Positioning Preservice Teachers as Writers and Researchers

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In reading the inaugural issue of Teaching/Writing, I knew that I wanted to write about the methods, theories, and practices of teaching pedagogy classes for preservice teachers of writing. In reflecting on how I organize my own preservice writing courses my thoughts began to coalesce quite organically around a few lessons learned from Wendy Bishop and Diane Holt-Reynolds. In this essay, which is as much a story of personal experience as it is a theoretical and practical excursion into the preservice writing classroom, I will offer several theoretical approaches toward the teaching of writing learned from these two women followed by three assignments I use in my preservice writing classroom that I feel best articulate these pedagogical approaches.

Wendy Bishop

I discovered the writings of Wendy Bishop shortly after her death in 2003. Bishop was a revered teacher/writer working to bring together the traditions of composition and creative writing. She died at the early age of 50 from leukemia, leaving behind an impressively large and impassioned body of work. To read Wendy Bishop is to feel her presence rise from the page. Rather than use academic language and conventions to construct and defend a façade of objectivity and authority, she chose to get close to her readers with earnest inquiries and truthful admissions into her writing and teaching life. Bishop's writing and teaching life continues to serve as inspiration to others as most recently evidenced by the edited collection Composing Ourselves as Writer-Teacher-Writers: Starting with Wendy Bishop with contributions from several teacher/writers indebted to her work.

This is a core value of the preservice writing classroom that strikes me as rather self-evident, nonetheless I am consistently surprised at how few future teachers of writing (or teachers of writing for that matter) consider themselves writers. The way Bishop defines “writer” here is important too—it’s not a definition moored to publication or primary occupation but rather, a felt experience of what it’s like to invent, build, revise, and share in the human experience through writing.

A second lesson learned from Bishop is to make explicit connections between the experiences of accomplished writers and the writing classroom. “In our classrooms,” Bishop writes, “the results of writing research should be welcome beside the everyday knowledge of expert (and famous) writers” (234). This idea that testimonials from expert writers can serve as research data and springboard to pedagogy has dramatically impacted my research trajectory and subsequent approach to teaching writing. For several years I have been interviewing accomplished teacher/writers to further understand writerly invention—one of Aristotle’s five canons of rhetoric encompassing the ways we originate ideas with language. These interviews with accomplished writers have also informed my teaching pedagogy classes.

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In the position of teaching writing pedagogy classes for preservice teachers of writing, I observed that students are often intimidated by the idea of writing in an academic setting. Many students view writing as a solitary activity that is not suited for group collaboration. My goal was to create an environment that would encourage students to engage in writing as a collaborative activity. I wanted to promote a sense of community among my students and to create a space where students could feel comfortable sharing their ideas.

I started by incorporating a variety of writing activities into my course. I encouraged my students to participate in peer review sessions, where they would read and provide feedback on each other’s writing. I also created opportunities for my students to work in small groups on writing projects.

Additionally, I aimed to make the course more personal and engaging by incorporating writing activities that were relevant to my students’ lives. I encouraged my students to write about their own experiences and to draw upon their personal interests in their writing.

The inclusion of writing activities that were relevant to my students’ lives helped to make the course more engaging and meaningful. My students were more engaged in the course when they were able to connect their writing to their own experiences. This helped to create a sense of ownership and investment in their writing.

