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Learning about Teaching Writing: The Use of Roles to Support Preservice Teachers Pedagogical Knowledge and Practices

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Preparing preservice teachers (PST) to teach writing is a daunting task. While we feel fortunate to offer a methods course dedicated to teaching writing at our university, we are constantly seeking ways to strengthen the connections between what PSTs are learning in our class to what is occurring in middle and high schools. This is often challenging as so many schools have limited time for writing instruction or rely upon prescriptive writing programs that typically focus on writing that prepares students for state testing.

Over the years, we have been fortunate to find middle and high school teachers who share similar beliefs about writing instruction. One of these teachers, Ann, teaches 8th grade at a local suburban middle school 20 minutes away from our campus. She is a former National Writing Project graduate and attends local and national conferences to further develop her pedagogical knowledge about teaching writing. We connected with her through her superintendent, a graduate of our university, who was interested in creating a partnership with our program. This led to our extended collaboration with Ann to provide PSTs opportunities to experience writing workshop pedagogies that she employs in her classroom.

Over the years, we have modified and refined the ways this collaboration works. We typically have 25-30 secondary PSTs in one class, and it is not logistically possible for us to take them all to Ann's 8th grade classroom; so, we have developed creative ways to make sure all our PSTs spend time working with Ann and her students. This ensures that all PSTs have opportunities to practice pedagogy consistent with the content within the methods course and research-based writing instruction.

In this manuscript, we share how we created a dedicated learning space for our PSTs within Ann's classroom. First, we provide some context about the course, and we explain our decision to create teaching teams and the scaffolds that help

facilitate PSTs' learning of how to teach writing. We then share what our PSTs have reported learning from the structure of our work in Ann's classroom.

Course Design

The Integrated Language Arts program is designed to prepare undergraduate preservice teachers for the 7-12 teaching license. Each year, approximately 20-30 preservice teachers are enrolled into a cohort that progresses together through methods courses to graduation.

The course, Teaching Language and Composition, is offered in the second semester of the program. During this course, PSTs consider the writing process and contrast it to the reading process. They read *Write Beside Them* by Penny Kittle (2008) and *Study Drive* by Katie Wood Ray as their core texts, in addition to an essay by Donald Murray (2009) on the writing process and relate his conceptions to their own experiences as writers. Throughout the course they are asked to write, keeping a writer's notebook and developing habits of independent writing, so that PSTs are encouraged to see themselves as writers. A unit of study, inquiry-based approach is practiced throughout the course where PSTs practice "reading like writers" (Smith, 1983; Ray, 2006) as they are immersed in mentor texts to study the techniques writers use in various genres.

Field Experience

Because the methods course meets once a week for three hours, it overlaps with the middle school's block schedule; therefore, we have had to be creative and flexible to make this work. PSTs are assigned a teaching group of four and they are assigned a designated class time for their field experience (2nd, 3rd or 4th block). When the methods course and middle school periods do not align (typically 2nd and 4th periods), Lisa and the PSTs adjust in their schedules so they can fully participate. The teaching group design helped alleviate some of the challenges of the slightly conflicting methods course and middle school schedule along with helping navigate with the sheer number of PSTs enrolled.

Within each teaching group, PSTs are assigned one of four roles which they rotate through during the seven weeks. There is always one lead teacher (LT), while the remainder of PSTs take on the roles of secondary teacher (ST), notetaker (NT), and participation partner (PP). See Figure 1 for an explanation of each role.

The lead teacher works with Ann and Lisa to co-plan instruction. Lesson plans typically go through multiple rounds of revisions so that not only are PSTs prepared to teach but are engaged in dialogue about the teaching of writing. The LT then implements the lesson with the support of the ST. During the lesson, the PP is focused on students, providing individual and small group instruction and support as needed. The NT engages in observation, taking notes about the lesson plan

implementation guided by using a checklist designed by Kristy and Lisa (See Figure 2). This checklist asked the NT to look at important aspects of teaching writing and were used to facilitate the debriefing conversation. Following the lesson, PSTs and Lisa debrief, including discussing what went well and what they might need to adjust for future instruction. This provides the PSTs with opportunities for immediate reflection and analysis of the lesson.

