Composing Ourselves: Utilizing Literacy Narratives to Promote Knowledge and Reflection in Preservice Secondary English Teachers

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COMPOSING OURSELVES: UTILIZING LITERACY NARRATIVES TO PROMOTE KNOWLEDGE AND REFLECTION IN PRESERVICE SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS

by

Cheryl Henderson Almeda

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of the The Graduate College
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requirements for the
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Department of English
Advisor: Jonathan Bush, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
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COMPOSING OURSELVES: UTILIZING LITERACY NARRATIVES TO PROMOTE KNOWLEDGE AND REFLECTION IN PRESERVICE SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS

Cheryl Henderson Almeda, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2010

My research entails examining and interrogating the literacy narratives written by six preservice secondary English teachers before their first semester of teaching. After writing their literacy narratives, these teachers worked together in two focus groups to consider, celebrate, and interrogate their memories they recorded in their narratives. They shared conversations which focused on their reflections, their teaching strategies, and the ideas they embraced as newly forming teachers.

This study considers claims made by Dewey (1933), Lortie (1975), Schulman (1986), and others, who emphasize the importance of learning through observation and the intuitive nature of reflective learning and teaching. It emphasizes the indelible impressions gained through preservice teachers’ years of learning as students first, long before they began to see themselves as teachers. It considers how age and experience add to one’s knowledge of teaching, and how conversations surrounding teachers’ memories can enhance a person’s perceptions of what ideas and practices might work best in his or her future secondary English classroom. It also examines the thoughtful consideration of the ideas and practices which might better be left behind.
This project offers an inside look at how the experiences preservice teachers first have as student impact their memories and ultimately, affect their teaching beliefs and practices. Finally, it informs teacher educators about how using literacy narratives in their methods classrooms and then creating learning communities comprised of preservice teachers to interrogate those narratives, can have a positive impact on the shaping and training of English Language Arts educators.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the support and wisdom shared by my dissertation advisor, Dr. Jonathan Bush, Western Michigan University. From the very beginning of my doctoral program, Jon has been my motivator, my cheerleader, and most significantly, a scholar and administrator with whom I can share ideas and celebrate preservice teachers’ success. He first trusted me to teach 4790: Teaching Writing in the Secondary Schools course, and second, to direct the English 1000 program; both experiences have indelibly shaped my experiences as teacher, scholar, and individual.

I am deeply appreciative of the time, energy, and commitment the six preservice educators in my project shared with me. Inside or outside of the ELA classroom, no matter where life takes them, they will find success.

I’d like to thank my dissertation committee comprised of Dr. Karen Vocke (Western Michigan University), Dr. Janet Alsup (University of Purdue), and Dr. Ellen Brinkley (Western Michigan University) for their timely advice and thoughtful consideration of my dissertation. Beyond being wise scholars and reflective interpreters, they have been remarkable role-models for me in this field of English Education.
I would like to thank my dear friend Erinn J. Bentley, for the deep friendship we have shared during this four year journey in our doctoral program. It would have been a far less lovely voyage, if not for the encouragement, the challenge, the ideas, and most importantly, the laughter we shared.

Most importantly, I would like to share my love and appreciation with my family. I am thankful for my mom and dad who provided me with every opportunity to stretch my wings in song, school, and life; and who grounded me in a faith that sustains me when I am feeling overwhelmed. I am grateful for my children, Jacob, Luciano and Abigail, whose three little faces (which grew more mature during the pursuit of my degree) consistently reminded me that simple pleasures often mean more than grand accomplishments, and that life is richer with a bit of both. Finally and most significantly, I am deeply indebted to my husband Ramie, my true companion and someone who firmly and lovingly holds my hand as we walk through this life together. His strength, encouragement, and ever-present willingness to partner with me in any way I need, allowed me not only to complete this project, but fully enjoy it.

Cheryl Henderson Almeda
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CHAPTER I

THIS TEACHING LIFE: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Literacy narratives are our personal stories about the development of our worldview. They are in-depth, reflective discoveries about the development of our life texts that come about by understanding the history of the texts that we have been exposed to through visual, oral, written and cultural texts ... Literacy is a fluid and dynamic part of who we are and how we read the world around us and, as such, makes these narratives relevant to teaching.

(Joanne Dunn, University Writing Program, East Carolina Univ.)

This project emerged from my intrinsic interest in personal narrative and memoir, and my ideas concerning Metacognition and reflection and their potential power in evolving preservice teachers’ practice and beliefs. I have always believed in the power of teachers’ personal histories to inform and enhance our professional practice, and relished the opportunity to see these interests motivate my doctoral scholarship and research. Personally, I am acutely aware of my intentions to teach from the youngest ages I can remember. I carry with me memories of both make-believe classrooms, and the very real teaching role-models who embodied characteristics and performed practices I planned to implement in my own classroom. These facets of my literacy history, along with favorite authors, texts, assignments, and various classroom communities all coalesce in my memory to form what it means to teach effectively. My teaching worldview was first established in my literacy history, and I am constantly mining its deepest regions in order to better understand myself as student, teacher, and human being.
An Emerging Interest in Teacher Beliefs and Ideologies

In this project, I considered several preservice teachers’ literacy narratives and the effect writing those narratives had upon their first teaching experience. I contemplated the themes which emerged in these students’ writing and looked at how those themes materialized in the small group discussions which transpired during their first semester teaching. In the program I helped supervise at Western Michigan University, English 1000: The Writing Process, I recognized a microcosm of some of the most important elements in my own teaching experience and wanted to better understand the dynamics of how teachers grow their teaching beliefs and develop their ideologies resulting from their personal literacy histories. Also, I wanted to see how small group discussions could influence these eager educators as they began their teaching careers. This group attracts diverse participants: some are eager young professionals who have grown-up considering themselves teaching material, others took the length of their secondary education and more than half of their years as undergraduates to place themselves in this role as classroom leader, and others yet, are “untraditional” students who have returned to the classroom as adults in search of second or even third careers. While members of my study represented all of these diverse characteristics, what they did have in common, was an eagerness to jump into their roles as teaching professionals through the opportunity to teach within the English 1000 program.
English 1000: The Writing Process and Its Instructors

In this study, I worked with six preservice teachers – those who had completed all of their education, major and minor subject requirements, and were ready to enter into internships. As part of the English 1000 experience at Western Michigan University, these student teachers applied for and were accepted into our program which gave them the opportunity to lead their own classrooms of 14 – 18 freshman students who were struggling below proficiency levels with their writing skills. These teachers would establish autonomy as leaders in charge of their own classrooms, but balance that with their affiliation as members of the English 1000 staff. As part of the orientation and preparation to teach within our program, teachers were required to attend a forty-hour orientation and take part in our weekly mentoring sessions which allowed their director (me) to focus discussion on community-building and classroom management, as well as the pedagogy of our writing program. Witnessing the rich discussions which ensued at these Friday afternoon sessions with past English 1000 staff members, I knew I wanted to take these six participants out of the classroom and our larger meetings, and ask them to think about and talk about their literacy narratives in two smaller groups comprised of three participants each. Over the course of the fall semester, I collected a copy of each participant’s literacy narrative, exchanged several emails with each participant, and met with two small groups a total of three times each. Each session lasted 1.5 hours and we wrapped-up the semester by meeting as a large group one final time.
My goals for this project were to examine their literacy narratives which they had written for their teaching writing methods class in a new context; first written as students, these narratives now followed these six instructors into their first experiences as teachers. I desired to know how their narratives were formed: who or what influenced the ways they thought about themselves as teachers and the ideas they brought to the classroom regarding the teaching of reading and writing. I hoped to reach some understanding of if or how their narratives would change when confronted with the realities of teaching verses what they imagined teaching would be like. Lastly, I was acutely interested in whether the opportunity to reflect upon their narratives in a small group setting with other new teachers, would enrich their teaching experience in ways anticipated or unexpected.

*My Literate Life: Novice Instructor, Creative Writer, Seasoned Teacher Educator*

To further explain my interest in this project and the topic, I will detail my own history as a teacher, my experiences with the literacy narrative assignment, and how I became so interested in this project.

*Novice Instructor: Embarking on the Career of My Lifetime*

I headed into my first teaching experience after graduating from a small, Midwestern liberal arts college at the age of twenty-one. I was assigned various levels of ninth, tenth, and 12th grade English at an urban public high school in the Midwest. I threw myself into teaching with excitement and optimism and met with some success. Despite my eighteen-hour work days, just staying one ahead proved a tremendous
challenge. The time it took to prepare exciting lesson plans, copy relevant material, read ahead in the assigned novels, and edit student writing left me little time to eat and sleep, let alone reflect on my progress. The idea that I might need to continue my own education and focus on my own development as a novice teacher baffled me. Yet based on my memories of the good (and bad) teaching I had experienced as a secondary student in the eighties, by most standards, I was meeting the challenge and finding success. Still, something was missing. My students, while engaged on some levels, at times appeared to lack the drive and desire to write with purpose. I sometimes felt exhausted by trying to figure out what they needed and why they needed it. Why did certain ideas work in the classroom but others fall flat? What was left to develop in myself and for my students? Fortunately, despite my feelings that I was the best I could be, a prospect fell into my lap which promised me twelve credits of master’s level work for six weeks of work over the summer: it was an opportunity just too good to miss.

*Creative Writer: Discovering My Own Voice*

Soon I found myself participating as a practicing teacher in a writing experience much like the National Writing Project. Together as professionals, I joined with eleven other practicing teachers to read, write, discuss and socialize for the summer. At times we worked as “the dirty dozen,” and at others, we joined larger groups of professionals attending Summer Institute courses focused on writing fiction, poetry and nonfiction, as well as portfolio development for ourselves and our classes. Sponsored by Wright State University and The National Endowment for the Arts, in *Change Course!* I was equal parts writer and teacher of writers. In various workshops focusing on the genres of
nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, I began to move through the stages of writing and
flickers of frustration surfaced: many times I sat before my computer and wondered
“What was it my instructor wanted?” and “Was all this work really necessary?” At other
moments, I reacquainted myself with the ease and excitement of writing about
something for which I truly cared. Revision became a relevant necessity as I discovered
my own writing process: read much, write profusely, revise thoughtfully and
repeatedly. As I was first forced, then reluctantly moved to agreement, then finally
eagerly began to share my work; I found that other readers sharpened my skills as they
asked me tough questions about my work. Perhaps most importantly, I was given the
time, room and encouragement to reflect upon what I wrote. As I look back on these
experiences, I understand now how important they were for me. These opportunities
for expression and reflection have influenced my personal and professional life in
myriad ways and I am continually identifying and considering new their effect and
influence.

Topics for consideration in my creative writing covered relationships with family
members, the loss of my childhood pet, my hopes and dreams for teaching, even my
fears regarding sharing my writing. One particular piece which came easy was titled
“Here”. In it, I chronicled my own experience as a student in my senior level high school
English class with my favorite teacher. Surprisingly, I discovered much of the “method”
at work in that class, matched what was transpiring during my Change Course!
experience and tied-closely to my plans for my own teaching. In both situations,
writers were encouraged to pick our own topics, genres, and find our own process; in
both writing environments, we were asked to share our work with others, face critique and enjoy fellowship with other writers. Through this experience of working on “Here,” I discovered two important things about myself as a teacher and writer: I was modeling my own professional experience on my high school senior English teacher’s example and memoir was easily my favorite way to write about it.

**A Teacher Transformed: Returning to the English Language Arts Classroom**

I was on my way to earning my masters degree and had an overflowing portfolio of reflective writing assignments to show for it when I re-entered my teaching classroom in the fall. Together with my students, we engaged in all sorts of reading and writing assignments that tied our own experiences to various themes and genres we enjoyed as a class and as individuals. Our journals transformed from “what I did over the weekend,” to “what I think about my writing” and together we began to understand how reflection becomes a tool for learning when students are given space and time to ruminate.

Dewey (1933, 1938) provided one of the earliest expositions of reflective thinking. He suggested that real reflection occurs only following recognition of a real problem. King and Kitchener (1994) suggest “such problems ... cannot be answered by formal logic alone. Rather, they are resolved when a thinking person identifies a solution to the problem that temporarily closes the situation” (p. 6). Formal logic is insufficient for the purposes of evaluating potential solutions to problems in light of incomplete or insufficient information; instead, reflective thinking requires the
"continual evaluation of beliefs, assumptions, and hypotheses against existing data and other plausible interpretations of the data" (King and Kitchener, 1994, p.7). As students engaged in reflective thinking about their reading and writing processes, they began to interrogate the decisions they made as readers. For example, students who questioned their abilities to synthesize large amounts of reading in a single sit-down session, reflected upon whether breaking the assignment into smaller pieces (and starting earlier!) would yield greater results regarding retention of the material covered. Writers questioned the choices they made ranging from higher order concerns like genre and purpose, to lower order concerns like word choice: reflection was yielding great rewards which the prior process -- draft, submit, and return with a grade -- had not.

