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Teaching Writing as a Metacognitive Process

Heather Fox, *Eastern Kentucky University*

I cannot determine when I first recognized that I was a “real writer.” Perhaps, it began with writing poetry and song lyrics in my journal. It could have been when I won a county-wide portfolio contest my senior year of high school. Or, maybe, it happened when someone once told me that I “looked like an author” at a social event. I am still uncertain about why I looked like an author and what that actually meant. Nonetheless, I know my reticence to acknowledge that I was a writer related to observations in school. As Jill Parrott (2017) argues, “a powerful differential between inexperienced writers and professional authors perpetuates the idea of learners as helpless children” (p. 72). “Researchers,” she continues, “refer to [student writers] by first name only in publications rather than last names as we would real authors (in other words, ‘Julie writes’ as compared to ‘Faulkner writes’), we construct writers as passive rather than active, and we negatively compare them to professional writers” (p. 72-73). My understanding of what it meant to be a writer developed from (primarily) external validations of my work. How can teacher-educators help preservice teachers to recognize that they are already “real writers,” so they can set aside these differentiations from academic culture to risk examining their processes while they prepare to teach future students?

Neither helpless nor inexperienced writers, preservice teachers rarely begin the semester with the conviction that they are already writers. Invariably, when I ask, “Haven’t you been writing since early elementary school?” and “How many times a day do you respond to an email or text?,” everyone nods their heads in agreement. But whether because of self-efficacy, academic preparation, writing anxiety developed from previous experiences, or another concern, most preservice teachers in the courses I teach do not identify as writers, and telling them that they are “real writers” cannot revise this self-conception alone. Instead, encouraging students to draw upon previous experiences with writing, writers, and writing instruction makes visible what they already do as writers. Real writers make narrative decisions about what to include (or what not to include) in their work. Real writers determine and arrange ideas within a structural framework that conveys meaning to an intended reader. And real writers are keenly aware of the importance of building writer-reader relationships in all writing tasks.

Incorporating metacognitive instruction, or opportunities to cultivate an awareness about one’s writing practice through both “how” and “why the how” inquiry, allows students to “not just think about [their] own thinking,” but “to plan the strategies [they’re] going to use to learn certain pieces of information” (McGuire, 2013).

Metacognition connects knowledge acquisition to applications of that knowledge by comprehending processes and the strategies within those processes—a concept inherently embedded in writing practice and instruction. Central to creative problem solving and project-based learning (Hargrove & Nietfeld, 2015; Blythe, Sweet, & Carpenter, 2016, p. 145), metacognitive instruction allows students to discern strategies capable of solving “wicked problems,” or challenges in academic and professional settings that lack clear solutions (Hanstedt, 2018, p. 4). Linda Alder-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, in the preface to *Naming What We Know* (2015), assert that “ideas, ways of seeing, ways of understanding . . . [don’t] just change *what* people know; they change how people know because they lead to different ways of approaching ideas by thinking through and with these concepts” (p. x). When metacognitive instruction is integrated into high-impact teaching practices—collaborative projects, undergraduate research, writing-intensive courses, and learning communities (Kuh, 2008; Blythe, Sweet, & Carpenter, 2016)—students’ critical reflections about writing strategy change how they understand their role in writer-reader relationships. This awareness provides students with “control,” or “agency,” over their strategies and goals for writing tasks, prompting a progression from feedback dependence to independent learners (Ramadhanti, 2019, p. 41; Barnes, 2020; Johnson, 2008). Teaching writing as a metacognitive process in a composition course designed for preservice teachers enables writers/future educators to see their writing strategies and to envision themselves as “real writers,” or writers who control their work and are capable of teaching future “real writers” across grade levels and disciplines.

