaña, 2016), which we individually applied to a third writing journal. After meeting to discuss and finalize our codes, each member of the research team applied the code book to all data, meeting weekly to discuss any discrepancies and to finalize our analysis. See Table 2 for a list of initial, emerging, and final codes.

Table 2--Evolution of Coding

Initial Codes	**Evolving/Emerging Codes**	**Final Code Categories**
Conflict: Students vs. Teachers Conflict: Novices vs. Experts Conflict: Identity vs. Agency Rhetorical Moves (e.g, audience and process)	Recognizing Conflict Feeling Conflicted Responding to Conflict	Experiencing Conflict
Fear Concern Traditional Views of Students and Teachers	Can I or Can't I? Neutrality	Struggling to See Teachers and Teaching as Political
Identity: Teacher Identity: Writer Negotiating Identity Positionality	Identity as Barrier Addressing Identity Barriers	Censoring Oneself

To guide our analysis, we used Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory, which allowed us to view all data as constructed collaboratively and collected within the context of the classroom. We applied qualitative coding techniques to student data in order to interrogate content. We began by engaging in open coding and then used the preliminary codes to construct categories, themes, and ultimately axial codes (Saldaña, 2016). Initial open coding and analytic memo composition (Charmaz, 2014; Mertens, 2010) were performed individually before meeting to establish clearly defined categories and themes.

Findings

Throughout the semester, the PSTs experienced conflict, both as humans and future teachers and as writers, including conflicts within how they viewed writing. Many of these conflicts, in turn, related back to the struggles they had viewing teachers and teaching as political. The intersection of their conflicts and struggles led to instances of the PSTs censoring themselves.

Experiencing Conflict

The PSTs in this study experienced a variety of conflicts as they engaged in civically-engaged writing, writing meant to move them out of the classroom and into the world and to project their voices in ways that publicly address social issues. These conflicts were layered and nuanced and included conflicts within themselves and conflicts in how they viewed others. Demonstrating conflicts of self, the PSTs described competing parts of themselves and struggled with how to merge those into one identity, one they believed accurately represented them as writers, including civically-engaged writers, and as future teachers of writing.

Alexandra, for example, wrote about the contrast between who she was and who she is becoming, her complex positionality and competing aspects of her life. Discussing her Letter to the Editor, which responded to the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh as Supreme Court Justice, and Letter Writing Campaign, which focused on policies influencing abortion and women's rights, she shared her struggles addressing the audience and positioning herself within the issue: "Being an emerging democrat and this denomination do not go hand in hand. However, hopefully I can foreground some previous religious knowledge into my writing…" She goes on to describe her hopes that the rage she feels related to her topic "will be sneaked in subtly. One thing I will need to remember is that I used to be pro-life and am still a Southern Baptist." Here, she seems to wrestle with whether and how two seemingly disparate aspects of her identity (being a Democrat and a Southern Baptist) can coexist. In other words, Alexandra is struggling to negotiate her own complex positionalities and competing aspects of her self—a contrast between who she was and who she is becoming. Likewise, Alexandra shares her struggles with wrapping her head around how those two identity aspects can inform one another

versus creating two unrelated identities and spaces she cannot simultaneously occupy. In discussing her concern about the rage she felt and how to sneak that rage in subtly, to find a way to balance an articulation of how she feels and how she fears such an articulation would land with those reading her letters, she appears to be conflicted over sharing her beliefs versus appealing to her audience, or at least who she perceives to be her audience (e.g., Christians, Republicans), and notes a decision to take on the stance of her audience, her former self, to address them. Relatedly, this conflict of identity also manifested itself in how she viewed others. In other words, her struggle to identify exactly who she is led to conflict in viewing and stereotyping others (e.g., Southerners, the Republican Party), and while she also demonstrated a more sophisticated approach to public writing, especially public writing around controversial topics (sneaking her rage in subtly), her conflict threatened to stymie, if only in the short term, her development as a civically-engaged writer.