Dewey (1933, 1938) identified that in the presence of ongoing verification and evaluation, judgments based on reflective thinking are more likely to be legitimate and thoughtful than are beliefs derived from authority, emotional commitment, or narrow reasoning. Further, King and Kitchener (1994) suggest, "unlike authority-based beliefs or emotional commitments, judgments derived from the reflective thinking process remain open to further scrutiny, evaluation, and reformulation; as such, reflective judgments are open to self-correction" (pp. 7-8). Even before I found these sources which backed-up my thinking regarding reflection and its power over students' growth as academicians, I could see the above mentioned "scrutiny, evaluation and reformulation" playing out in my classroom.
Seasoned and Renewed: My New Commitment to Preservice Educators

With these ideas informing my practical experience, I entered a new phase in my teaching career: I embarked on college instruction at Western Michigan University. After a few years working as an adjunct instructor in freshman composition and developmental writing, I realized what I really felt impassioned to do, was strengthen the preparation experience for preservice educators in English Language Arts. With my preservice teaching students in English 4790: Teaching Writing in the Secondary Schools, I began to actively seek ways to promote reflectivity in my undergraduate students. At the same time, I was developing my own skills and heightening my awareness of reflectivity as a doctoral student in Dr. Joyce Walker’s English 6790: Theories in Composition Studies: Storytelling, Narrative, Writing, and Research class. A variety of thoughtful assignments included two of particular interest to me: a literacy narrative and a book review. I was at a new stage in my professional development and the literacy narrative offered me a much desired opportunity to reflect on the totality of my literacy experience; at the same time, because I had done a variety of reflective pieces on my reading and writing history during my Change Course! creative writing experience, I embraced the idea of exploring it in an unconventional way as tied to a book review, an idea which would surprise and delight me.

When I stumbled upon Donald Murray’s Crafting a Life: In Essay, Story Poem (1996) and began to see how his teaching methods with his students mirrored my own experience, I was eager to combine the two assignments and see where they would take me. Murray, a seasoned journalist and veteran composition instructor, wove together
his professional experiences as teacher and writer with eloquence and expertise; the result being this braided book which would inform and inspire English teacher educators like me. As I composed my literacy narrative now coupled with an analysis and review of Murray’s book, literacy epiphanies abounded. Finally thankful for my pack-rat tendencies, I had multiple artifacts reaching back as far as third grade and up to the present to include as evidence of my literacy. Multimodal representations by way of technology (scanned documents, links to resources, etc...) made this evidence concrete and meaningful for my audience. Using Murray’s text to critique my own experience allowed me to compare and contrast our teaching and learning styles and reflect upon the differences. This literacy narrative, coupled with Murray’s text and enhanced by my own examples of reading and writing assignments, evolved into a piece that moved me to think about my literacy history, teaching strategies, and trajectories for my scholarship in novel ways. In the most basic terms, I began to fully embrace that what I wrote was affected by my life, my teachers, and my curriculum. How I taught could be correlated to the teachers I used as role-models and the beliefs I formed in their classrooms.

**Teachers as Role Models**

One of the most significant texts interrogating the relationship between teachers as role-models and their influence upon their students is Dan Lortie’s *School Teacher: A Sociological Study* (1975). “American young people,” Lortie describes, “see teachers at work much more than they see any other occupational group; we can estimate that the average student has spent 13,000 hours in direct contact with classroom teachers by the
time he graduates from high school” (p. 61). The interaction is direct and intense; it is usually rooted in relationship. Exchanges can range from placating the teacher in order to “survive” school to “taking the role” of the classroom teacher to anticipate the teacher’s plausible reaction to a student’s behavior, to, when the student aspires to becoming a teacher herself, “engage[ing] in taking the role of the teacher” (Lortie, 1975, p. 62). Lortie warns of two important limits on the extent to which a student can become a teaching apprentice: First, “the student’s participation is usually imaginary rather than real” and second, the student is the “target of teacher efforts and sees the teacher front stage and center” (p. 62). The student’s learning about teaching, from this limited vantage point and “relying heavily on imagination,” does not represent the acquisition of knowledge nor the attainment of technical skill; it is “more a matter of imitation,” yet still has the potential power to inform generations of eager preservice teachers (Lortie, 1975, p. 63).

Hughes (1958) described professional socialization as a “turning point in the entrant’s perceptions of the role and of himself; prior conceptions are reversed as the learning individual looks back on his former self from inside” (Lortie, 1975, p. 65). Yet in the context of his study, Lortie identified students, who when describing their former teachers, did not contrast their “student” perceptions with a sophisticated “adult” viewpoint. Instead, they talked about the “assessments they made as youngsters as currently viable, as stable judgments of quality” (p. 66). In fact, “What constituted good teaching then constitutes good teaching now; there is no great divide between preentry and postentry evaluations. Training (and even subsequent experience) is not a dramatic
watershed separating the perceptions of naïve laymen from later judgments by knowing professionals" (Lortie, 1975, p. 66). The preservice educators’ experiences, whether in methods classrooms or student teaching seminars, would not erase the years of observation and study these young professionals went through as students. Whether distinctly positive or negative, or in many cases some combination of both, the people who helped define the literacy histories of these educators are powerful, exerting influence well beyond the walls of the individual classrooms from which they taught.

The “Apprenticeship of Observation”

Based upon my own understanding of what my best teachers – at the high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels - had done for me, I began to consider my own “apprenticeship of observation” and its influence on my pedagogy and classroom management, as well as the books I selected and the assignments I distributed to my typically eager students. In fact, during my first three years of teaching high school English Language Arts, I assigned the very texts my senior English teacher had assigned to me. I often found myself involving methods – from journal writing, to poetry assignments, to particular methods employed in peer review – which reflected the teaching methods of my favorite role models in education.

Moving into my teaching methods class, I saw the literacy narrative assignment as one which would afford my students these same revelations but much earlier in their careers. I considered how the literacy narrative assignment might become a launching pad for the ideas we would consider in our shared methods classroom; one fraught with
sticky decisions regarding all that we needed to cover, yet never enough time to cover it. From their 2005 text, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do*, editors Linda Darling-Hammond and John Bransford tackle big questions like, “How do teacher learn to draw upon their understanding of subject matter, learning, development, culture, language, pedagogy...?; How can teacher educators help prospective teachers learn to address the multiple challenges of classroom and school life?” (p.358). More specifically, in their tenth chapter titled, “How Teachers Learn and Develop,” they consider how teacher education should “lay a foundation for lifelong learning” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p.359). This was the very thing I was discovering in and for myself, and dedicating myself to for the purposes of informing my pre-teaching students. Yet, as the authors acknowledge, “Given the relatively short period available for preparing teachers and the fact that not everything can be taught, decisions must be made about what content and strategies are most likely to prepare new entrants to be able to learn from their own practice, as well as the insights of other teachers and researchers” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p.359). Personally, I embodied this reality and stood as testimony to the idea that preservice and novice educators embody a sum of their past teachers’ parts; for better or worse, we represent the ideas, pedagogical styles, and often times personalities of the influences from our educational past.

**Tough Concepts for New Teachers**

Darling-Hammond and Bransford acknowledge the three widely documented problems in learning to teach: The first is, “requiring new teachers to come and think
about (and understand) teaching in ways quite different from that they have learned from their own experience as students” (2005, p. 359). As Lortie (1975) pointed out, these experiences have a substantial effect on preconceptions about learning and teaching for new teachers becoming professionals. Second, what Mary Kennedy (1999) coined as “problems of enactment,” new teachers need help learning to teach effectively and “think like a teacher” followed by ideas to put what they know into practice. They need to know how to do a wide variety of things, often simultaneously. A third issue involves problems of complexity such as working with many students at one time and what Jackson, 1974, suggests as having to “juggle multiple academic and social goals requiring trade-offs from moment to moment and day to day” (qtd. In. Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p. 359). Because the classroom changes constantly due to variables determined by course objectives, student responses, and unexpected classroom events, teachers must be prepared to think on their feet and execute decisions that will meet with success. The authors suggest, “Helping prospective teachers learn to think systematically about this complexity is extremely important. They need to develop metacognitive habits of mind that can guide decisions and reflection on practice in support of continual improvement” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p. 359).

Addressing these three major concerns is difficult for an English teacher educator no matter how “seasoned,” and the immediate matter with which to wrestle becomes, “Where do I start?” By acknowledging Lortie’s (1975) ideas behind, “the apprenticeship of observation,” teacher educators refer to the process by which
prospective teachers develop impressions of teaching based upon their own experiences as students.

Through writing a literacy narrative, I believed my students would find a “way in” to their literacy histories with rich perceptions they had not previously considered with only their fleeting thoughts or hastily written thank you notes at graduation time. A warning however is that while “the good news of these apprenticeships is that [while] students have had a great deal of experience in classrooms, and many draw inspiration from outstanding teachers who taught them, the bad news is that these apprenticeships can result in serious misconceptions about teaching” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p. 367). Previous to this reflective exercise called the literacy narrative which students were embarking on no longer simply as students, but in their new identities as future educators, Lortie (1975) recognized that students do not receive invitations to watch the teacher’s performance through the wings; they are not privy to the teacher’s private intentions and personal reflections on classroom events. Students rarely participate in selecting goals, making preparations or postmortem analysis. They are not pressed to place the teacher’s actions in a pedagogically oriented framework. (p. 62)

Now as preservice teachers, students will begin to wrestle with the “how and why” behind their experience which develops from the “what” they remember.

Lortie (1975) contends that as “experts” of the undergraduate experience and the “long apprenticeship of observing,” students can become proprietors of a number of misconceptions; notably, one classic view is that teaching is “easy.” This may be tied to the fact that, according to Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), “students observe
the superficial trappings of teaching, but not the underlying knowledge, skills, planning, and decision making” and that, “part of the problem is that the limited vantage point of the student does not result in the acquisition of professional knowledge” (pp. 367-8).

Planning, selecting, and implementing different strategies with the goals of supporting students with different learning styles and goals, is the challenging task for every teacher, but often times, the student who is observing, does not see and consider these complexities. Instead, the student may imitate the ideas that are the most easily observed and miss the intricacies of the real work of teaching, “simplified” by a good teacher. “Good teaching,” suggest Munby, Russell, and Martin (2001), “tends to reinforce the view that teaching is effortless because the knowledge and experience that support it are invisible to those taught. Good teaching looks like the ordering and deployment of skills, so learning to teach looks like acquiring the skills” (p. 887).

Complex activities involving group work, assessment, and diversity, often are simplified by students as being part of their experience. Prospective teachers may have experienced group work, but “been totally unaware of the degree to which the tasks they were assigned or the procedures they followed actually supported collaboration” and “whether they had poor experience in unguided, poorly planned group work or good experiences with well-designed collaborative tasks, they may not know what elements causes the experience to be more or less productive” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p. 368). My questions continued to surface regarding whether students would more specifically and carefully examine these strategies within their literacy histories by way of the literacy narrative.
Making the Implicit, Explicit: Ideas Which Shape Teaching Practice

Many ideas and beliefs about good teachers and their qualities need to be made explicit for the purposes of interrogation: These views tend to focus on the affective qualities of teachers (caring, warm, compassionate), their styles of teaching (didactic, inquiry-based, pragmatic), or their relationships with individual students, with “little appreciation for the role of social contexts, subject matter, or pedagogical knowledge” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, 368). As Paine (1990) notes, “novices typically bring an enthusiastic appreciation of personality factors and an underdeveloped sense of the role of content and context (p. 20). As well, misconceptions abound concerning learning. Borko and Mayfield (1995) suggest the impressions of pre-teaching candidates are often that teaching is only about the transfer or transmission of information and this “can make it difficult for teacher educators who see to prepare teachers to teach in ways that are more compatible with what we now know about how people learn. These more successful methods are often fundamentally different from how the student teachers were taught, and sometimes, from how the teacher educators themselves learned as students” (qtd. In Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, 369). Importantly, preservice educators hold a variety of images, understandings and beliefs – often misguided – about teaching and learning. Again, my question bubbled to the surface, “Could the literacy narrative open these much needed conversations regarding students’ beliefs and ideologies about teaching that begged to be interrogated?”