In addition, we also ask PSTs to consider their individual learning and insights weekly as they reflect upon two questions weekly via google forms. We ask the following: 1) What did you do today that gave you insight into learners? Specifically, what did you learn about the process of helping writers develop? and 2) What is one thing you wish you would have done differently today? In closely examining their responses, we discover the way having specific roles throughout this experience shaped and influenced their learning about teaching writing (Pytash et al., 2020).

The Significance of the Roles

While it is not surprising that the PSTs learned about teaching, students, and writing during this field experience, what was surprising was how the roles shaped what PSTs reflected upon each week. Each role had a clear purpose and task to complete thus providing PSTs with a lens to focus, notice, and learn specific aspects of writing instruction. It was through these teaching teams, and the roles taken up by each PST over the course of 7 weeks, that led to a collective understanding of how to teach writing. Below we share the insights we noticed when examining PSTs responses.

Lead and Secondary Teacher

The lead teacher and secondary teacher were required to plan and implement their lesson and their reflections about their teaching aligned with these responsibilities. For example, when we examined the data, they overwhelmingly reflected on general elements of teaching. For example, the LT and ST seemed to notice when their pacing didn't work well with the timing of the lesson or student learning took more time than anticipated. Because they were responsible for the planning, when they didn't feel prepared, they reflected on what they should have done to more effectively prepare for teaching. While they did reflect on the teaching of writing, it seems as if the demands of teaching overwhelmed what they were able to notice during the experience. Additionally, because they were so focused on teaching, they didn't seem to notice as much about what students learned or how they were engaged during instruction. When in these roles, they worked to hone their "teaching" and depended on the insights of the other roles to examine student learning and writing implementation.

Notetaker

The NT was responsible for taking observational notes specifically to provide feedback to the LT and the ST. These observational notes were used as the catalyst for the debriefing conversation that took place immediately following the teaching session. Interestingly, their comments were also focused mostly on the general aspects of teaching. They paid attention to when a lesson wasn't timed properly or going as planned. Additionally, the NT was focused on how students were engaged in the lesson and how the LT and ST were interacting with students. They noted students' body language and level of engagement. They seemed to notice that instruction can position students as writers.

Participation Partner

The PP was required to participate in the lesson by working directly with students, individually or in small groups. Their observations and interactions were purposeful and they participated in the lesson by working closely with students. Interestingly, this purposeful positioning led them to reflect deeply across each aspect of instruction. Their full engagement in the lesson seemed to help them consider the perspectives of both the teachers and the students. Surprisingly, across all the roles it was the PP who made the highest number of comments about aspects of writing instruction. They often identified the influence the teacher had when sharing her own writing, the power of using mentor texts as co-teaches, how instruction positioned students as writers, and what students could or couldn't do because of the instruction.

What We Learned

We found it most interesting that the roles afforded PSTs such different viewpoints across the semester. Their reflections helped us see and then shape our conversations about this work. We were mindful of Darling-Hammond's (2010) call for PSTs to learn about "practice *in* practice" (p. x), meaning what is learned in methods courses should be applied in supportive field experiences. It is in such experiences that allow PSTs to "...learn the fine-grained stuff of practice in connection to the practical theories that will allow them to adapt their practice in a well-grounded fashion and to innovate and improvise to meet the specific classroom contexts they later encounter" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 40). We feel there are three important insights into this role-based approach to writing teacher education.

Roles Matter

Because Ann implemented research-based writing pedagogies that aligned to the methods course, we wanted all PSTs to have experience in her classroom. The roles were first created and designed to solve the logistical issue of taking many PSTs into one classroom. The creation of teaching teams solved one aspect of this issue, but the roles further solved the issue of what PSTs would be doing and deliberately encouraged collaboration and conversation about teaching. In addition, because PSTs had to rotate through each role, it seemed as if that further prepared them to consider what they needed to be doing each time they entered the classroom. They examined with an eye towards the next role they would embody during the following visit. The roles also mattered because it focused PSTs' learning on specific things happening in the classroom.

The reflections from NTs and PPs seems to suggest that when PSTs do not have the responsibility of implementing practice, but are rather fully engaged with students, that they can gain insights into the intricacies of teaching writing and student learning. In these two roles, students seemed to capture PSTs' attention; however, when PSTs were implementing instruction, their focus appeared to be on their own abilities to implement instruction. While this makes sense, it also suggests the need for PSTs to have different experiences within their field placements.