Other students, such as Hope, who wrote about a transgender student's lawsuit over equitable access, experienced similar conflict. She wrote, "I picked [a topic] I thought would be easy because it is such a big…controversy right now, and it is very close to home…Trying to decide how…to present my [Letter to the Editor] makes me think a lot about the converging of personal and professional life." Hope further shared that this convergence was concerning to her, as she wondered how that would be viewed by others. She questioned 1) whether or not she would be taken seriously or even listened to as a student and as not yet a teacher; 2) how public-facing writing, especially writing around activism, would reflect on her as an educator and a community member; and 3) what expertise she might even have to share on the topic. Hope described her pursuit for "a balance in persuasive writing that goes between convincing a friend to do something for you and a defense attorney swaying a jury." She posed the questions, "What is that balance?" and "How do I give an intelligent argument of a topic that's infused with my own opinion?" She, at once, appears unsure about this 'new' form of writing and conflicted about how to approach the rhetorical situation without creating a sort of dichotomy of appeals (either to a friend or to a jury). Additionally and perhaps drawing on notions of 'professionalism' in education and the related discourses of professionalism that can inhibit activist identities, Hope struggles with fact versus opinion and the idea that one can be used and offers credibility and the other cannot and suggests only subjectivity.

Hope's conflict between personal and professional, at its center, is around what constitutes credibility, at least in her eyes. For her, "putting an opinion" about a topic that "is very close to home" blurs the boundary between personal and professional writing and between how she writes and how she connects to the topic itself. Such a boundary-blurring can create a feeling of disequilibrium for PSTs like Hope and can serve as additional barriers around which PSTs must negotiate

throughout their identity development journey. Hope, and others like her, can struggle to reconcile the complexity in and around the process of civically-engaged writing, a process that specifically asks educators to recognize and draw upon the intersection of professional and personal writing in an effort to interrogate and interrupt inequities and problematic power imbalances. At the same time, however, applying concepts of civically-engaged writing and critical literacy to PSTs like Hope helps us to see the ways in which these future teachers work to redraw boundaries around 'professional writing'.

The conflicts these PSTs experienced certainly have an influence on how and if they take up civically-engaged writing. Struggles with competing parts of self (like Alexandra) and uncertainty around even the possibility of writing about one's passion without losing credibility (like Hope) form barriers around which PSTs must move if they are to position their writing as public engagement (Heggart & Flowers, 2019), recognize the power of their writing to challenge hegemony and power (Feigenbaum, 2012; Kohl, 1995) and use their public writing for activist purposes (Ervin, 1997). The issue, it seems, is that these barriers are layered and thus more difficult to navigate. Finding themselves at the crossroads of a complex path forward and engaging in a holding pattern—in essence making the decision to stay put and not continue down the civically-engaged road—can feel like a binary choice that must be made in the here and now, when in reality identity development is supposed to be messy and comes with its own ebbs and flows, false starts and gains. Perhaps PSTs like Alexandra and Hope require additional scaffolding and support and opportunities to reimagine the roles they can play in civic engagement (Spiezo, 2002) and socio-political discourse (Wile, 2000), to critically engage with the world around them (Bennett & Fessenden, 2006; House, 2015), and to grapple with and through the barriers that present themselves.

Struggling to See Teachers and Teaching as Political

The conflict PSTs experienced connected also to the ways in which they positioned themselves, as burgeoning teachers and as political beings. Early in the semester, the PSTs were more open to throwing themselves fully into activist writing, yet as the semester progressed, and as the audiences became real, they often offered hedging statements and shared the fears and concerns they held regarding sharing such, what they saw as, controversial writing in public ways.