In chapter three I will describe in detail how I decided to take the assignment of the literacy narrative into my methods classroom. For the purpose of introducing the
project here, I will illustrate more generally how I used this assignment with the goal of reaching a better understanding of these preservice teachers' ideas about teaching reading and writing, and establish the sources for these preconceptions. My hope was that not only would I understand these teachers' belief systems better, but that they would themselves gain a sense of their teaching identities and conceive of where and when these identities were formed. Students participated in a prewriting assignment which asked them to create a lifegraph charting the highs and lows of their literacy experiences. Reluctant at first, students soon realized that with some concentrated reflection, their good and bad memories pertaining to reading and writing came rushing back.

After completing their lifegraphs, students began composing seven to nine page narratives which allowed them to focus on one particular experience and analyze it specifically; or write a chronologically devised history of events which may have revolved around a person, theme, location, or another unifying factor; or they concentrated on one educational experience which, or role-model who, helped them become the readers and writers they were today. Following a process model, students wrote, revised, shared, revised again, and polished their essays. When they turned their papers into me, I responded to and evaluated their writing. Upon returning these papers to the students, I surprised them with a "next step" few expected: they were to turn their papers into a multi-modal presentation that other members of the class could enjoy.
Some students chose to focus on one particular part of their essay which they thought would really resonate with their audience, while others sought to convey the entirety of the experience. Students impressed me with their creativity. Of course there were the more typical collage posters, i-movies, and scrapbooks, but there was also a unique breakfast table set-up with homemade muffins and "coffee talk" slips of paper to reinvent the conversations one young woman had with her mother when the student was in grade school and her mother was in graduate school; Maria did this to exemplify the rich literary discussions in which they engaged. Another student composed "scenes" on audio tape with his wife who played the role of the various females in his life who had encouraged his literacy – first his mother, then a favorite teacher, then his girlfriend (who later became his wife!). When sharing with the class, Justin re-enacted each scene by reciting a script he had memorized which coordinated perfectly with the words his wife read on tape.

One other student created himself as a reader, in the form of a wooden marionette which was covered with words, titles, and themes relating to the influential books he had read. Starting at its feet, the doll was swathed in titles of favorite children’s books and phrases pertaining to early, rich literacy experiences; moving to the tip of the doll’s head, the words grew more challenging and less “positive” but the literacy experiences, still plentiful. Notably, the midriff of the marionette was bare, emphasizing Ben’s lack of literacy experiences during his middle school years. This void was what his literacy narrative had emphasized and Ben’s physical representation of this
emptiness underscored his motivation to become a teacher and reach youth at this critical stage in their development as readers and writers.

I felt the project was a powerful one and I found my students did too. Upon reflecting on their literacy narrative experience, three classmates shared these comments:

- “This assignment has really made me believe that reflection is key to every individual, in myself and in students. Reflecting on my past events, in how I learned to enhance my skills in both reading and writing, and learning to enjoy other types of literature, has shown me both the type of learning I learn best from and the ways in which I would like to model my own classroom.”
- “What I was most impressed with about this assignment was how a question as simple as ‘What events influence you as a reader/writer during your lifetime?’ turned into a teaching revelation... I love the fact that through this assignment we, the students, essentially taught ourselves how to be better teachers and not just in theory but through practice as well – our own practice.”
- “This assignment has opened my eyes to the possibilities of writing multigenres. I wasn’t the only person taking risks; the majority of the classroom put themselves out there for the rest of the class to investigate.”

The vast majority of the students’ comments were positive and insightful, especially regarding the opportunities they had to reflect upon their own experience. Starting with the lifegraph, and continuing through their narrative, they focused their multimodal project on one or a few “moments,” and brought those to life in their
multimodal projects. After they presented their projects, then responded to each other and reflected on their own experience, students recognized that the very personal experience of writing was only a small part of this literacy project. For some, this was a revelation. What they thought of as a private act -- that of writing a paper by and for themselves and their professor -- became a conversation open to an entire classroom; surprisingly, instead of feeling intimidated and afraid of the open-endedness of that exchange, they were inspired to share with one another.

Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) note that it is especially important as they move toward the goal of lifelong learning, that for teachers’ growth and development, they learn from others. “As noted,” they suggest, “lifelong learning often involves the kinds of changes that require giving up old routines and transforming prior beliefs and practices.” Yet they warn, “This is much easier said than done” (p. 365).

Helping teachers work in teams moves teachers from being intimidated by feedback and potential criticism into space where they can collaborate and support one another to reach a larger goal. For example, Darling-Hammond and Bransford note,

It is important when a school team asks how well students are doing in different classrooms and areas of the curriculum and considers how school curriculum, professional development, or organizational structures might need to change... teachers who have experienced working in teams [can] consider such questions [and] will see this an important, ongoing activity rather than as a threat to what they have previously been doing (pp. 365-6).

Adaptations and enriching exercises for teaching professionals involve actively seeking feedback “from many sources” in order to help the educator make the best possible decisions for himself, his classroom and the students. In my own experience, this
literacy narrative exercise appeared to afford students the opportunity to reflect individually and as a part of a larger group in order to inspire real insight into themselves as the professionals they desired to become. Helping these preservice educators develop means more than just telling them the information they need to know. Reflection has proven to be a tool for self-critique and growth and may afford teachers the opportunities essential to their professional development.

Dispositions of Effective Educators

In the 2006 edition of the Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts, Editor Lois T. Stover and her NCTE committee note the dispositions "essential to the effective conduct" of skilled teachers and to the choices these individuals make as they practice their profession. Beginning ELA teachers should:

- Value the diverse traditions, cultures, and language experiences learners bring to the classroom
- Value the responsibility to assist students in learning about many forms and uses of language and how to use them effectively
- Value all forms of human communication – oral, written, pictorial and signed
- Value the innate power, right and responsibility of learners to shape their own education as they engage with language and various texts
- Value the role of literature in the classroom and in life more generally
• Value composing – written, oral, and visual – as a means of discovering self, learning about the world, creating meaning, and interacting with others
• Value technology as a potential means for understanding self and as a tool for teaching, learning and communicating
• Value continual professional growth
• Value personal experience, interpersonal communication, and the processes and products of research as bases for growth and as ways to obtain new knowledge and understanding of self and others
• Value collaboration with colleagues as a way to maintain professional self-esteem, serve students, and engage in professional growth. (Stover, p. 13)

The final two dispositions noted – the ability and desire to value personal experience, interpersonal communication, and the processes and products of research as bases for growth and as ways to obtain new knowledge and understanding of self and others and the disposition to value collaboration with colleagues as a way to maintain professional self-esteem, serve students, and engage in professional growth -- seem particularly relevant to me and my interest in literacy narratives and the potential transforming power of reflection. In Guidelines (2006), Stover credits Bandura (1997) with concepts regarding self-efficacy: “A beginning English language arts teacher’s positive sense of professional self-efficacy is a cornerstone for enhancing the learning environment -- and for continuing to mature over time” (p. 14). Self-efficacy is a person’s belief in his or her
ability to succeed in a particular situation and these beliefs or cognition which individuals create or develop and hold true about themselves as a foundation for agency in personal growth and development. Importantly, Stover (2006) notes that beginning ELA teachers should respect their unique qualities they bring to the classroom (p. 14).

*Guidelines* resonates with similar ideas found in *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World* (2005, p.366), where authors Darling-Hammond and Bransford lay out the **three key principles** for facilitating teacher development:

1. Prospective teachers come to the classroom with preconceptions about how the world, and teaching, works. These preconceptions, developed in their “apprenticeship of observation,” condition what they learn. If their initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information, or they may learn them for the purposes of a test but revert to their preconceptions outside the classroom.

2. To develop competence in an area of inquiry that allows them to “enact” what they know, teachers must (i) have a deep foundation of factual and theoretical knowledge, (ii) understand facts and ideas in the context of a conceptual framework, and (iii) organize knowledge in ways that facilitate retrieval and action.

3. A “metacognitive” approach to instruction can help teachers learn to take control of their own learning by providing tools for analysis of events and situations that enable them to understand and handle the complexities of life in classrooms.

Points one and three in particular, direct attention to the importance of reflection, metacognition, and personal experience as it relates to developing teachers and their belief systems.
As sociologist Dan Lortie (1975) identifies by using the term *apprenticeship of observation*, prospective teachers develop conceptions of teaching based on their fifteen-plus years of experience as students. Marshall and Smith (1997) identify the observable practices at the collegiate level that inform preservice educators as they shape their teaching identities. “That university faculty,” they write, “do prepare teachers for secondary schools even when they aren’t thinking about it, even when they aren’t particularly interested in the project – seems clear from even the briefest overview of most teacher education programs” (p. 248).

That both education and English faculty are modeling particular classroom practices is not the issue; indeed they are. But three essential questions arise: “What kinds of practice are they modeling? How is that practice being reshaped by transformations in theory and scholarship? How consonant is the teaching of English at the university with the kind of teaching most high school teachers will undertake when they begin their work in public schools?” (Marshall and Smith, 1997, p. 248). Authors Marshall and Smith scrutinize word choice on syllabi; defined (clear and obtuse) instructional goals and follow-through; opportunities (and lack of them) for students to choose their texts and/or projects; and regarding literature, the focus on close reading of very specific texts “in relative isolation from theoretical, cultural, or biographical context,” which runs contrary to the goals of critical practice as outlined in literary practice and educational practice (Marshall and Smith, 1997, p.253).
By looking at these syllabi and their expectations for students in literature, rhetoric, and writing classrooms Marshall and Smith (1997) note, “perhaps the most revealing feature of these descriptions of writing is how little description there actually is. This is due in part, of course, to the fact that specific assignments will be handed out as the course moves along. But it suggests an assumption that the student readers already know what a ‘paper’ means – that it means, in fact, an argumentative essay with a thesis and textual evidence... etc...” (Marshall and Smith, 1997. p. 254). What is so revealing to these authors and by way of this text is that students are continually learning about teaching through their personal experiences as students. The syllabi, the assignments, and the texts themselves become “not just themselves” tools for the course, but “are part of the larger ‘text’ – the course itself – for which the instructor is the principle author” (Marshall and Smith, 1997. p. 257).

“Teaching How We’re Taught” continues to make insightful discoveries regarding the reading and writing strategies employed by these teachers and how they often times contradict the very strategies the course goals illustrate for the students. “Do as I say and not as I do,” may be the chorus, but students are not singing it. The grammars that are privileged, the texts that are implicitly and explicitly valued, the defining features of a suitable “text”; all these inform the students’ perceptions of the course and what it values, and, “through the process of observational apprenticeship – for about three generations now – they have constituted the taken-for-granted script, the all-but-indivisible convention, that governs what seems possible in our classrooms” (Marshall and Smith, 1997, p. 267). Towards the close of this article, Marshall and Smith
ask the all-important question: “Must teachers teach as they were taught?” (267). The authors argue that while we must not, should not, “there is a kind of folk tradition that suggests that [we] should” (p. 267). First Lortie (1975) and then Marshall and Smith (1997) allow that “twenty or more years of watching teachers perform cannot help but influence new teachers as they make their way into the profession, and that influence will, almost by definition, pull instruction back in a conservative direction – to the way it was done before” (p. 267). That these “voices of teachers past” inhabit our professional selves is no surprise; yet, they need to be interrogated by students within the context of their teaching methods classrooms.

**Looking to the Future by Reflecting on Our Past**

“A Vision of Professional Practice” is envisioned within the introduction of Darling-Hammond and Bransford’s *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World* (2005). In their framework for understanding teaching and learning, and in working towards two important themes for educators and their students: *Teaching as a Profession* and *Learning in a Democracy*, the authors identify three key areas as important to teacher development:

- Knowledge of Learners and their Development in Social Contexts
- Knowledge of Subject Matter and Curriculum Goals
- Knowledge of Teaching

For the English Language Arts professional, while these areas are indeed crucial in establishing a professional sense of self and influencing pedagogy, what appears to be
lacking is the articulation of the importance regarding a teacher's past history with literacy experiences, and her ability to reflect upon those experiences. Both an educator's sense of self and her teaching practices are influenced by her literacy history. By engaging in the act of remembering and mining those memories to explicate their influences, she can engage in self-discovery and growth and affect the trajectories for her future teaching experiences.