Furthermore, during typical field experiences or during student teaching, one student works closely with a cooperating teacher. Rarely are teams of PSTs working together to implement practice, and yet, working collaboratively with others who are learning the same instructional practices, seems to be a catalyst for attempting to implement new instructional approaches. The PSTs engaged in rich deliberations about their practices, not only with Lisa, but also with their fellow teaching team who were also learning to teach. It seems as if there is something important about novices supporting and engaging with each other during the learning process, this deliberate and ongoing collaboration is vital. And in our work, even though PSTs were still significantly supported by the teacher and university methods professor, our data suggests that the team approach was effective.

Rich Deliberations

The roles also allowed PSTs to engage in nuanced and rich deliberations about teaching writing. Lead teachers submitted lesson plans to Lisa and Ann. This allowed them to engage in one-on-one conversations with their methods professor and a middle school teacher. The lead teacher then had to communicate those plans with the secondary teacher. This resulted in another round of conversations about not only what would happen, but why and how. Finally, after each teaching session, the NT led a discussion based on the observational notes gathered during the lesson.

The checklist helped scaffolded their noticings ensuring that they were talking about the rich aspects of writing. This format enabled PSTs to immediately reflect upon and talk about the lesson, something that might not have occurred if in an individual based field placement. The PP are able to provide additional information about the student's engagement and learning since that was their primary focus during the lesson.

Methods/Field Divide

It is a noted challenge for teacher educators to find supportive field experiences that align with methods course pedagogical content (Sanders et al., 2020) especially with regard to writing instruction. But for practices and understandings about writing to develop and expand, PSTs need congruence between what they are learning and what they are seeing in the field. With this deliberate design to work in a classroom where there was a match between content and implementation, PSTs were in a position of not having to question *how* to teach writing, as what they were learning was enacted in the lessons, thus, helping PST avoid a common pitfall in teacher education (Smagorinsky et al., 2013). PSTs instructional plans were not something that they had to modify to please or meet the requirements of the cooperating teacher; they were able to fully embrace what they were learning and reflected on such instruction over time. Being simultaneously able to study writing methods instruction while enacting these practices allowed PSTs to work on refining their instructional practices and solidifying their understanding about teaching writing.

Final Thoughts

Learning to teach writing is a complex endeavor. We have implemented the use of roles within teaching teams since 2018. And we have found that this structure supports PSTs in developing their writing pedagogical practices as well as general pedagogical knowledge. Certainly, PSTs need field experiences that match the rich, pedagogical approaches studied in methods courses; however, it is also important to consider the work that PSTs are doing during field experiences and how their learning is being supported. Our findings point to the necessity of having a social network to support PSTs learning.

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Figure 1
Role Description

Role	Description
Lead Teacher	Collaborates with Ann and Lisa to design the lesson plan, writing the initial plan, submitting it for feedback and refining the lesson. Leads the lesson.
Secondary Teacher	Supports the Lead Teacher, creating the parts of the lesson the Lead Teacher assigns and facilitating that part of the lesson.
Participation Partner	Works closely with students, attending to their engagement and behavior; Contributes insights to debriefing session.
Note Taker	Provides detailed written feedback to the Lead and Secondary Teacher guided by the checklist; Following teaching leads the debriefing session

Figure 2: Observation Checklist for Lessons

Observation Checklist

Use of Time:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time spent getting lesson/class started and on each lesson component • Transition time between activities • Pacing—too fast or too slow?
Clarity of Presentation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling—appropriate demonstration of the skill being taught? • Wrote beside students? • Clarifying—appropriate response to student confusion? • Coached students to identify audience and purpose? • Directions—Clear and delivered effectively
Use of Space and Movement:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher varied his or her stance and used movement to engage learners’ attention • Used proximity to students to elicit positive student behaviors • Initiated interactions with learners during workshop time to clarify expectations • Organized and led quick transitions of student movement to workshop groups
Participation Strategies:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pause at appropriate points in lesson to check for student understanding • Involved all students at some point in the lesson • Created opportunities for partners or small group collaborative work • Draw on students’ personal literacies practices and/or home languages
Strategic Questioning:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connected to learning target • Assesses understanding • Stretches student thinking beyond yes/no