Katherine, while brainstorming ideas for her first assignment—the Letter to the Editor—stated that she "should call issues what they are" and that she should "not be afraid to say things like they are, even if they are a touchy subject. Trying to avoid the truth to save face…is never okay." Katherine recognized early on her duty to speak and write a better world into existence. She even noted that it cannot be about her, that it has to be about addressing social issues. Similar to Katherine, Lindsey shared that she was anxious to get started and that "by doing this we

actively engage in what will effect [sic] us, as educators, in the future." Lindsey's excitement to engage in activist-related writing that will help her and her peers grow as teachers suggests an initial open-mindedness and belief that her voice can make a difference. Statements such as these were common in the initial discussions of teacher-activism and writing as civically-engaged citizens (and as teachers). There was no appreciable pushback at the beginning of the semester, and the PSTs, as a group, appeared to embrace the idea that their voices would be valued and amplified in ways that act upon the world.

As time progressed, however, and as the PSTs began to see the public nature of their writing in more concrete terms, they voiced more and more struggle over what they 'could' do. Alexandra, again discussing her Letter to the Editor, expressed worry about how she would be viewed, especially by the community in which she hopes to teach. Similarly, Hope shared that "[T]eachers, and honestly people in general, are told to not be so political…which I have found to be a blanket statement covering anything controversial or remotely divisive." When considering how that statement impacted her, especially as a soon-to-be teacher, she continued, "…to be seen as employable and 'good', you have to stay neutral." In other words, these PSTs began to see external forces influencing them and their decisions, and they grew increasingly uncomfortable with speaking out and began to perceive education, and the profession of teaching, as full of politics and ideology that masquerade as neutral.

While Hope noted that she did not agree with that and that she had much to say on her topic, she hedged by adding "putting something out there that could potentially be published is difficult. I think the word potential makes all the difference." Hope here seems concerned over the simple possibility of her writing being published; that is, any probability of that happening, whether small or large, may serve as a powerful deterrent to teachers like Hope expressing themselves as political beings. Certainly this reaction speaks to education. Perhaps the existing culture of education creates this fear in teachers and pushes the idea that a teacher can be political in private, but not in public. The 'gotta get a job' mentality that is common among PSTs, and understandably so, can work to protect them from the uncomfortable.

What makes Hope's comments so compelling was her follow up to the above statement, where she asked, "What does that say about me? How strong are my beliefs?" Interestingly, she recognizes that remaining neutral and not speaking out for equity and change go against her beliefs, but the power she associates with external judgement may be too strong to work through. PSTs like Hope and Alexandra clearly note the importance of their topics and of addressing such social issues, yet they struggle with how they will be viewed by those around them if they avoid political neutrality and act in civically-engaged ways. These PSTs were able to acknowledge their own voices and beliefs, but were unsure how or if to share

them, causing them to oscillate between believing in their stances and being uncertain of the consequences to them personally.

Ultimately, the ways the PSTs consider teachers and teaching to be political, or at least the ways they believe others consider this, plays a clear role in whether or not they view education as an avenue for change (Ritchie, 2012), how or if they take up writing as civic engagement (Ervin, 1997; Feigenbaum, 2012), and their willingness to fully develop and maintain their agentive stances in and through writing. The questions then become: What changes for them along the way? What makes them feel like their voices can make a difference in and on the world early and then, as time goes by, what makes them feel like their voices have less power? What contributes to such an evolution of ideology and belief that can encourage educators to take up what Cook (2021) theorized as passive activism in their roles as change agents? Based on the experiences of these PSTs, there are at least two factors at play. First, the simple potential of something being published and public has an impact on how they think and write—that is, whether they are willing to or comfortable with engaging in civic minded or activist writing or to use writing to, as House (2015) and others discuss, critically engage with the outside world. Second, the assumptions they hold about administrators and the communities in which they hope to teach can lead to a belief that teachers must be non-political and neutral. Such assumptions certainly impact PSTs' comfort and ability to use their writing to interrogate and work to interrupt social inequities and power imbalances (Kohl, 1995; Wile, 2000). While the participants in this study seem to recognize that these factors exist and that they should not impact their decisions, nevertheless it is enough to give them pause and to cast some doubt on their willingness and excitement to use their writing to positively impact the world.