Preservice educators' past literacy experiences – whether they most deeply occurred at home, at school, or in their larger communities – must be interrogated in order that real reflection and metacognition can occur. If self-efficacy is important, it is important that as educators for future English Language Arts teachers, we develop a vehicle to use within our reading and writing methods classrooms to facilitate this learning about our own and others' literacy practices. Literacy Narratives and the ways we share, interrogate, and celebrate them, provide the instruments by which we can reveal the inner workings of our minds and memories, and serve as a conduit for preservice educators to listen, critique and learn from one another as they develop their self-efficacy and professional identities. This dissertation seeks to identify these ideas at work and anticipates the implications for the field of English Education.

Dissertation Chapters

- I. This Teaching Life: The Journey Begins
  - An introduction to myself, my literacy history, and the motivations for my study.
II. What Has Come Before: The Study of Literacy Narratives and Teacher Reflection

- A literature review which considers the body of scholarship surrounding the literacy narrative as a composition assignment, the literacy narrative as a tool for the development as teachers, and the body of knowledge surrounding reflection and reflective judgment.

III. From the Inside Out: Project Methodology and Study Participants

- A chapter identifying the methodology and protocol followed for this doctoral project, an introduction to the content of participants’ literacy narratives, and preliminary information concerning each of the project’s six participating preservice teachers.

IV. Undue Influence: Interrogating the Teachers Who Have Shaped Us

- A chapter devoted to the consideration of the literacy narrative as it reveals positive and negative role-models which helped shape the identities of my participants, as well as ideas concerning what these revelations mean to all of the participants. Consideration of the ways they view themselves as teachers and the ideas which contribute to their teaching styles and classroom management.

V. Living a Literate Life: The Influence of Experience

- A chapter revealing how one participant’s life experiences have shaped his teaching identity and how sharing his wisdom – gleaned inside and outside the classroom – affects the rest of the project’s participants. A conclusion to Hunter’s quest to become the teacher he most revered.
VI. Taking Steps Towards Reflection: Ideas That Shape Our Thinking

➢ A chapter dedicated to the process of reflectivity as it plays out in the narratives written, spoken, and lived by these six preservice educators; also, a consideration of the ways that we encourage reflection in our preservice educators and to what extent they are able to make effective reflective judgments considering themselves and their students.

VII. Implications: What Matters To Teacher Educators and Why It Should

➢ A final chapter considering the implications of this study and how it contributes to the larger issues facing English teacher educators and our field.
CHAPTER II

WHAT HAS COME BEFORE:
THE STUDY OF LITERACY NARRATIVES AND TEACHER REFLECTION

My dissertation study focused on the ways six preservice educators evolved their teaching identities and beliefs about reading and writing during their first professional teaching experience. In order to understand these novice educators’ earliest conceptions of what it meant to teach effectively and to better comprehend the beliefs they brought with them into this first teaching experience, I employed the use of an assignment called the literacy narrative which functioned as the vehicle for reflection for their preservice experiences. Their narratives provided room and space for these preservice teachers to explore what they believed about “good” and “bad” teachers and their reading and writing experiences and the personal stories allowed the small group of instructors a place to revisit these ideas as their first semester of teaching progressed. Also important to this study were concepts relating to reflection and teacher reflectivity. When and by what means do educators develop the ability to reconsider their early ideas about teaching and replace them with new ones which are increasingly more valid based on experience and study? How do teachers develop reflective judgment and does this ability affect their memories of teaching and the ways in which those memories enable them to improve teaching practice? In all of these areas I explored the wealth of scholarship available for study.
The Exploration of Teaching Identities and Beliefs in This Project

These preservice educators’ teaching identities and beliefs about reading and writing have been developed over their lifetimes as readers, writers, and students in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. Recently as undergraduates, these young educators had been schooled in content, pedagogy, and ideas about learning and the
development of learners in their ELA teaching methods classrooms. To explore the relationships between their own experiences with reading and writing and their ideas about how reading and writing experiences should be shaped in their future classrooms, students wrote literacy narratives. These narratives could be shared and interrogated by other preservice educators in a small group study; students were able to share their narratives, talk about their good and bad encounters with reading and writing and their teaching role-models, then discuss the ramifications of these identity-shaping experiences together. Reflection and Reflective Judgment took shape as these preservice educators engaged in these acts of remembering and together interrogate their memories. Coupled with the practical experiences of teaching, the students emerged from their semester of teaching, sharing, remembering and reflecting, in ways that suggest some incidences of change had occurred in their identities and in their beliefs about reading and writing.

Current Trends in Teacher Preparation

Within the curriculum most universities currently offer and require, programs tend to be focused on three general areas. These three areas include the following:

- Knowledge of learners and how they learn and develop within social contexts
- Conceptions of curriculum content and goals: an understanding of the subject matter and skills to be taught in light of the social purposes of education
An understanding of teaching in light of the content and learners to be taught, as informed by assessment and supported by classroom environments (Darling-Hammond, Bransford, eds. 2005, p. 10)

Together, these comprise teachers' professional knowledge. In their text, Preparing Teachers for a Changing World (2005), Darling-Hammond and Bransford conclude knowledge of learners and their development in social contexts is aided by studying learning, human development, and language (p.11). Knowledge of subject matter and curriculum goals is enriched by learning about educational goals and purposes for skills, content, and subject matter, and knowledge of teaching is gained through classroom content focusing on content plus content pedagogy, teaching diverse learners, assessments, and classroom management (Darling-Hammond, Bransford, eds. 2005, p. 11).

Content knowledge is deep knowledge of the subject itself (Schulman 1987). Pedagogical content knowledge includes “overarching conceptions of what it means to teach a particular subject, knowledge of curricular material, and curriculum in a particular field, knowledge of students’ understanding and potential misunderstanding of a subject area, and knowledge of instructional strategies and representations for teaching particular topics” (Grossman, 1988, p. 25). The Model of Pedagogical Reasoning, created by Shulman (1986, 1987, 1992) completes a picture for good teaching: comprehension, transformation, instruction, evaluation, reflection, and new comprehension.
By defining preparation for teachers in the three major content areas listed previously, by considering Grossman's definition of pedagogical content knowledge and its importance, and by studying Schulman’s Model for Pedagogical Reasoning, one can understand the multiple facets contributing to the education and professional training secondary ELA teachers undergo before they are certified as instructors. Their training, however, may be more fully expanded from the “what and how” to teach, to the “why” one employs certain methods, ideas, curriculum choices, etc... in his or her first classroom. Of particular interest are one’s ideologies and belief systems that are personally at work within the teacher him/herself. Reflective thinking, particularly as originated through the vehicle of the literacy narrative, helps bring to the surface preservice educators’ conceptions of what teachers do and why they do it. Reflection by way of written narratives and spoken conversations surrounding these narratives can provide a unique window for self-analysis, and a though small group conversation, a reconsideration of beliefs that are rooted in the individual lived experience.

**Teacher Reflection and Its Research Base**

Whether through small group conversations or individual journaling, teacher reflection can be developed in many forms and with many facets for the teachers in whom it is being encouraged. Cognitive change in preservice educators enables them to be more specific in their knowledge of context variables and student learning (Hollingsworth, 1989). Researchers interested in the strategies that “delineate steps toward reflection” have applied Van Menen’s (1977) levels of reflectivity, or followed Zeichner and Liston’s (1987) recommendations (Schoonmaker, 2002, p. 8). Importantly,
a basic understanding of the differences between *Reflective action*, which entails “active, persistent and careful consideration” of any belief or form of knowledge in light of its supportive information as opposed to *Routine action* which is guided “primarily by tradition, external authority, and circumstance” is essential (Zeichner and Liston, 1987, p. 24). Van Manen’s (1977) three levels of reflection incorporate the first level of *technical rationality*, the second level of *practical action*, and the third, *critical reflection*. At this level, “central questions ask which educational goals, experiences, and activities lead toward forms of life which are mediated by concerns for justice, equity, and concrete fulfillment” and whether the current accommodations serve these goals. (Zeichner and Liston, 1987, pp. 24-5). Other researchers have considered reflection as a process by which teachers make decisions regarding strategies both content-specific and in new and different contexts from the ones in which they were learned (Hollingsworth, 1989).

Recent developments in assessing teacher preparation programs have led to a breakdown in the consensus regarding what works. “Process/product research has failed to generate a substantial and significant set of findings to guide the preparation of teachers [and] the research paradigm itself has been seriously challenged as an inadequate way to explain and guide teaching” (Valli, 1992, p. xiii). This failure has led to a renewed interest in Dewey’s ideas (1933, 1938) regarding reflective practice and Schon’s concepts (1983, 1987) surrounding the reflective practitioner.
What is Reflective Thinking?

John Dewey (1933, 1938) observed that real reflection can only occur once there is true recognition that a problem exists. For true reflective thinking, there must be some doubt as to how a problem might be resolved. According to Dewey, a person makes a judgment in order to bring closure to an uncertain situation. The problem-solver must assess and evaluate potential solutions and is affected by the “limitations of the available information [and] also the limitations of the knower” (King and Kitchener, 1994, p. 7). It requires the continual evaluation of beliefs, a constant consideration of assumptions, and involves the knower turning-over hypotheses against existing data and other plausible interpretations of that data. “Because they involve ongoing verification and evaluation, judgments based on reflective thinking are more likely to be valid and insightful than are beliefs derived from authority, emotional commitment, or narrow reasoning” (King and Kitchener, 1994, p. 7).

Perhaps most importantly, because they stem from the thought-processes of the inexperienced knower, and are not deemed authoritative, reflective judgments remain open to further critique, assessment, and reformulation: they are open to self-correction. Koskela’s (1985) study of reflective communication examines the effects of reflective communication which offer statements indicating “the presence of critical thinking or problem solving, the attitudes of open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, or responsibility, and the skills used for self-analysis” (Zeichner and Liston, 1987, p. 39). Literacy narratives can be a vehicle for moving these judgments from the mind of the preservice educator, to the page. Once identifiable, these ideas can be interrogated by
the authors themselves, and open to interpretation and comments by others engaged in teacher preparation and support – both teacher educators and other preservice teachers. These narratives can become a valuable tool for teacher development.

**Reflection Takes Shape in the Education Curriculum**

Donald A. Schon (1983) explored ideas regarding reflective judgment and its place in professional practice and examines the contrast between “the university’s familiar dichotomy between the ‘hard’ knowledge of science and scholarship and the ‘soft’ knowledge of artistry and unvarnished opinion” (Schon, 1983, p. viii). He argues that professionals know more than they can say, that they exhibit a “knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit” (p. viii) and that, “Indeed, practitioners themselves often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action and sometimes use this capacity to cope with the unique, uncertain, and conflicted situation of practice” (Schon, 1983, p. ix). In particular, he notes that “Teachers are faced with pressures for increased efficiency in the context of contracting budgets, demands that they rigorously ‘teach the basics,’ exhortations to encourage creativity, build citizenship, help students examine their values” (Schon, 1983, p. 17).

Reflective judgment is that practical, “on-the-spot” thinking which educators employ during their practice of teaching. Most people would grant that experts in any field have this capacity, but the questions come when regarding how to teach it. David C. Berliner (2001) notes these reflective practices as traits in experts:

- They recognize meaningful patterns faster than novices
• They are more flexible and can change representations faster than novices
• They can impose meaning on ambiguous stimuli as opposed to novices who are misled by ambiguity
• They develop automaticity in their behavior to allow conscious processing of more complex information (pg. 464).

Berliner (2001) recommends that regardless of the opportunities, talents and “proclivities,” that motivate a person to become a teacher, “extensive deliberate practice is still needed to become highly accomplished in teaching” (p. 465). Importantly however, while experience is equated with expertise, the acquisition of experience does not automatically denote expertise (Schon, 2001, p. 466), and can be equated with other factors, such as reflective practice. Questions surface as to how to teach reflective practice and in what ways teacher education can incorporate these practices in the professionalization of teachers. Duffy (1994) advises “teaching mindfulness” must be factored into the curriculum and must not be delayed until after prospective teachers develop the “basics” of teaching, as is now the case (p. 20).

The preservice teacher education program should be characterized by opportunities for professional development; the availability of inquiry and research prospects; and a “spirit of intellectual community, with all participants engaging in conceptually informed discussions about how to be analytical, creative, flexible, and adaptive” (Duffy, 1994, p. 22). Importantly, “preservice teachers, like children in school, are mediators of experiences who come to understand teaching by making
sense of experiences with teaching. Given that most preservice teachers’ ‘apprenticeship of observation’ have been in schools featuring a technical model of teaching, they must be put in a learning situation that ... provides teaching experiences that are innovative, creative, and thoughtful ventures, not technical ventures (Duffy, 1994, pp. 21 - 2). Teaching mindfulness and expertise may be enhanced through thoughtful, purposeful appreciation of the experiences preservice teachers have already had as students and apprentices in addition to the experiences they will gain in their education and methods courses and internship opportunities.