In conclusion, I believe that it is important to create a supportive and collaborative environment for preservice teachers of writing. By incorporating a variety of writing activities into my course, I was able to create a space where students could feel comfortable sharing their ideas and engaging in meaningful writing practices.
Recently, however, I have decided to make this connection more explicit by positioning preservice writing teachers as researchers. In an
qualitative interview assignment I ask my students to interview two or more writers whom they admire. The types of questions I
want my students to include: (1) What motivated you to interview these people? What makes them strong writers in your eyes? (2) Why have you asked these questions? What are you trying to understand? (3) What are the major
insights learned from your interviews? (4) What are some links between your interview data and course readings you’ve done? (5) What are
the links to teaching? How do you plan to pass along what you’ve learned to your students?
This assignment works at the nexus of the lessons learned from Wendy Bishop and Diane Holt-Reynolds. Drawing from
Bishop, having students conduct their own interview study privileges the testimonial knowledge of writers. Again drawing from
Bishop, positioning preservice writing teachers as active researches provides greater ownership over the subsequent writing event,
helping to promote a research writer/teacher line of thinking and explicit the knowledge of teaching, having preservice writing teachers
do their own research and then graph the knowledge attained onto teaching makes explicit the need for an ongoing, self-directed inquiry model to facilitate one’s pedagogical development.
Additionally, this assignment asks preservice writing teachers to self-identify the type of writers they are motivated to learn more
about, a move which promotes a personal vantage point. Such personal investment helps to sustain interest and involvement
over the life of the project and can ultimately exemplify the importance of deliberately infusing personal investment within writing
and teaching. Such personal, intrinsic motivation is what sustains good writing and teaching. In my own interviews with writers I have
come across this sentiment time and again. James Gee writes “because it’s fun.” Deborah Brandt calls writing her “favorite state of
being.” Mike Rose shares that “it has given me an identity” and “this way to touch the world, to engage the world, to fiddled around in
the world in way that can give pleasure both to me and to other people.” In interviewing accomplished writers or writers whom they
admire, preservice teachers of writing invariably discover the importance of cultivating an intrinsically rewarding, positive atmosphere
around writing instruction within their own classrooms.
Embodied Research. A way to cross the line effectively between academic and creative writing is to purposefully juxtapose
genres representative of each. As an example, I have my students complete a writing assignment in which they use the knowledge
attained from a recently composed research paper to inform a short story. Juxtaposing an genre is an effective means to highlight the
notion of genre itself—the fact that genre carries with it values actively shaping the writing and the writer. In juxtaposing genre—
in this case the research paper and the short story—preservice writing teachers come to understand how genre acts upon and
subsequently produces different texts even as the content knowledge infusing each genre is held constant.
This is a move taken directly from Wendy Bishop’s playbook. Bishop knew well the power of crossing the line between
academic and creative writing, arguing, “we may want to eliminate the line altogether” (211). There are several avenues of thought
related to this notion of crossing the line between academic and creative writing that I wish to develop, the first being that in my
interviews with accomplished teacher/writers an emergent theme was the persistent move from strict genre convention toward more
creative organizational structures. Generally, early careers were marked by strict adherence to traditional academic genre conventions
while later years were marked by more creative and personal organizational approaches. Julie Lindquist, for example, says that she
has come to rely on academic genre conventions “less and less I think because most of what I write is sort of lyrical and narrative
and personal. I tend to do that with most things because I think that it works best; it’s the way I can feel most inventive and most
effective.” James Gee speaks at length to this idea as he recounts his personal history as a writer:
I’ve been two different types of academic writers in my career. I started my career as a theoretical linguist in a straight
discipline and then I moved to a thing like education which is really not a discipline but a field. In a straight discipline like
linguistics, what you write is very ritualistic in the sense that there’s a format for how you do it and you pretty much can’t
deviate from it which is true of a thing like physics or disciplines like sociology. In fields, since it’s not defined by one
strict discipline, the recipe you follow is less strict. The other thing is that as I’ve gotten older I’ve gotten a wider audience
and written more for that wider audience which allows me more chance for creativity. Linking crossing of the line between academic and creative writing as a natural progression of their
development as writers. Nancy Sommers speaks to this same trajectory. After moving from academic genres to creative non-fiction
and essays she says, “I didn’t want to go back. I was not going to go back to the straightforward, dry academic essay.” The reverse
trajectory is certainly possible as well. My own writing background, for example, lies in fiction writing which, of course, carries its
own genre expectations. I have since moved from fiction toward more academic, non-fiction writing. The point I wish to make is that
the preservice writing classroom should embrace an enlivened view of what constitutes appropriate genres by “crossing the line” as
Bishop urges.
The students I most encounter in preservice writing classrooms are adept at reading and writing responses to a text. They can
write about a text through a Marxist, Deconstructionist, or Feminist lens and pick out themes and illustrate said themes with quotations
pulled from the text. It is not a stretch for them to apply these same principals to composition readers such as Victor Villanueva’s
Cross-Talk in Comp Theory. It may be new content but it’s the same game: read the text for main ideas and then summarize these main
ideas in writing using paraphrase and quotations. It is entirely different, however, when I ask students to use the research they’ve done
for a long time to inform a short-story. Practicing writing that is not about showcasing reading ability is something many of them have not done for
several years and it’s a challenge students both welcome and fear. Sondra Perl shares her related experiences with crossing the line
between academic and creative writing: “They know how to analyze literature but now you’re asking them to write a short story or a
narrative, a personal narrative, which they’ve not done before. All of a sudden they’re reading short stories not as literary critics but
from the eyes and the point of view of a writer.” For Perl, a benefit of having writing teachers work within the creative genres is this
adoption of “the point of view of a writer,” a much different and less familiar perspective than that of the literary critic.
Final Thought
Wendy Bishop and Diane Holt-Reynolds continually inform my preservice writing classrooms because they taught me that
teachers of writing should be writers themselves, that testimonials from writers should help shape the preservice writing classroom,
and that knowing your subject matter and being able to teach it at two different things. The three assignments presented in this
essay—Digital Poetics, Qualitative Interview Study, and Embedded Research—seek to articulate these theoretical ideas by way of
practical assignments. It is my hope that these theoretical underpinnings and subsequent assignments move readers to view their own
preservice writing classrooms in new light.
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