Censoring Themselves

As a result, largely, of the conflict the PSTs experienced and the struggles they encountered in trying to position themselves as both teachers and activists, they often censored themselves in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. These instances of self-censorship began broad but, as the semester progressed, became more focused on specific topics and approaches, ultimately working to hinder the outward-facing, civically-engaged writing the PSTs took up.

Lindsey, for example, discussing the Letter to the Editor and Letter Writing Campaign assignments stated, "I am a little hesitant to complete [the assignments] since I am not a confrontational person." Here, she equates civically-engaged writing with confrontation, a concept she believes to be contrasting to her evolving teacher identity. Lindsey struggles to view herself, especially how she sees herself as an evolving teacher, at the intersection of 'professional' and confronting the injustices or inequities she witnesses. In other words, she appears to conceptualize a dichotomy where one can either be professional or one can be confrontational,

but one cannot be both. Given her eagerness to start the course and engage in the assignments, this hesitancy points to a shift in her thinking. Along those lines, perhaps as the assignments drew nearer and became more real, Lindsey began to question herself, in this case how she could occupy two seemingly disparate positions—one of confrontation and one of civic engagement, which led to considerations to self-censor.

Around the same time, Hope expressed her own motivations for censoring herself. Discussing her Letter to the Editor response to an article on transgender equity in schools and her Letter Writing Campaign, where she encouraged the college and university administration to fund and build a new facility for the College of Education, she shared, "If I knew that no one could see it…I would fully speak my mind and my truth." Hope's statement suggests self-doubt and a concern over the reaction from the audience. Such doubt and fear can work to silence PSTs in their civic engagement and lead them to feeling as though they should remain quiet. Shortly thereafter, when describing the iterative process of completing her Letter to the Editor, in which she charged the university with responding appropriately to a campus fraternity's use of racial hate speech in their football game day banners, Katherine shared, "When drafting…I stayed away from labeling the issue as a racist one, mainly because I didn't want to accuse someone of something when the intention may not have been in play." In this instance, Katherine avoids naming the specific injustice she is writing about and appears to use 'intention' as her rationale. Moreover, her statement and her focus on intention rather than outcome or impact suggest a misunderstanding of racism, which also impacts her ability (or willingness) to both name the injustice and explicitly condemn it. Interestingly enough, she later shared that she should avoid ambiguity and always label issues appropriately.

Just before submitting her Letter to the Editor critiquing the fiscal budgeting and spending of the mayor of her hometown, Allison expressed her own worries: "I think the letter is okay and I still think the idea was good, but I don't love the idea of putting my name on it and sending it in just yet." Allison appears to be grappling with her perceived consequences of sharing her writing and positions with the public—a public who may well know her and her family. She feels unsure of sharing herself and her writing with the world and specifically with her home community. Even with a topic she agrees with and a letter she, largely, appreciates, Allison's concern over the reaction from imagined readers, whether they are her neighbors or others somewhere out there in the world, makes her give pause and seriously consider censoring her own voice and beliefs.

Like her classmates, Alexandra also found herself using censorship as a way to shield herself as a writer, teacher, and human. Reflecting on her composition, she wrote, "I'm also struggling with how to make myself sound genuine. As a woman, having someone like Kavanaugh is truly terrifying. But, I'm afraid that by

starting off with that I'll simply be labeled as some 'crazy feminist'." Alexandra's statement can be read as a struggle to enact an activist personality and as a woman and young person who is unsure how to be taken seriously. Both of these serve as self-imposed barriers or censoring and work to limit her effectiveness. While Alexandra's comments can be read as instances of self-censorship, it is also important to note that the idea of the "crazy feminist" she references is a culturally imposed barrier, one carrying with it its own risks, risks that may cause women such as Alexandra to impose censorship on themselves as ways to protect themselves.