Literacy narratives could help bridge this divide between the experiences preservice educators had as students and apprentices of their earlier teachers, and their professional development. Preservice educators need opportunities to write about their reading and writing experiences in order to interrogate their experiences and learn from them. Despite this need for teaching preparation programs which emphasize reflection and “teaching mindfulness,” Schon (1987) warns that many universities provide a model of professional knowledge institutionally “embedded in curriculum” and arrangements for research and practice. These programs emphasize that practical competence becomes professional when inquiry is grounded in scientific knowledge (Schon, 1987, p. 8). Yet professional educators have voiced their worries about “the gap between the schools’ prevailing conception of professional knowledge and the actual competencies required of practitioners in the field” (Schon, 1987, p. 10).

Importantly, as opposed to the schools’ conception of professional competence rooted in scientific knowledge, Schon (1987) argues that artistry is “an exercise of
intelligence, a kind of knowing, though different in crucial respects from our standard model of professional knowledge ... is not inherently mysterious; it is rigorous in its own terms” (p. 13). He goes on to suggest that just as we should inquire into its manifestations, equally important are the ways in which people acquire artistry. What shaped their ideas? Who influenced their practices?

Beyond the confines of professional schools, there are “deviant traditions of education” which influence practice, including apprenticeships, coaching, and conservatories. Schon (1987) notes, 

The artistry of painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers, and designers, bears a strong family resemblance to the artistry of extraordinary lawyers, physicians, managers, and teachers. It is no accident that professionals often refer to an ‘art’ of teaching or management and use the term artist to refer to practitioners usually adept at handling situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict. (p. 16)

Learning in all forms of professional artistry and competence could be enhanced by creating conditions similar to those in conservatories or apprenticeships. Schon (1987) suggests “freedom to learn by doing in a setting relatively low in risk, with access to coaches who initiate students into the ‘traditions of the calling’ and help them, by ‘the right kind of telling,’ to see on their own behalf and in their own way what they need most to see” (p. 17).

One particular aspect in relationship to the “traditions of the calling” involves the consideration of teaching as “a calling” itself. What motivates someone to enter this highly rigorous, yet often undervalued, profession? Deciding to teach can be difficult for a person wanting to balance economic reward, intellectual challenge, and personal fulfillment on some level. Despite a variety of these conflicting factors, typical
development for new teachers (Shoemaker, 2002, p. 3) tends to follow four significant trends:

1. Preconceptions and implicit theories about teaching and learning will play a major part in a teacher's development.
2. Most teachers leave their teacher preparation program with the conviction that theory is abstract and unrelated to the realities of teaching.
3. Despite their interest and motivation to be caring teachers, most educators will become more concerned about control than about issues of teaching and learning.
4. Even if their teacher-preparation programs succeed in helping them develop reflective practices, most teachers will find their practices are incompatible with the demands of most schools.

Teachers' expectations for their profession are often met with dismay due to the difficult conditions under which most new educators practice. Along with the thrill of working in and maintaining their own classrooms, they also often meet with fatigue, frustration, and job dissatisfaction. Often new teachers do not have the time or energy to reflect on their professional situation. Wildman and Niles (1987) point out:

Expectations inherent in teacher reflection are difficult to justify, given the demands of schools, because they are counter to the world in which (a) the goals of schooling can be narrowly defined in terms of basic academic skills and achievement scores, (b) the means to obtain those goals can be clearly specified from research, and (c) the teachers can be collected in large groups to hear about the procedures they will be expedited to follow. (p.30)

As early as their intern teaching experiences, preservice educators face one of two settings for teacher training: large group lectures, either with the other intern teachers or with the staff of the school with whom they are working, or isolated
conversations with their mentor teachers, or with themselves, often involving reflective journaling. Some small-group clusters do exist, but these meetings are often “add-ons” and do not reflect the settings where interns spend the majority of their time.

Key Concepts and Issues This Study Addresses

In the past thirty years, much attention has been given to the idea of metacognition (Brown, 1980), metalinguistic awareness or metalanguage (Yaden & Templeton, 1986), and reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933). Donald Schon (1983, 1987) provides a framework for reflective practice that addresses cognitive and organizational barriers but distinctly illuminates the practice of reflectivity. Schon’s principles (1983,1987) describe the process that for educators, move theory to action. Schon (1987) defines reflection as knowing-in-action, and explains, “When the practitioner reflects-in-action in a case he[she] perceives is unique, paying attention to phenomena and surfacing his intuitive understanding of them, his [her] experimenting is at once exploratory, move testing, and hypothesis testing” (pg. 72). Within teacher preparation programs, historically the goals of creating reflective teachers have not concentrated on changing teacher behaviors; instead, student teachers have been encouraged to become more aware of themselves and their environments in an attempt to “change their perceptions of what is possible” (Zeichner and Liston, 1987, p. 25).

Wedman and Martin (1986) advocate the use of reflective journal writing to provide a means of reflection within terms of meaningful practice. “The process of writing serves as the technology for developing reflectivity” (Wedman & Martin, 1986,
Zeichner and Liston (1987) advocate the use of journals as a means for providing student teachers with a vehicle for systematic reflection on their development as teachers, and helps focus instructors on how their actions and work in the classroom connect. Yinger and Clark (1981) argue journaling helps novice teachers identify what they know, feel, and do, and helps them distinguish why they make the choices they do. Many scholars, including Clark and Medina (2000), have done research on narrative and reflection in relationship to teacher education and professional development “as a means to explore different ways of knowing about the work of teaching and learning” (pg. 65; Brunner, 1994; Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Elbaz, 1992; Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

Others in the field of composition and English studies helped define the genre of literacy narratives (Eldred, 1991; Eldred & Mortensen, 1992; Soliday, 1994) and “claimed a place for narrative as a unique vehicle for conveying theory and practice about teaching” (Trimmer, 1997). Educators and researchers have written about how “analyzing or interrogating narratives” that teachers tell in their literacy narratives can help new teachers overcome “long-held and overly simplistic belief structures” about what a teacher “should be” and what a classroom should “look like” (Alsup, 2006, p. 54; Bullough and Stokes, 1994; Knowles & Hold-Reynolds, 1991; Tillema, 1998). Reflectiveness gained through the experience of writing, sharing, and interrogating personal narratives can lead to enhanced “cultural literacy” (Bowers, 1984) by helping student teachers become more aware of themselves in their past and present environments, and will lead to greater benefits for the teacher and students alike.
The Literacy Narrative

The Literacy Narrative has been used in college-level reading and writing classrooms for many years. As early as the middle of the 20th century, students were engaged in the activity of reading literacy narratives as a means to develop and interpret their own reading and writing histories. J. Blake Scott (1997) suggests literacy is defined as “social meaning-making through language.” This definition assumes literacy is dependent upon context and is socially constructed and enacted. The literacy narrative can be defined as a history or accumulation of literacy (Scott, 1997). Used within both literature and composition classrooms, literacy narratives can uncover and describe students’ meaningful language experiences with their peers, with their families, and at various community sites, including their schools.

The purpose of the narrative is to reacquaint students with memories of their reading and writing histories. By including literacy narratives in composition and teaching methods classrooms, students and preservice teachers can together reflect upon the shaping influences in their literacy and look for trends in their reading and writing histories. At the most basic level, a literacy narrative is a personal story about a writer’s experiences with reading and writing. By examining these stories, students and teachers may arrive at their own definitions of literacy; in doing so, they will discover gaps in their language histories, and determine the need for new means and modes for expression. Literacy narratives can provide a wealth of reflective learning for all students in their reading, writing, and teaching lives.
Literacy Narratives as Composition Production

Writing is recursive; writers learn much about where they are going when they consider from where they have come. Sara Kajder (2006) suggests, “Literacy narratives invite students’ own stories and experiences into the classroom, providing a writing space meant for the exploration of what student writers think, read, understand, and know about their own skills and experiences” (15). As “acts of self definition,” literacy narratives become a place for students to “explore, challenge, and ultimately act on what [they] know, but first [they] have to discover what it is that [they] have to say” (15). Caleb Corkery (2005) alleges, “Awareness of the choices one has made as a communicator in the past can help a student see the potential advantage in making other choices and still call them one’s own” (50). Since students are in control of turning over this or that piece of evidence, yet still allowing for privacy in sharing only selective memories, “the portrait is, of course, in their hands. How they position themselves in relation to the literacies taught in school is up to them” (50). Importantly, the choices students make in defining their memories which surface in their literacy narratives begin the process of reflection which can be instrumental in their development as readers and writers.

A student may use this assignment to “revise and strengthen one’s student identity; likewise, literacy narratives can offer students a chance to adjust their self-images to place themselves comfortably within their new academic community” (Corkery, 2005, p.51). Any and all of these strategies afford students choice and encourage them to consider their weaknesses while informing themselves and others
about what they need. Paulo Friere (1984) warns against the “banking concept” in
education. In this model, teacher-controlled narration in classrooms can promote
passivity in students. By producing literacy narratives themselves, students resist the
banking concept and participate in composition production which can be shared with
other students.

Students may also find themselves challenging dominant ideologies of cultural
literacy (Eldred & Mortensen 1992). Possible frames for the literacy narrative used
within the composition classroom could include 1) A narrative that re-tells or analyzes
an important incident, experience, or person that was vital to a student’s development
as a reader, writer, or thinker or 2) A narrative which follows students reading selected
narratives, then responding to their reading by composing their own narratives. The
literacy narrative becomes an assignment students can use to celebrate their favorite
books and stories, their influential teachers, and their familial histories; they are
encouraged to share significant reading and writing experiences they may have had at
home, perhaps ones which no one has asked about in the past. Students may draw on
critical or liberatory pedagogy identified by Mary Louise Pratt’s (1991) concepts of the
“contact zone” but may also discover intersections of home, school, peers and
community are not always places of conflict, but of comfort. Both discoveries can be
helpful to students in their new academic environment. When teachers and students
examine their histories within the classroom, they create a bridge which they can cross
together: one which will carry them to new texts, new technologies, and new ideas.
The scholarship which surrounds the use of the literacy narrative in composition classrooms is vast. It has been shown to be an effective tool for students to explore their reading and writing identities and reevaluate the literacy experiences which have shaped their academic identities. Less research is available concerning using literacy narratives in teaching methods classrooms. My project considers the implications of using the assignment in English education classrooms and thoughtful consideration of what that assignment reveals in small group discussion.

**Literacy Narratives as Tools in Teaching Methods Classes**

Using the literacy narrative in the teaching methods classroom opens up even wider possibilities for effective use of the assignment. Madeline R. Grumet (1988) writes, “As we study the forms of our own experience, not only are we searching for evidence of the external forces that have diminished us; we are also recovering our own possibilities. We work to remember, imagine, and realize ways of knowing and being that can span the chasm presently separating our public and private worlds.” Parker and FitzGibbon (1986-87) suggest that in the past, autobiographical writing was often used in teacher education courses as a way to identify the concerns of preservice teachers so as to bring these concerns forward that they might better be addressed.

More recently, life histories of teachers have come to be recognized as grounded experience for knowledge of teaching (Alvine 2001) and are seen as a way for prospective teachers to increase their teaching knowledge base. Rosenthal (1991) asked preservice science teachers to write their science autobiographies, their personal
histories of learning science, and to document the ways they have connected with
science. Pereira-Mendoza (1988) asked his preservice math teachers to do the same,
but with their own content area. Danielson (1989) asked her preservice language arts
teachers to write literacy autobiographies, focusing on their own learning in reading and
writing, as a means of understanding language learning and its nature. Amy S. Johnson
(2008) tackles critical issues in her article examining agency in preservice teaching
narratives. She suggests,

Teachers’ personal narratives offer a unique context for apprehending teachers’ experiences and knowledge . . . Such moral reflection is
imperative for teachers to understand not only the moral values that
frame their pedagogical judgments, but also their roles as social and
moral actors within the classroom. Literacy storytelling is one vehicle
that can be used for moral reflection. (p.132)

Preservice teachers must adapt to an abrupt change in the power structure: one
day they are students -- reading, writing and responding to an instructor; the next, they
stand in front of their own classrooms facing questions concerning what should be
taught and in what manner? Teacher educators must ask themselves and their student
teachers, how will one’s literacy history shape the choices he or she will make in one’s
future classrooms?