Advanced Composition for Teachers

Taught by Department of English faculty in partnership with the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Educational Leadership at a regional university, my design of “Advanced Composition for Teachers” uses an inquiry and constructivist approach to instruction to examine the intersections of our experiences as students, writers, and future teachers. Moreover, the course guides preservice teachers through a process of strategizing for writing tasks and critical reflection on those strategies. Inspired by Nicole Bondreau Smith’s (2017)

philosophy of teaching writing, the course cultivates writers' self-awareness, rhetorical awareness, and the ability to raise awareness through scaffolded instruction across three interdependent projects:

- The *Writing Memory Project* integrates sustained reading and writing practices to cultivate a self-awareness about identities as writers and future writing teachers. While reading excerpts from a memoir or selections from a blog, alongside selected chapters from *Bad Ideas about Writing* (2017), students respond to five prompts about writing memories over three weeks. Prompts connect to reading assignments thematically, although students are welcome to deviate from a prompt's focus in their responses. For three of the five prompts, I provide question-driven descriptive feedback to model "audience, collaboration, and conversation," while small writing communities read and discuss their work during class sessions, using an "author-out" workshop method (Whittman, 2016, p. 678; Apol & Macaluso, 2016). In the second phase of the project, students select and arrange excerpts from their prompt responses to develop a narrative response to the following questions: "How do previous writing and writing instruction experiences inform our considerations about how to best teach writing? How can I convey the significance of those experiences? And how will this information impact my approach to teaching writing in a future K-12 classroom?" Students then design a collaborative rubric during class for final project submission evaluations.
- The *Writing Teaching Philosophy Project* reflects on observations from the first project to examine approaches to writing pedagogy in a two-part project. In part one, class colleagues work in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to research writing pedagogies in NCTE's *English Journal*, *Voices from the Middle*, and *Language Arts*. They design an electronic handout to record their findings in annotated bibliographies, in addition to providing the class with a "key points" summary of the primary arguments and evidence used in their research and 2-3 discussion questions. Presented in a "teaching presentation," PLCs introduce their research through a short, interactive exercise. Finally, students respond to the questions, "How will ELA research inform my teaching of writing?" and "How can I develop and articulate a research-informed teaching writing philosophy?," individually, by designing and publishing their "Teaching Writing Philosophy" in an infographic.

- Finally, the *Writing Awareness Project* integrates experiences from the first two projects to produce an English Education-formatted essay or ELA instructional website. Responding to “How can I share my researched analysis about how to use a Special Collections and Archives (SC&A) artifact to teach an ELA writing standard with other educators?,” this six-week project focuses on field-relevant practice by privileging collaboration throughout the writing process, examining ways of reading and writing across genres, and modeling scaffolded writing instruction, supported by workshops, conferences, and reflection on strategy. After reading about Elizabeth Winthrop’s inspiration for YA novel, *Counting on Grace* (2006), students use an heuristic, developed from Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies* (2016), to read selected Lewis Hine’s photographs and to prepare for an SC&A library instruction session. Once we return to the classroom, teams of 2-3 students use directions from Joanna Wolfe’s *Team Writing* (2010) to draft a team charter and task schedule in a Google document, set up for sharing deliverables in progress for incremental descriptive feedback. Then, they select a grade-appropriate writing standard and SC&A artifact from [this exhibit](#) before drafting an introduction, researching and describing an SC&A artifact in historical and/or sociocultural contexts, and articulating a researched praxis for teaching a writing standard.¹

Throughout all stages of the course projects, preservice teachers collect and collaboratively complete work in a Google Site. In lieu of a final exam, they complete a portfolio exercise at the end of the course, which includes three samples of writing from the course (from any stage of their process). These samples are revised beyond their initial evaluation, indicated through in-text comments or highlighted text, and these revisions are accompanied by a short reflective synthesis essay, which describes a trajectory of insights about writing and teaching writing.

Writing Memory Project

In “Advanced Composition for Teachers,” students’ examination of their writing agency, or authorial control capable of reflecting critically to implement narrative decisions, begins with the *Writing Memory Project*. While integrated throughout all stages, explicit metacognitive instruction occurs during the project’s

¹ Further discussion about the *Writing Awareness Project* is available in Fox (2021), and two of these projects (Bowling, Murray, & Snyder, 2020; Allen, Cook, & Riley, 2021) are published in [Students in the Archives](#).