The ways the conflicts described here impact and influence civically-engaged writing, at least in the examples from our participants, is tied up intricately with notions of 'audience', and audience is central to external, public writing (Heggart & Flowers, 2019) and writing aimed at impacting the world (Bennett & Fessenden, 2006; Ervin, 1997; and others). For example, as the semester progressed and as the PSTs were tasked with sharing more and more writing with the world, the manifestations of self-censorship narrowed with time and were largely focused on concerns over external audiences, who may have some control over their lives and/or careers. In some cases, participants created a false equivalency between civic engagement and what they viewed as confrontation. Because they did not want to be seen as confrontational people—they all want to be liked and valued—they struggled with how to take on this type of writing or even if they could occupy two competing (as they saw them) identities simultaneously. In other cases, the PSTs, citing concerns over how they would be viewed, avoided naming the specific injustices they wished to address, yet another way they struggled with civically-engaged writing. These struggles resulted in hesitancy and self-doubt, a self-doubt borne of the realization that others will see their writing and will be privy to their beliefs. Perhaps these concerns are valid. Perhaps they are excuses. Perhaps it is both and. The fear of audience reactions, and any associated consequences, can certainly be powerful enough to give PSTs pause. Regardless of whether the concerns are valid, are excuses, or are in some ways both, they ultimately work to create hesitancy. These lengthy or repetitive pauses work in ways that stymie teacher identity development and minimize when and how PSTs put themselves out there as civically-engaged activists.

Discussion

At the heart of this inquiry were two questions. *In what ways does a composition course focused on writing as civic engagement impact PSTs' views of civically-engaged writing?* And *In what ways does a composition course focused on writing as civic engagement impact PSTs as writers of civically-engaged texts?* Throughout the course and as part of their civically-engaged writing, PSTs experienced conflicts in how they viewed and experienced writing and in how they

believed they were or would be viewed by others. As part of this dual conflict, we found that the PSTs were working to merge competing parts of themselves. They, for example, often struggled to view teachers and teaching as political, including how they viewed and positioned themselves as teachers and political beings. As they progressed through the semester and their audiences became more real, they often hedged or were hesitant in sharing their own ideologies publicly, especially with regard to what they saw as "controversial" topics. As a result, their hesitancy created opportunities for re/overthinking their purpose, sometimes leading to self-censorship. The experiences of the PSTs in this study shines a useful light on if, how, and when teacher candidates throw themselves into civically-engaged writing and how they view that part of themselves as important to their development as teachers.

It is important to note that, while hesitancy played a role in their experiences, the PSTs in this study articulated a recognition that education, especially writing education, can serve as an important path to social change (Ritchie, 2012). Even though they shared an overarching belief in this relationship between education and change, participants wrestled with competing parts of themselves—as passionate individuals and as public and visible teachers—and experienced difficulty reconciling them. The belief that their profession was in fact political and that their voices, whether aloud or silenced, spoke volumes to students and other stakeholders helped them remain engaged and assisted in keeping the hesitancy from becoming immovable barriers.

The PSTs simultaneously became more engaged in using their voices to positively impact social issues they recognized and openly oscillated between what they believed to be right and how they felt they would be viewed by others. Scholars (e.g., Heggart & Flowers, 2019) continue to point to the importance of including authentic methods of civic engagement as part of any civic minded education. The course and project design in this study were intended to do just that, by opening up the walls of the teacher education classroom and tasking PSTs with stepping out into the world and using their writing to engage in dialogue and to work toward fostering change. Similar to Heggart and Flowers (2019) and Spiezo (2002), we wanted to empower these future teachers to become involved in their communities and in advocating for justice and social change. Regardless of course design, participants needed more scaffolding and more assistance moving forward. In other words, our findings suggest more research is necessary to better understand how teacher education can help PSTs navigate their fears and concerns, their hesitancy to publicly and openly share their voices and beliefs on social issues. We are left with important questions: How might we help PSTs, like those in this study, overcome their hesitancy and more fully commit to the public nature of civically-engaged, activist writing? How might we guide them to and through manifestations of self-censorship that impact both what and how they write for external audiences?