Literacy narratives can help answer these questions. In her examination of
teachers’ literacy stories, Johnson (2008) shares that “Undoubtedly, teachers’ personal
narratives can perform important work for teacher educators and educational
researchers alike in understanding who teachers are, what they consider to be
important, why they teach the way they do, and how they conceptualize their
classrooms, curriculum, and students’ lives” (123). Based on an earlier study by
Zeichner (2003), an effective teacher is one committed to equity and social justice; he
or she sees potential in every student, and believes that he or she is responsible for
making a difference in his or her students’ learning. In her study of preservice
teachers, Johnson (2008) found that most told stories about their literacy to uncover
how they felt they should have learned literacy (126). No matter what content is
revealed in literacy narratives, the simple fact that these stories are the ones first
remembered and now recorded, indicate their importance to the preservice teacher
who has selected them for publication. The material which surfaces in these literacy
narratives provides the substance for reflective thinking in these preservice educators.

Chapter two has reviewed the wealth of scholarship surrounding the wide use of
literacy narratives in composition classrooms, and the lesser yet still impressive
management of literacy narratives in teaching methods classrooms. Current practice
involved in training teachers is facing increased scrutiny. By accepting the challenge to
reevaluate our current pedagogy surrounding English teacher education and in our
attempts to more fully understand the ways and means needed to train expert teachers,
teacher educators recognize reflective thinking is an important concept to underscore
and more fully develop in our English Language Arts education classes. How to use
literacy narratives as a vehicle for mining preservice educators’ literacy histories in an
attempt to bring their preconceptions, ideologies, beliefs, and ideas surrounding their
teaching identities to the surface, and it becomes the focus for chapter three. In it, I will
share the methodology for my data collection and introduce the six preservice educators who participated in my dissertation study.
CHAPTER III

FROM THE INSIDE OUT:
PROJECT METHODOLOGY AND STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Arriving to Teach without Unpacking Their Bags

English Language Arts (ELA) preservice teachers take multiple methods classes in both the Education and English Departments during their teacher education programs in English Language Arts, yet these courses typically do little to weave autobiographical teaching narratives into teacher preparation programs. Alsup (2006) writes, "‘Teacher training’ is usually focused on the future students of the preservice teacher, not on the development of the teacher him-or herself" (xv). Instead, ELA pre-service teachers learn a great deal about the history of the profession, past and present ideologies regarding teaching ELA, assessment techniques and classroom management. Methods, pedagogy, or education courses focus on acquisition of discrete knowledge (Alsup, 2006, p. 25). This historically dominant concern with technical rationality and “instrumental criteria of success” (Beyer and Zeichner, 1982; Lanier, 1982) focuses our gaze outward on teacher preparation as we “add” to the teacher by promoting ideas, behaviors, and teaching new concepts; yet, the teacher him or herself brings much to the preparation program that others cannot see and often even the preservice teacher does not appreciate or fully understand.
The Problem

In reality much of what teachers “bring” to their professional lives are the moments and memories that have shaped their belief systems. These ideas are not new; in 1975 Dan Lortie noted that teaching, “unlike other professions, is constrained by perceptions of the job with which new teachers enter the field,” and that preservice teachers come to their jobs with twelve plus years of experience interacting with and watching model teachers on a daily basis (pp. 33 - 4). Therefore, the mind is not a blank slate for preservice teachers; they come with plenty of prior knowledge. Preservice teachers enter their classes and ultimately their first jobs, with an “entire set of internal narratives” that define what a teacher is (Alsup, 2006, p. 34). Often preservice teachers expect their students will look, talk, and behave as they remember they did when they were younger (Shannon 1995). Marshall and Smith (1997) echoed this sentiment when they observed and interviewed teacher education students at a large public university. Attending these classes, education students brought with them influential internal narratives regarding their teachers, the curriculum, and even the other students in their classes (p.2). Preservice teaching students recognize people’s lives are based on competition and while they label it “problematic “ in the classroom, real-life experience positions students against each other, and students against the teacher (Shannon 1995). These conflicts follow teachers into their first classrooms:

Once preservice teachers begin their new jobs, they often find that they do not know as much as they thought they knew; however, the choice then seems to become clear. Either they must choose the way of the teacher education program, or choose the apprenticeship of observation and teach as they perceive or remember they were taught. Unfortunately, there is seldom an opportunity to build a bridge between
these two bodies of knowledge and experience. Instead the student is compelled to choose one or the other” (Alsup, 2006, p. 42).

In the field of English education, teacher educators do not have a working model of how literacy narratives can be used to provide insight into the development of practicing teachers in their first vocational experiences. Regarding the use and effectiveness of these narratives, these questions surface:

1. How does using the particular assignment of the Literacy Narrative (with the thematic focus on being educationally edifying) in a Secondary English Teaching Methods course, affect preservice teachers during their first teaching experience?

2. Is it a useful tool in the training of secondary English teachers, and if so, in what ways?

The Purpose

As noted in the introduction to this project, the literacy narrative has provided me with an insightful look into my past and present as a student and teacher of English Language Arts. I have found the same to be true for my own methods students. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to help both individual instructors and English Education faculty understand how literacy narratives can impact new teachers’ practice identified by their assumptions, beliefs, and strategies. Shannon (1995) suggests that “We read and write our lives as if they were texts and we negotiate meaning from and with those texts,” hence, those negotiated meanings make connections between our own lives and others’ (11). The literacy narrative, while widely employed as a “personal
narrative” has not been fully tapped to extract the layers of meaning it might reveal in preservice teachers’ belief systems regarding how and to what extent learners can/will function in these teachers’ future classrooms. Consequently, there is no research on the specific benefits of writing a literacy narrative within class and identifying any short or long-term effects on teaching.

**Research Questions**

When I was preparing this study, I established this set of questions to frame my research:

1. How do first year secondary English teachers who used literacy narratives during their teaching methods course describe the impact of using the narrative to reflect on the formation of their own teaching beliefs, approaches, and strategies?

2. How has the experience of using the literacy narrative in their preservice training influenced who they are and how they function as teachers in their first year of teaching? What parts of the narratives have been interrogated by the context of their current teaching practice?

**Specific and Researchable Subquestions**

A. Did the experience of writing their literacy narratives bring memories to the surface that represented things that they consciously attempted to emulate or avoid in their work with students now? If so, what are they?
B. How did the experience of discussing prior learning experiences with other preservice teachers impact the ways they now interact with their teaching colleagues?

C. How did the experience reveal their ideologies or biases and how have they impacted their thinking and actions as a teacher today?

As I noted previously, these questions were those that framed my research when I started my project. However, as I began my research, I began to sense that instead of discovering answers to my questions, new ideas were emerging from the project participants and the data they provided. This is not surprising since researchers Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note, “Qualitative research crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matters. A complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions surround the term qualitative research” (p. 2). Marshall and Rossman, Designing Qualitative Research (4th ed., 2006) suggest, “these interests take qualitative researchers into natural settings, rather than laboratories, and foster pragmatism in using multiple methods for exploring a topic. Thus, qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (p. 2). Perhaps most importantly, the authors note, qualitative research is (a) naturalistic, (b) draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants in the study, (c) focuses on context, and (d) is emergent and evolving, and (e) is fundamentally interpretive (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 2).

The overall strategies of this study focusing on individual lived experience involved collecting and analyzing the written literacy narratives of each participant, as
well as considering their written responses to reflective questions I posed before our focus group meetings. Importantly, I sought to capture the meaning in the participants’ experiences in their own words before moving into a shared setting where their conversations brought the experience into context within a larger group. Also important were elements of a case study as part of the study’s strategy. Because not only the participant’s individual experience but also his and her immersion into the English 1000 focus group was significant, the case study frame is important: “This,” suggests Marshall and Rossman, “entails immersion in the setting and rests on both the researchers and participants’ worldviews” (2006, p. 55).

A phenomenological study is such that it “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). In this case, the several individuals were living their experience as preservice English Language Arts educators, teaching within the English 1000: The Writing Process program at Western Michigan University. Yet, as Creswell writes in Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design (2nd ed., 2007, p. 62-3), “a phenomenology emphasizes the meaning of an experience for a number of individuals [but] the intent of a grounded theory study is to move beyond description to generate or discover a theory,” and in fact, this is what emerged from my study.

Strauss and Corbin (1997) write, “Participants in the study would all have experienced the process, and the development of the theory might help explain practice or provide a framework for further research. A key idea is that this theory-development does not come ‘off the shelf,’ but rather is generated or ‘grounded’ in data from
participants who have experienced the process”. Thus, Creswell suggests “grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views ... of a number of participants” (2007, p. 63; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). The concepts behind grounded theory enhanced my study from which I discovered new insights and theory surrounding the concepts of teacher reflection and the interrogation of preservice teachers’ lived experience.

Subject Recruitment

From a pool of over 100 preservice teachers who had written their literacy narratives in their teaching writing methods course, I turned to 14 adults who were currently hired to teach within the English 1000: The Writing Process program at Western Michigan University. The preservice educators were all junior and senior level undergraduates who had completed the majority of their work in their majors and minors, one of which was required to be English. All had completed English 4790: Teaching Writing in the Secondary Schools where they had written their literacy narratives, among other assignments, and were schooled in process-oriented best practices in writing instruction. These 14 students instructors participated in a rigorous hiring process which involved submitting a written portfolio including their work as scholars and provided evidence of their abilities to teach writing. They were also interviewed by Cheryl H. Almeda and Dr. Jonathan Bush, were required to obtain instructor evaluations from other departments, as well as the English Department at Western Michigan University.
The English 1000 teaching experience is an unparalleled opportunity for undergraduate education majors to receive experience teaching at the college level. English 1000 serves a population of students at WMU who are placed in this basic writing course due to a low high school grade point or a low ACT score in reading/writing or a combination of both. Students are required to pass this credit/no credit course, in order to progress to English 1050, the required freshman writing course. As part of the English 1000 teaching staff, these instructors would participate in a 40 hour orientation experience; teach two classes at one hour and 50 minutes each, per week; and attend a 90 minute mentoring session with Cheryl Almeda and the other 13 instructors each Friday afternoon. Participating in this dissertation study was not necessary for employment as an English 1000 instructor nor did it affect their status as instructors in the program. It was completely voluntary. Therefore, subject recruitment involved these stipulations:

1. These adults must be WMU students, working as teachers in the 1000-level English program. All English 1000 instructors were queried and individuals were selected based on their willingness to participate.

2. The potential participants/subjects were contacted via email about the opportunity to participate in this study and asked to respond if they were interested.

3. Subjects indicated interest in participating by returning a consent form, signed, to me.
4. Confirmation was made, orally and in writing, with the students who were participating in the study.

5. Students willing to participate in the study signed a consent form and attended a short research study orientation and consent information meeting on the campus of Western Michigan University.

Methods of Data Collection

The methods of data collection followed the cycle identified by the “data collection circle” Creswell (2007) identifies. The researcher located the site and individuals; gained access and established rapport; sampled purposefully; collected data through narratives, focus group interviews, and surveys; recorded information; and stored data. I remained alert to field issues that needed resolution.

Following the case study approach, I first collected the participants’ literacy narratives which are “first-order narratives,” wherein “individuals tell stories about themselves and their own experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p.119). Following the collection of these narratives, I set-up 2 focus groups with 3 participants in each group, for the purposes of interviewing and observing their interactions with one another. This format hosting 2 smaller focus groups allowed me “the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues as they arose in the discussion” and as a “readily understood” method, the focus groups “appear[ed] believable” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 114).

As researcher I conducted the semi-structured interviews, audiotaped the interviews, then reviewed the tapes, recording follow-up annotations and remarks.
took notes during group interviews as well as recorded conversations between members
and observed body language and issues tied to setting and the participants' level of
observable comfort and/or discomfort. Employing field notes and interview and
observational protocol, I used both open-ended and semi-structured interviews. All
interviews took place face-to-face but some written reflections were submitted via email.
On one occasion I asked students to respond to a questionnaire.

1. All participants submitted their literacy narratives.

2. After reading the narratives I requested interviews with some of the participants.

3. Participants were asked to complete short, reflective writing assignments regarding their teaching experiences. No follow up interviews occurred following their teaching semester.