revision stage to facilitate skill transferring strategies applicable beyond the course (Sachar, 2020; Pacello, 2014). My thinking about the role of narrative selection and arrangement in authorial control developed over the last decade through archival research about the literary lives and production of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American women writers for *Arranging Stories: Framing Social Commentary in Short Story Collections by Southern Women Writers* (2022, forthcoming). In the book, I argue that the selection and arrangement of previously published short stories enables writers to privilege or contextualize a story by its proximity to other tales as a form of social commentary. The theoretical foundations for this work include structuralist linguistics (de Saussure, 1916), narratology (Genette 1980; Genette, 1987), and, especially, feminist narratology (Lanser, 1986; Bal, 1985; Keene, 2015; Lanser & Warhol, 2015), which rightly complicates structuralist readings with the historical, sociocultural, and political contexts already embedded in writer-reader relationships. Whether we contend that the author within a published work is dead (Barthes, “Death of an Author,” 1967) or just resting (Foucault, “What Is an Author,” 1969), we must acknowledge that we neither read nor write in a vacuum.

At its core, the *Writing Memory Project* is a literacy narrative assignment for preservice teachers. First Year Composition courses regularly incorporate this exercise, and while some criticize its overuse, composition scholars still applaud its facilitation of self-reflection that leads to increased confidence capable of developing critical perspectives and building community (Comer and Harker, 2015; Berry, 2014; Corkery, 2005; DeRosa, 2008). Studies about preservice teacher literacy narratives, in particular, often demonstrate patterns in students’ understandings of their identities as readers and writers (Johnson, 2008; MacPhee & Saden, 2016; Korson & Hodges, 2018; McQuitty, 2020). Stacey Korson and Connie Hodges (2018), who studied preservice teachers’ engagements with another literacy narrative assignment in an education course at my institution, link students’ progressive decrease in reading and writing interests between early elementary school and high school with grades, testing, and prescriptive assignments (pp. 319-23). “Understanding the literacy narrative of pre-service teachers, as well as how they see them shaping their lives is important,” Korson and Hodges contend, because future educators need to “critically reflect on their experiences, rather than replicat[e] them without contemplation in their classroom[s]” (p. 314).

What sets the *Writing Memory Project* apart from other literacy narrative assignments is its focus on students’ narrative decisions when selecting and arranging previously written text as part of a critical reflection exercise designed to magnify one component of authorial control during the writing process. Readings and discussions of work from contemporary writers--Janisse Ray’s *Ecology of a*

Cracker Childhood (1999) in Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 and selected blog posts from Sean Dietrich's *Sean of the South* in Spring 2021 and Spring 2022—accompany students' writing of prompt response assignments to consider "How does the author decide which recollections to include, or not to include, in their work?" and "How do authors arrange these recollections to convey meaning to the reader?" In an argument that extols the importance of teaching threshold concepts of writing studies to future educators, Kristine Johnson (2019) asserts that "the story preservice teachers tell about the nature of writing--how they conceptualize the game of writing itself--can powerfully shape how they will teach writing" (p. 3). When preservice teachers consider other writers' narrative decisions alongside their own, they identify patterns, relationships, and challenges within their writing practices and instructional experiences that have the potential to impact their future teaching.

To examine these considerations and their potential impacts further, I conducted an empirical study over four semesters since Fall 2019.² Completed in seven face-to-face sections and one online, synchronous section, participants (n=138) included 105 Elementary Education majors, 13 Middle Grades Education majors, and 20 (Secondary) English Teaching majors enrolled in "Advanced Composition for Teachers." Among participants, 67% were admitted to the College of Education, while remaining participants were planning to apply for admission. Participation in the study was voluntary and not included in course assessment.

After submitting their Writing Memory Projects, student participants completed an LMS-accessible survey, which automatically anonymizes responses. First, the survey asked about the time students devoted to writing prompt responses, followed by the time students devoted to selecting and arranging excerpts from these responses in preparation for final submission. Between 2019 and 2022, students spent more time selecting and arranging previously written material than composing and drafting prompt responses. During prompt writing, 49% of students spent less than two hours and 49% spent less than one hour preparing each response, with only nine students reporting that they drafted a response for more than two hours. In contrast, 88% of students devoted at least one hour to selecting and arranging text, with 33% spending more than two hours. While time spent on an assignment does not constitute an inclusive evaluation of the amount of work involved in the process, these results suggest that responding to prompts about memories of writing and educational experiences engendered less critical reflection than considering the significance of and relationships between those recollections.

