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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. While doing this work, she should receive help and encouragement. Teachers shouldn’t need to apologize for having a writing strength or a weakness (“I’m never going to be a poet”; “I can’t write a critical essay to save my life”; “I don’t think of myself as a [creative] writer”; “I write, but I guess the type of writing I do isn’t creative”) as long as they are willing to explore writing in the same manner and along the same dimensions that I’m suggesting for first-year college writers: as a complex human endeavor, requiring practice and analysis, involving beliefs and emotions, resulting in failure and success. Teachers don’t have to profess writing but they should experience it, and that experience, as any graduate of National Writing Project training will attest, is life-changing. It’s possible, I guess, to teach writing without ever having felt like a writer, but shouldn’t we insist that it be otherwise? (234, Teaching Lives).

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 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 writing research. “In our classrooms,” Bishop writes, “the results of writing research should be welcome beside the theoretical expert (and/or 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 pedagogy and I will be drawing from these interviews within this essay to help illustrate a few of my ideas about the preservice writing classroom.

Diane Holt-Reynolds

Diane Holt-Reynolds was my methods instructor when I first was learning to become an English teacher as an undergraduate. The only weakness in her teaching was she invested too much time and emotion in us—her students. Our development as teachers was paramount: essays were handed back the class session immediately following the due date accompanied by a full page of single-spaced commentary. She was reprimanded for spending dramatically more time teaching than on her own scholarship, and she had difficulty giving our class of her death signified for me—that none of us were safe if someone as ferocious as Diane could pass away with such abruptness.

Holt-Reynolds was the first challenge to my assumption that subject matter expertise and teaching were correlated. She drilled into us the idea that teaching was a skill all on its own, requiring study and experience that our Literature courses, unfortunately, did not provide. In her article aptly titled, “Good Readers, Good Teachers?” she shares the case example of Mary, an undergraduate student enrolled in an English education program. “What is striking here,” she writes, “is that Mary knew so much about how to read, how to interpret, how to think about text, that she could use the skills she valued to her own reading advantage, and yet she offered none of that expertise as a valuable trait for a literature teacher” (42). Holt-Reynolds concludes, “unidentified, unclaimed, and unappreciated subject matter expertise has little power. It has dormant and uselessness in a classroom” (45). The point that being a good teacher does not make one a good teacher of reading parallels the point I wish to make: good writers do not translate ipso facto into good teachers of writing.

Productive Reductionism: Praxis for the Preservice Writing Classroom

Teaching teachers needs decisions. I recall a meeting with Diane Holt-Reynolds that took place fifteen years ago during which a teacher who taught this that I outline three that I use in my preservice writing classroom: Digital Poetry, Qualitative Interview Study, and Embedded Research.

Digital Poetry. The preservice writing classroom is defined in large part by its transitory nature—one foot planted firmly in graduate or undergraduate studies while the other foot reaches tentatively toward teaching high school or first-year composition. Offering a clinically rich, hybrid experience helps facilitate this transition from student to teacher. As an example, I’ve partnered my preservice writing courses with first-year writing classrooms and, most recently, high school classrooms. What does this partnering look like? In its latest incarnation my graduate students partnered with a high school classroom around a digital poetry project. The graduate students completed this project first—an original poem coordinated with sound, image, and text by way of a movie-making program. After the graduate students had completed their own digital poems they helped the high school students write drafts of their poems and then later met with them for a one-day workshop to help digitize these poems. We then held a final celebratory “premiere party” in which we showed the films the high school students had created to an audience of family and friends. An immediate benefit of this collaboration was an increased engagement with instructional objectives. For the preservice writing teachers authentic adolescent audiences lead to greater motivation in the form of time and commitment. As one graduate student attests, “Every response I wrote, I knew the students were going to see them...they knew that they were coming from a group of graduate students. I needed to make this experience worthwhile.” This type of hybrid experience helps to facilitate a paradigmatic shift away from the “island-thinking” of being a student and toward the teacher-thinking of being concerned with the development of others.

Clinically rich, hybrid experiences also enhance the writing skills of both the preservice writing teachers and the adolescent writers. This “simultaneous renewal” (Goodlad 23) takes shape as the preservice writing teachers experiment and learn how to effectively respond to adolescent writers and as the adolescents increase the complexity of their writing based on the feedback they receive. A comment made by an adolescent student illustrates simultaneous renewal at work: “They’re using their skills to help us and then we’re like also needing the help. I’m like a back and forth situation.” And a comment from a preservice writing teacher: “It was like I’m learning from you and you’re learning from me.”

The link between creating a clinically rich, hybrid experience for preservice writing teachers and the lessons shared earlier from Wendy Bishop and Diane Holt-Reynolds are plentiful. Perhaps the most clear connection is the lesson from Holt-Reynolds that subject matter expertise and teaching expertise are discrete skill sets. I have had success in getting preservice writing teachers to experience not only held that their subject matter expertise isn’t so much held but rather gradually unlearned. I have had success in getting preservice writing teachers to begin to understand their own writing habits, rituals, and strategies and then translate these skills effectively to an adolescent audience. As an example, when the preservice writing teachers in my courses first respond to adolescent writers they most often speak in a language that is fragmented and at times altogether inaccessible to the adolescents. They routinely begin with statements such as, “watch for that” or “avoid cliché,” and perhaps a strong elaboration. “Perhaps” and “cliché” are certainly not terms that adolescent writers use or listen to. The point that the preservice writing teachers more effectively by maintaining a significant back-and-forth correspondence over the course of a writing assignment.

Qualitative Interview Study. When I first began teaching preservice writing courses I was hesitant to make strong ties between curricular design and my own research agenda centering around qualitative interview analyses of accomplished writers.
The students I most encounter in preservice writing classrooms are adept at reading and writing responses to a text. They can 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 development as writers. Nancy Sommers speaks to this same trajectory. After moving from academic genres to creative non-fiction. Lindquist and Gee view such crossing of the line between academic and creative writing as a natural progression of their academic and creative writing, arguing, “we may want to eliminate the line altogether” (221). 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 research focuses on the nature of writerly invention—the ways in which writers generate ideas through writing. Embedded 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 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” (221). 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 and personal organizational approaches. 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.”

Clueless in the Academy


Lindquist, Julie. Personal interview. 4 January 2010.

Perl, Sondra. Personal interview. 4 April 2011.


Sommers, Nancy. Personal interview. 5 September 2012.


Byline

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