4. Participants engaged in group discussion and interviews. Three focus group discussions occurred. No group discussions or interviews occurred after the end of their teaching semester.

5. All interviews and discussions took place on the campus of Western Michigan University.

6. All participants were assigned pseudonyms for publication, in order to ensure them anonymity.

7. Participants did not miss any regular activities. The discussions and interviews were separate from the regular English 1000 staff meetings and other professional activities.
**Instrumentation and Data Analysis**

The literacy narratives, originated by the students, were the primary means of instrumentation in this study. Evaluative and qualitative data were assessed in these narratives. Further instrumentation involved the reflective writing assignments, auditory tape recorders, paper, pens, and computers for the purposes of creating word documents.

Analysis began with a “detailed description of the case and its setting” (Creswell, 2007, p. 163). Along with the description of the case and the setting, I provided individual introductory descriptions to my participants regarding their educational histories and their professional goals. These details will help contextualize participants’ comments within the data gathered. With my participants’ consent, I used data-recording strategies that fit the setting” such as a tape recorder, but also employed note-taking strategies (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 152).

After introducing the setting, the participants’ and their backgrounds, and establishing the means by which data would be gathered; I began observing the participants’ interactions during focus group interviews. Recording responses to open-ended and semi-structured interview questions, I employed the “editing analysis style” as outlined in Marshall and Rossman (2006; p. 155). Within this analysis strategy, the “‘interpreter engages the text naively, without a template’, searching for segments of text to generate and illustrate categories of meaning” (qtd. in Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 155).
Importantly, this data collection and analysis went “hand in hand to build coherent interpretation” as I generated new essay questions and semi-structured interview questions by building on the responses of participants in prior interview situations within this research study (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 155). Participants contributed written responses and verbal responses to focus group interview questions throughout the study and a questionnaire was also employed.

Finally, as researcher, I adhered to the following procedure as outlined in Marshall and Rossman (2006), for analyzing data: 1) organizing the data, 2) immersion in the data, 3) generating categories and themes, 4) coding the data, 5) offering interpretations through analytic memos, 6) searching for alternative understandings, and 7) writing the report or dissertation for this study (p. 156). As noted in Marshall and Rossman (2006), “raw data have no inherent meaning,” so importantly, the researcher’s “interpretative act brings meaning to those data and displays that meaning to the reader through the written report” (p. 157). Creswell (2007) notes, that during the process of interpretation, “researchers step back and form larger meanings of what is going on in the situations or sites” (p. 154). These interpretations will generate implications for the use of this study as written in the report.

Role of the Researcher

In Designing Qualitative Research (2006), Marshall and Rossman issue researchers these three injunctions: “As researchers we (a) must examine how we represent the participants – the Other – in our work; (b) should scrutinize the “complex
interplay of our own personal biography, power and status, interactions with participants, and [the] written word; and (c) must be vigilant about the dynamics of ethics and politics in our work” (p. 5). They warn that the researcher must build flexibility into the design model and consider the concerns of context, including where and when interviews are conducted, how freely participants will feel to respond honestly and openly, and what benefits the participants may feel they have access to as a result of participating in this study.

With these concerns in mind, I understood that my presence within the context of these interviews and as a collector of data must be effectual but appropriate. I strived to avoid making the participants uncomfortable and refrained from offering “advice” or “admonishment” if and when participants shared about teaching scenarios for which I felt some level of authority or expertise. My goal as researcher in this study was to gather information about the first teaching experiences of my participants and examine how these encounters relate to the information revealed in their literacy narratives. I was not acting as a mentor, coach, or critic and was cognizant that I must build trust, maintain good relations, and consider ethical issues with sensitivity (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 78).

**Rationale / Significance for Investigation**

Experiential narratives internally held can be, without interrogation or reflection, reproduced materially as classroom pedagogies, whether they are effective or not (Schon 1983, Alsup 2006). It is important that these experiential narratives be moved from memory to paper where external consideration and evaluation can occur. In
order to meet the needs of preservice teachers and bridge the divide between the internal narratives all new teachers embody and the narratives that practically play out in their classrooms – inadvertently or with intention – critical reflection achieved through writing and sharing these literacy narratives is crucial.

Preservice teachers should be encouraged to examine their literacy histories in order to employ practical methods and/or learn which ideologies need to be celebrated and employed, which need to be changed, and/or which, ignored, in their future classrooms. Alsup (2006) confirms that insight gained by looking back can help educators move forward: “Once preservice teachers are aware of how both professional and personal discourses affect their lives, they can modify these discourses if they so choose and hence enrich their professional selves” (p. 124). Autobiography can be a site of teacher learning. It may be a useful tool for teachers to “construct” their own learning and “participate in the transformation” of learning about their profession (Florio-Ruan, 2001, p. xxix).

Before I even began the process of subject recruitment, the preservice ELA secondary educators enrolled in the teaching methods course called “English 4790: Teaching Writing in the Secondary Schools” participated in writing their literacy narratives as part of their course experience. The prompt involved a prewriting exercise titled the “Lifegraph” where students charted on a -5 to +5 scale, their reading and writing memories as associated with the very negative (down to -5) to the very positive (up to +5). Students then shared their graphs with one another and we asked to consider the follow-up prompts in reflection:
“Beyond the Lifegraph”
*Other ways to frame your literacy narrative....*

- Choose a place that represents your reading identity. Is there a particular place in your home where you like to read? Is there a public place that holds significance (library, book store, park ...)? Is there an imagined place you wish you could visit (perhaps a setting from a book you like)?

- Choose an influential text from your life. This might be a favorite children’s book, a story you just can’t forget, a book that upset you in some way...

- Choose a particular memory that involves reading or writing. You might think about a time when you were read aloud to; you might reflect on a positive/negative reading experience; you might also think of those memories you enjoy writing about.

- If you naturally enjoy writing and have a history of writing, take time to reflect on what you write. Consider which genres you use and why. How does one poem or story you have written embody your identity/personality?

*Figure 2. Life Graph Assignment*

Students were then assigned their literacy narrative essay. The prompt was as follows:

*Write a 5 – 7 page literacy narrative that re-tells and analyzes an important incident, experience, or person that was vital to your development as a reader, writer, thinker. It is important that you “show” us these significant moments and/or people in your literacy history. It is equally important that you make some sense of these memories. Be sure to tell us why and show us how these memories are significant.*

*Towards the close of your text, I’d like to see you move from reader, writer, thinker to “teacher of... readers, writers, thinkers” and consider how your own experiences may shape your future classroom. What must you read with your students? Write? Discuss? How will you empower them in ways you were not, or encourage them in ways you were?*

*Figure 3. Literacy Narrative Assignment*
The purposes of the literacy narrative assignment for the course were twofold: first, the instructors were interested in helping students mine their literacy histories to discover the people, places, discourses, and events that shaped their reading and writing identities; and second, the narrative, by moving the writers from their past experiences as students to their future as teachers of reading and writing, would help create the professional context of the course and moves students toward the learning outcomes.

Having written the literacy narrative myself, and having used it several times in the context of teaching this method’s course, I knew it offered a rich resource for students and instructors alike. In many cases, students would explicate the deeply rooted ideas about reading and writing they held, and of which they were relatively unaware. Because the literacy narratives were written before subject recruitment for this study occurred, they offer a look into the minds and development of these preservice educators at a potentially significant moment. They are students considering their future as educators, but do not yet consider themselves “teachers.” They are on the cusp of their professional careers, perhaps anxious to consider from where they have come, in order to better prepare for where they are going. Later in this chapter, I will reveal significant themes which emerged from the participants’ literacy narratives; and in chapter 4 deal explicitly with the participants’ literacy narratives, their reflective statements about them, and the data explicated from our focus group interviews.
Six Project Participants: A Lesson in Contrasts

After obtaining approval for my study from HSIRB, soliciting participants, and querying the qualified candidates, six preservice educators agreed to contribute to my study. These six students represented myriad demographics. While all were English majors, their minors were varied; two sought certification in Spanish, another math, one history, one science, and the last in speech and communication. Ranging from age 21 to 52, these men and women spent earlier days in their lives in various parts of the country but most recently, resided in West Michigan.

While their motivations behind their desire to teach in the English 1000 program varied -- some wished to gain confidence in front of the classroom before their interning semester; others hoped to solidify their decision that teaching was the right profession for their future -- all were facing the reality of a bleak Michigan economy and were seeking the English 1000 teaching experience as a way to increase their experience-levels and improve their resumes. In chapters 4 and 5 I will focus on the results of the study and begin to assess the theories that emerged from the data. Here, I want to commence the study by introducing each preservice educator, sharing his or her unique background and the perspectives which these educators brought to the project, and situate them as they embarked upon their first teaching experience.

My first task for these educators was to share a bit about themselves by answering some questions. It was one week before the semester began and they were finishing their orientation session for teaching English 1000; they had not yet greeted their students. Over email, I presented them following inquiry:
Within 200 words or so, introduce yourself as a “teacher.” What strengths and weaknesses do you think you’ll bring to your roles as teacher, and based on what experiences do you make those assumptions? What circumstances have shaped your ideas about how you’ll make it as a teacher?

Figure 4. Introductory Reflective Prompt

Cole: Creative Thinker and Techno Wizard

My first participant, Cole, is a young man gifted in the arts and technology. He has an effusive sense of humor which I have witnessed contribute to the classroom narrative on many occasions: he could use this to his advantage with his peers, and I anticipated, his students. Cole writes,

I can contribute my love of stories to the films of my childhood, my love of wordplay to Sondheim’s lyrics from Into the Woods, and my quippy writing to the years of reading Entertainment Weekly. In essence, my education was greatest when not being directed by a teacher. This is what I bring to the classroom: a sense of creativity, curiosity, and collaboration with ‘outside texts’... as well as a healthy amount of alliteration.

While Cole’s short introduction to himself as a teacher suggests he was most fully educated “outside” of class, his literacy narrative written a few months prior, emphasized his relationship to literature and music and how a particular teacher inspired his fascination with The Wizard of Oz specifically. “Recorded onto a VHS from a television broadcast,” he writes, “our private copy of the movie was edited around the commercial breaks – making the film endearingly disjointed.” At the time he first began watching Oz, Cole was 8 and “reading, at this time, was not my forte. Home videos recorded when I was in kindergarten [and] show me struggling just reading the title of
Are you My Mother? Soon I was outfitted with glasses, and according to my mother, steadily became an active reader. Still, I did not view reading as much of a pastime, and especially not a passion.” He suggests he “comfortably lived this life for a couple years, even throwing a tantrum at a school Christmas party, when, instead of getting a NERF gun in the gift exchange, I got Ronald Morgan Goes to Bat. What kid brings a book to a gift exchange?”

It was Ms. Watts in third grade, who would move Cole into his “Oz” period of which he writes:

Each day, perched in her rocking chair surrounded by grubby little kids, she read to us a few pages form the adventures of Rinkitink in Oz. And every day, while we sat in rapt silence, listening, I would feel an unexplainable euphoric sensation course through my spine. The details of the plot, the quirkiness of the characters, and the rich vision of Oz itself painted a moving picture in my head that was undoubtedly grander than the Wizard of Oz film.

Discovering L. Frank Baum had actually written fourteen individual stories about the denizens of Oz, Cole spent the next several years trying to read all of them, “eventually borrowing copies from the library and from Ms. Watts. Along the way, I paused to absorb all of the Newberry honor books that I could, and found myself in other worlds outside of Oz: at war in Johnny Tremain, talking to animals in The Voyages of Dr. Doolittle, and sailing the high seas in Carry On, Mr. Bowditch. It was a wonderfully vicious cycle.”

This education rotation would continue for Cole, and forming another strong bond with his fourth and fifth grade teacher, Ms. Michaels, he consumed the titles she recommended: absorbing new texts he allowed himself to picture in his mind’s eye how
the characters, plot, and scenes might play out on stage. At Ms. Michaels’ leading, Cole discovered an “amazing book... called Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. My mother,” he recalls, “who can finish an Amish romance novel in a matter of days, read the book along with me, though I am confident that I beat her to the ending. Unlike Oz, I was blessed with a lack of cinematic versions of this new wizarding world, leaving my mind wide open to film my own.” Cole remembers, “I was eleven when I entered Hogwarts with Harry...and twenty by the time he ended his journey in Deathly Hallows. The series was, essentially, the only set of books that I readily read throughout high school. For every new book, and again for every new movie, I would reread Harry’s adventures and find something new to enjoy.”