² "Narrative Selection and Arrangement in Metacognitive Instruction" is an IRB-Exemption Approved study (Research Protocol #2723).

Students were also asked about the usefulness of instructional interventions at the beginning of the survey. “Author-out” workshops and class discussions were identified as instrumental to their processes, whereas only 14% of participants felt they benefited from the “Gallery Field Trip,” or a visit to the campus gallery to practice analyzing individual selections of artwork and their arrangement in the gallery. Due to the pandemic, a short documentary and class discussion about a posthumous Norman Rockwell exhibit (Brawley, 2020) replaced the gallery visit after early Spring 2020. Following these initial questions about time engagements and instructional interventions, students provided narrative responses to seven questions, including five about narrative decisions and two about self-perceptions. The progression of questions begins with “how” queries before prompting considerations of “why” students integrated specific strategies in their writing:

- How did you select portions of previously written material to include in your Project 1 final submission?
- How did you eliminate portions of previously written material for your Project 1 final submission?
- Why did you select and/or eliminate portions of previously written material for Project 1 in this way?
- How did you arrange your previously written material in Project 1?
- Why did you arrange your previously written material in Project 1 in this way?
- What did you learn about yourself as a writer during Project 1?
- What have you learned about yourself as a writer during Project 1 that has the potential to inform how you plan to teach writing?

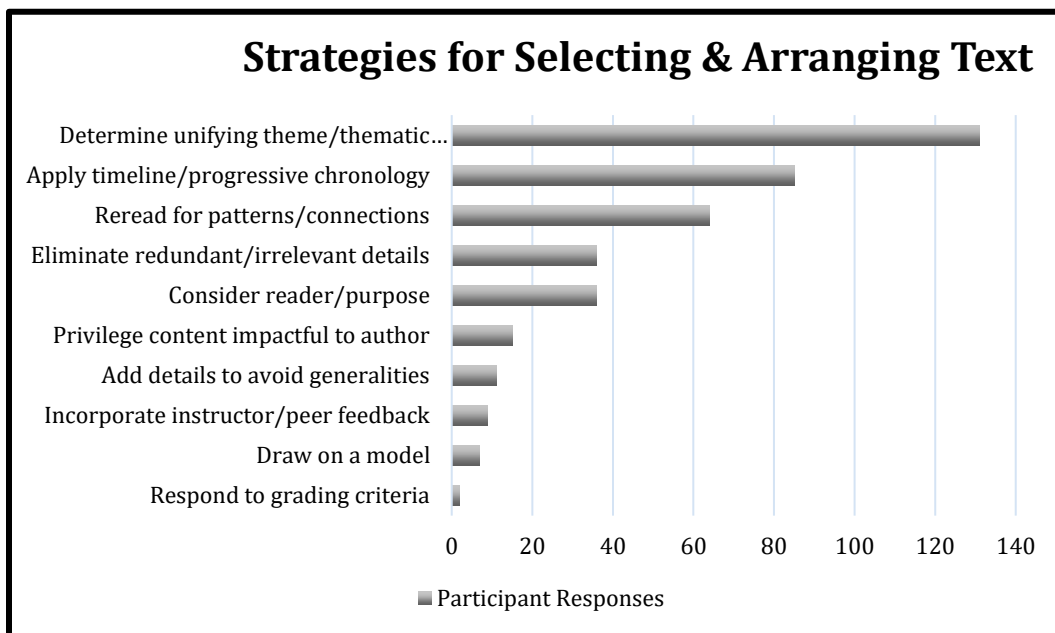
For all questions, students were prompted to provide as many specific details about their process as possible. Survey responses were analyzed for keywords and concepts related to strategies used for selecting and arranging texts, why these strategies were used, and how project engagement may have informed students’ understandings of themselves as writers and future teachers.