And given that real change takes time and continued engagement, how can we provide opportunities and support for PSTs to linger with the issues they hope to influence and to remain civically-engaged with these issues over time?

As noted above, participants were often hesitant to fully commit to the public nature of civically-engaged writing and ultimately engaged in manifestations of self-censorship that impacted what they wrote for external audiences. In what ways can we draw on these experiences, and those shared by other scholars (e.g., Cook, 2021), to empower PSTs to step outside the classroom and become voices in their communities and to advocate for others? And how can writing teacher educators use writing instruction in ways that foster civic engagement in both teacher candidates and their future students? In seeking to answer these questions, we can help offer additional insight for the field into impactful ways to make teaching methods public and to engage with our students in advocacy and activism (Lieberman & Mace, 2010). Additionally, future work can shine a useful light on helping PSTs develop as activists and as public intellectuals. Lastly, such work can add to previous scholarship (e.g., Morrell, 2005; Smylie & Eckert, 2018) on creating networks of teachers who support one another and who collaborate as civically-engaged citizens and agents of change.

Implications

Our findings suggest a clear benefit for teacher education programs to engage PSTs in civically-engaged writing. Even though participants experienced hesitancy and self-censorship as they sought to use public writing to impact change, they wrote and they delivered letters to external audiences. This is important to highlight, and we view this as a major success. Additionally, their hesitancy and self-censorship may also reveal their complex rhetorical awareness (e.g., recognizing that writing and delivering their letters can be risky for a variety of reasons), which is itself a major part of writing teacher education. Moving forward, we hope to help PSTs more smoothly navigate their concerns and minimize the impact their fears have on what they write about, the rhetorical approaches they choose to take, and who they ultimately deliver their writing to.

Given our findings, both the growth and the struggles, we note ways we want to revise our course and project for future iterations, and we believe these can also be beneficial to others interested in preparing writing teachers who engage with the world and provide opportunities for their future students to do the same. One contributing factor in this research, one that is outside the control of the participants, is that they were in the very early stages of the ELA program, and they had never engaged in writing for activist means prior to this course. As a result, participants may have been more uncomfortable with various aspects of themselves and with teaching, but it is essential to help them work through this with their peers and

professors before entering the teaching profession. Finding ways to make civically-engaged writing part of all teacher education courses can, thus, provide them the time and space necessary to work through their concerns. Similarly, introducing them to classroom teachers who, themselves, engage in civically-engaged writing can help them to see that what they perceive to be two competing sides of themselves can in fact merge within their teacher identity.

PSTs require additional scaffolding toward taking up civic-minded, activist identities, becoming public intellectuals, and developing the self-efficacy necessary to do this work, both inside and outside the classroom. Utilizing field placements to pair PSTs with classroom teachers who identify as civically-engaged and who use their writing (in public ways) to foster change can be a powerful educational opportunity as well. In order to help PSTs become teachers who apply critical literacy and power analyses to their teaching contexts and the world around them, teacher educators must scaffold in these ways and also create a classroom and program which values and respects these processes. For example, ELA and literacy educators can help teacher candidates engage as active participants in reading—and acting on—the world by expanding our notions of classroom texts and helping them develop the skills to critically view and critique the systems and structures that surround them and that govern their chosen careers.

Participants' hesitancy with some issues led us to the question, what role can/should anonymity play in this, at least as they develop skills and confidence? This is an important question, one we have yet to answer and one we pose to the field moving forward. In future iterations, we want to help PSTs clearly understand the importance of promoting civil discourse, engaging in difficult conversations, and advocating for and with their students. Moreover, we want to more closely examine how to help PSTs take these experiences and transfer and apply them to their own classroom contexts. We believe that teachers who are well versed in these areas can teach students more effectively and create learning environments more in tune to the complexity of our world and to the urgency of our social moment.

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