Narrative Decisions

Narrative decisions can indicate authorial control, or the extent to which a writer feels able and capable to exert agency over the content, structure, and production of their work. While not a complete indicator, students’ responses to “how” questions about strategies used when selecting and arranging text have the potential to implicate self-perceptions of authorial control. When asked about how they selected, eliminated, and arranged previously written material for the project’s

final submission, most students wrote about determining a theme or using a timeline to organize previously written material. They reread their work and reflected critically to locate patterns and connections between memories, without relying on the assignment’s initial ordering of prompts. Furthermore, they often considered the rhetorical situation at the earliest stage of the process, eliminating redundant/irrelevant details or adding descriptions to clarify the significance of remembered experience for the reader. Finally, while the survey question about instructional interventions elicited students to privilege author-out workshops, their responses about selection and arrangement strategies indicate few used feedback from these workshops, structural writing models from readings, or class-developed grading criteria when revising excerpts from their work into a cohesive narrative (fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Strategies for Selecting & Arranging Text



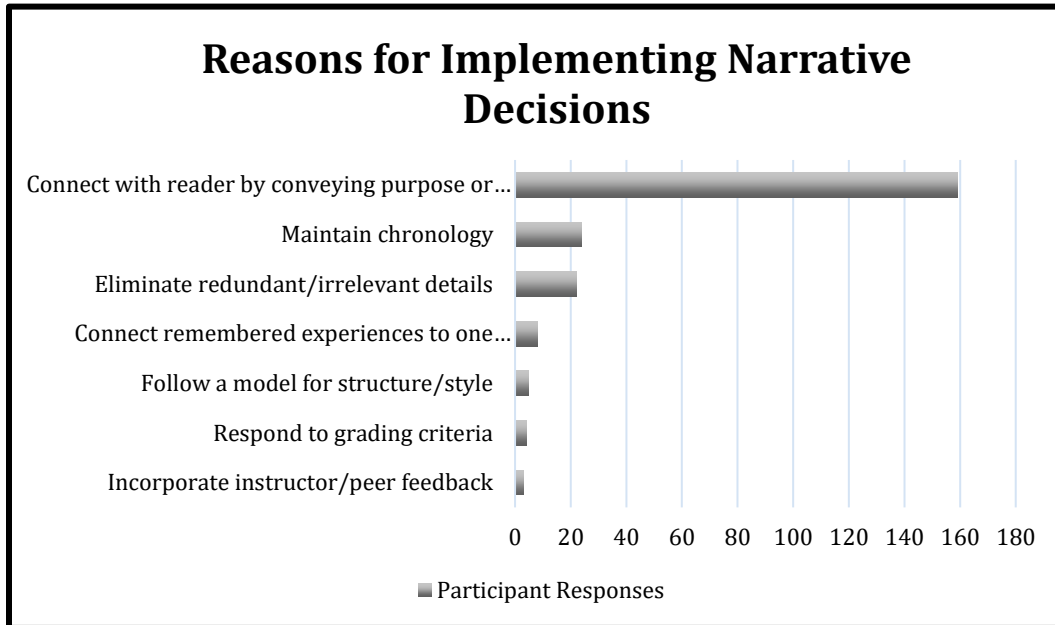
Instead, when determining which excerpts to select, students described beginning with a process of active rereading and reflection, which included marking words, sentences, or paragraphs, as well as marginal notes, to indicate the segments that best conveyed an experience’s impact. Then, they outlined, or used other graphic

organizers, to arrange drafted segments by overarching themes, recurring patterns and ideas, or chronological trends. Most completed this process electronically, but a few described how they cut printed copies of previous writings with scissors and arranged them like a puzzle. This emphasis on controlling text through *shaping it* appeared 36 times in the survey's narrative responses. Students conveyed how they were "shaped as writers," their "view of writing was shaped over time," they planned to "shape their stories," their remembered experiences "took shape" during their organizational process, and their reflections will "shape the way they teach writing." Sometimes, "shape" was used metaphorically to make their process more visible. As one student explained it, "I outlined what I wanted my bolded words to be [and then] saw a theme within my paper that showed an upward-downward-upward trend, so that's how I framed my paper." Another student described how their process resembled a puzzle: "I had four corner pieces that fit together pretty well and then an extra piece that must have come from another puzzle. I put that piece aside and put the others together."

To put the pieces together, most students strategized without explicitly relying on familiar models or formulas. When models were mentioned, they included authors' approaches to conveying experiences and emotions from class readings. Two exceptions included a student's use of "the hero's journey" to organize their work and a student's inspiration from "the writing process," modeled by "starting with an idea, growing it into paragraphs, and ending in a complete project." Throughout these descriptions of process, responses exuded confidence about their work. Students used the word, "story," to convey this agency nearly 90 times. They were eager "to tell the story" for "readers to read" its "intertwined excerpts"; to demonstrate a "whole story's importance," even though it "took place in different parts of their life"; and to create "something more like a short story compilation." Their "whole stories" were meaningful, and it was important to convey the significance of this meaning to readers.

Even though fewer students mentioned peer or instructor feedback as a strategy for completing the project, their survey responses emphasized a keen awareness of the intended readers (instructor and class colleagues). In almost every response, students wanted to "communicate with their audience," to be "understandable," to be "focused," and to be "specific." They used words like "journey," "process," "growth," and "purpose" to describe how they might connect overarching themes with readers' experiences as writers and educators. This emphasis on cultivating writer-reader connection spilled into responses to the "why" questions about strategies (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Reasons for Implementing Narrative Decisions



Overwhelmingly, the reasons behind students’ narrative decisions related to their desire to build writer-reader relationships by evoking emotion, sharing what impacted their lives, and using a thematic “vision” to convey their both unique and shared experiences as students, writers, and preservice teachers. One student called their narrative vision “empowerment,” echoed by another student who wrote, “I felt that every story I told mattered, and I wanted the reader to understand why.”

Real Writers / Real Teachers

In the final two questions of the survey, students commented on what they learned about themselves as writers and to what extent these observations might inform their future approaches to writing instruction. In these reflections, nearly every response related to self-efficacy. After completing the project, students perceived that they were “more capable” to write than they realized, that they had been “writers for a long time,” and that this project helped them to “put [writing memories] together and see it in a new way.” “Writing,” as a student wrote, “has affected me more than I ever would have thought.” Some of these effects included understanding the vulnerability writers often experience or the fear writers

sometimes feel about grades and judgment, which might prevent them from taking risks in their work. In the survey responses, preservice teachers took the opportunity to articulate what works for them, so they can work through vulnerability and grade concerns. They situated “a positive classroom environment” as key to K-12 writing instruction. “Positive” related to incorporating peer relationships, choices in writing tasks and topics to pique interest, scaffolded approaches to instruction that use low-stakes exercises to build towards larger assignments, descriptive feedback throughout all stages of the process, and involvement in the construction of an evaluative tool.

From this increased confidence, preservice teachers viewed themselves as change agents: “As a future educator,” a student wrote, “I [want to encourage student writers] . . . Writing does not always have to be assessed and should be used to express, make connections, etc. I want to make sure that my students are able to have group discussions about their thoughts, ideas, and progress through[out] their writing assignments. Also, I want to make sure that I implement assignments where students can have a voice.” Having “a voice” sets aside our misconceptions about “the perfect writer” or “perfect writing,” which feels (and is) unattainable. Instead, writers, as one student explains it, understand that “it’s okay to not be perfect at writing. It takes time.”

The *Writing Memory Project* serves as a foundation for students’ understanding and use of their authorial control throughout subsequent projects in the course. It links the cognitive “how” to the metacognitive “why the how” to cultivate relationships that connect writers, readers, teachers, and students. Students come to understand themselves as “real writers,” not because the instructor calls them writers but because they regularly enact a process of reflecting on their narrative decisions as writers do. Certainly, self-reported findings do not always correlate with external ratings or test results, and the connections between writing and pedagogy are complex (Hargrove and Nietfeld, 2015, p. 310; Ballock, 2020, p. 96). But as Amy Johnson (2008) contends, “teachers’ personal narratives offer a unique context for apprehending teachers’ experiences and knowledge. Such personal narratives lend insight into the experiences, theories, and beliefs that give shape to aspiring and experienced teachers’ knowledge base for teaching, instructional practices, and curricular choices” (p. 125). By compelling preservice teachers to reflect on the writing strategies associated with their narrative decisions during their implementation in a writing task, teacher-educators provide a space for students to visualize how and why they are privileging patterns, gaps, overlaps, and intersections in their work—a visualization capable of illuminating the writer identities already embedded in how we write and teach.

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