Cole’s literacy narrative emphasizes the power of teachers sharing their own experiences and passions in the classroom. Ms. Watts and Ms. Michaels, readers themselves, moved away from the literary canon, and into literature that both informed and delighted a kid like Cole. For this gift, he responds, “It is a tribute to the two teachers who inspired not just my mind, but my path in life, that I would try and pass the same goodwill onto to others.” Cole writes in his literacy narrative, “I want my classroom to be driven by creativity, and I want my students to understand that their mind[s] can take them anywhere.” At this juncture in his teaching career, as Cole reflects upon whom and what influences have shaped his literacy, he positions himself for his first teaching experience.
A sixth-year senior, Hunter thrives on the academic climate of collegiate life. Always looking for a good discussion, he readily acknowledges his undergraduate experience is one he doesn’t want to rush. Like Cole, Hunter is an undergraduate secondary English education major but shares his passions with history as well. In his response to the questions regarding how he sees himself as a “teacher,” Hunter writes, “Whenever I’m asked to examine myself as a teacher I think back to the teachers I had in middle and high school – I measure my strengths and weaknesses as an aspiring teacher against their successes and failures as my former teachers.” “For example,” he goes on, “while I take notes in a history course I ask myself if I’ll be able to recall the information as eruditely and eloquently as Mr. Hinton who managed to captivate the ‘burn-outs’ as well as the over-achievers.

I measure myself against former teachers because I haven’t fully developed my teacher-self and observed how he does in the classroom.” He concedes, “It’s easy to talk a big talk and deem myself prepared to teach as I review class notes and pour over didactic texts when there are no students in sight.” In his literacy narrative, Hunter credits Mr. Johnson, his AP English teacher, with his ability to understand poetry and help him develop the skills and self-confidence to pursue his English major at WMU. He writes,

There was a time, when to me, poetry seemed like a foreign language. My teacher would place a copy of The Road Not Taken in front of me and I might as well have been attempting to read Mandarin. I did not recognize hidden meaning, I could not draw relationships between words that symbolized other things, and the idea that poem could be
interpreted in as many ways as I wanted was overwhelming and left me feeling anxious. I was an English lover who loathed poetry.

Hunter credits Mr. Johnson’s English AP course as the place it “clicked,” and where “poetry became just a collection of words arranged in a neat pattern.” In painstaking detail, Hunter recalls how Mr. Johnson put Robert Frost’s poem on the board and in a way at first typical with Hunter’s previous experiences, asked students to talk with one another about what the poem might mean. “It all sounded too familiar.” And so Hunter “turned to my table partner and nodded my head agreeing with everything she said. When it was my turn all I said was, ‘ditto.’ This was my go-to response to poetry.” But to Hunter’s surprise,

Mr. Johnson did something different at this point and at first all it did was turn poetry into something even more horrifying...[he] took the poem on the overhead and drew two lines dividing the poem into three sections. He explained how like all stories, poems are divided up into sections. ‘Divide and conquer,’ was a phrase he said countless times throughout the rest of the school year.

How Mr. Johnson inspired Hunter to break the poetry into parts for the process of interpretation is interesting but not the focus of this project; instead, it’s more fascinating to identify the effect that this exemplary teacher had on Hunter’s self-confidence and understanding of his own abilities to make sense of poetry. He writes, “It did not take that long until I really started to understand poetry. It took a lot more days of scratching my head, but compared to eleven years of being clueless about the subject, I was stunned when it only took a week of Mr. Johnson’s teaching to not only grasp the fundamentals of poetry, but to also enjoy it.” Simplifying the process in his memory, Hunter acknowledges this about Mr. Johnson:
He handed it to us one poem, one stanza, and one word at a time. If there is one thing I took away from Mr. Johnson’s class, besides an understanding [of] poetry, it is that ‘brevity is the soul of wit.’ Shakespeare probably did not know the impact he would have on a high school senior when he wrote that phrase. Brevity is also the soul of effective instruction. Difficult concepts cannot be lobbed into a classroom with gusto. They must be handed out one piece at a time until a bigger picture has been assembled.

Hunter continues to cite Mr. Johnson’s teaching prowess throughout his narrative, noting his powers of collaboration with other teachers at the high school as well as doing “something else amazing in class; he let us make our own choices.” One particular assignment involved picking one novel from a list of six or seven. “Mr. Johnson had a plethora of literature that was made up of around thirty or forty titles. He also went the extra mile and had index cards for each of his students with suggestions as to which novel they might enjoy the most.”

In reflection, Hunter interrogates this activity as evidence of Mr. Johnson’s “way of matching students to a novel with an appropriate reading level that matched their performance up to his point in the class.” He also made sure “his students were reading something with which they had a relationship...” and “gave us a choice as to how we would be evaluated on our comprehension of the novel.” Hunter notes, “This was a very liberating experience [for] a student that was used to being told exactly what to do and how to do it.”

As evidenced through his literacy narrative and pre-teaching reflection, Hunter concerns himself with the teaching models he’s had in his own education. To the prompt concerning personal strengths and weaknesses, experiences and/or circumstances which have helped shaped his professional self-image, like Cole, Hunter
credits his own teachers with having an enormous influence on his identity and his ideas concerning teaching. The same is true for my third participant, Tessa.

**Tessa: High Achiever and Motivated Competitor**

Tessa, a young woman seeking her degree in English education, sees herself as a team-player in sports, but academically notes in her reflection that it may be her independence which “gets her in too deep”; that she takes on “too many tasks ... to where I can’t say no to other people.” Her strengths include her passion to “work with youth, to help them recognize who they are and who they can become.” She writes, “I attribute my strengths, weaknesses, and motivation to be a teacher mainly to my family and the teachers I had growing up.” And again, “My teachers were amazing, always motivating me and helping me become the student I am. Because of them I loved school.” Like Cole, Tessa focuses her literacy narrative on two teachers: Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Powers. In contrast however, Mrs. Miller is a negative role-model for Tessa. Therefore, her narrative is reminiscent of Hunter’s in that she spends most of her narrative identifying the positive attributes of a single, positive teaching influence. Tessa writes,

Among the mundane hallways sat her classroom. It was at the end of the hall, the last room on the left across from the dreaded science class with Mrs. Miller who was a large woman with a voice that boomed among the hallways. Mrs. Powers was her name. She was a woman with class. Her hair was chin length and blonde, and you would have never been able to tell she was a mother of two who hardly had time for herself. She had an air about her, a confidence that was not cocky, but was approachable and yet stern because her expectations were of the highest form. Mrs. Powers seemed to be the brightest, classiest, perfect teacher I had ever met as a sixth grader.
In her literacy narrative, Tessa recalls in painstaking detail, some of the activities she remembers from Mrs. Powers’ “perfect” classroom. She spends over two pages describing the poetry notebook she remembers making – it had an “about the author” page and a “brief synopsis of their accomplishments and life. Of course,” she recalls, “my book cover was sky blue.” The poetry books were shared with parents and peers at a reception held in the morning, right before lunch. “I was eager and nervous,” but “the smell of cookies filled the classroom.” These warm memories pervade Tessa’s thoughts now about wanting to be that kind of teacher:

I am a senior in college now and I still have my book of poems from sixth grade stowed in one of my many bins full of pictures, awards, and childhood memorabilia. However, even without a bin that held my poem book I would never forget the project and time I spent in Mrs. Powers’ sixth grade language arts class. She had a knack for making the students who may not have been as advanced as some feel as though they could accomplish anything in life and then be able to turn and push the students who needed to be challenged.

Although Tessa acknowledges Mrs. Powers is “not the only teacher” she hopes to model her classroom around, “her class has played a big role” in Tessa’s decision to become a teacher.

Claire: Quiet Classmate and Consistent Academician

Claire is a twenty-one year old undergraduate who expects her transition from student to teacher will “feel easy and natural.” In her reflective writing piece, she writes, “I hope that my biggest strength in my role as a teacher will be developing creative lesson plans and projects that are not only effective, but really appealing.”

Citing various leadership roles she’s held, including high school class president, Claire
thinks she has what it takes to teach effectively, but worries she won’t be able to “bounce back” easily if a student challenges her or she feels inept. “I may have a difficult time rising above the problem and wanting to continue on through the conflict.”

Interestingly, Claire’s reflection seems rather shallow. She does not dig deep regarding memories and her imagination regarding what may or may not occur lacks detail. The same is true for her literacy narrative. Claire writes, “Most of the things I enjoy writing about are somehow related back to my own experiences. Whenever I feel a surge of emotion somewhere in my life, whether it be good or bad, I always think about how my feelings could be put into a story and into writing. I think of how a bad experience that I have had could be revised and put onto paper so that someone else could read about, and possible relate to, my feelings.” She closes her narrative with some general thoughts:

From a personal standpoint, I have had great experience with writing. From the perspective of a student, I have had a wide range of good and bad experiences with writing. If writing is able to become something that can have a more personal touch to a student, like a work of art, that student may be more willing to put his or her best effort into the work. If nothing else, the combination of choice and creative thinking on the part of the teacher has the potential to inspire something in the student.

Claire’s lack of focus and detail in her reflective statement as well as her literacy narrative suggest something important regarding her use of reflective judgment. This idea is something I will explore further in my data analysis and will discuss in chapter 5.

**Mark: Hapless Student and Promising Educator**

In stark contrast to the first four participants in this study, Mark has never viewed himself in the role of a teacher. An average to poor student in the English
education program, Mark has differentiated himself as a student with his subpar performances but also by exhibiting tremendous potential he has yet to reach. Mark moved between these two identities in the writing methods class where we first met: he slipped from sleepy undergrad who lacked the initiative to bring his best work and ideas to class to the closet intellectual who stunned the class on occasion with his rich insights and magnetic creative writing skills.

Mark is not the typical undergraduate accepted to teach within the English 1000 program. His poor track-record of meeting the expectations of both his professors and his peer group members might have omitted him from consideration, but a key faculty recommendation brought him to the attention of the English 1000 administration. Mark longed to surprise his detractors and most notably himself, his own toughest critic. Importantly, Mark represents many of the qualities of the English 1000 students he would be teaching: often times disorganized and academically unsuccessful, but like some of his students, brimming with unearthed potential. He accepted the challenge to teach in the English 1000 program and participate in my dissertation study, but acknowledges his angst in the opening paragraph of his reflective piece, which (true to form) came rushed and late to my inbox:

So first up is, 'intro. as a teacher.' Well, that one is easy enough. 'Hi. I'm Mark and I've never taught a class before in my life. Please take comfort in the fact that your children's futures are nestled safely in the palm of my inexperience.' But of course I am, at least partially, joking. While I do occasionally fret over how my inexperience might reflect itself in my work, or more importantly in my students' work. I cannot say in earnest that I am completely without confidence in my abilities.
Mark’s self-deprecating sense of humor is something he would readily exhibit throughout our project. In contrast, his ability to reflect upon his experience and his work is something with which he consistently struggled. Since Mark had “lost” the reflective prompts I had sent to the participants, he shaped his own questions and chose next to respond to a self-imposed prompt of “what do I know about myself?” “Well,” he writes,

I hate to have all of my responses take the vein [of] humorous pessimism, but I have to say that the only thing I claim with any certainty to know of myself is that I simply don’t really know myself. I’ve lived a life of stark contradictions for so long that it has become rather difficult to sift through the rubbish for a nugget of pure identity.

Mark’s desire to participate and “know himself,” comes with his self-described “desire to make something of my life for the first time...” and his yearning “to find meaning and purpose within [his] educational career.” This desire was noted in his literacy narrative as well. Titled “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” Mark chronicles his middle school years and the stark contrasts he felt between teachers who “drilled and killed” his love for literature and those who did things differently. He begins by describing Mrs. Smith. “Unfortunately,” he writes,

like many things in life, the reality of Mrs. Smith’s 6th grade English class was much different than I had hoped. Instead of the novels I desired I was thrown a large hard-cover text book with the word ‘English’ printed in large letters across the front. The book, which was easily larger than any book I had ever read, was filled to the brim with assorted short stories and butchered portions of larger works.

The light of his experience would grow even dimmer. Assigned a short story to read the first night, Mark’s hopes for scintillating discussion were dashed when in class the next day he realized, “Mrs. Smith didn’t want us to discuss the text at all. Instead
we were given a long list of plot questions designed to do little more than ensure that we had read the assigned pages.” Plot quizzes, spelling tests, and other routine busywork filled Mark’s days in Mrs. Smith’s ELA class and he acknowledges, “As my interest in the class began to fade, so did my dedication. I gave the assigned readings only a simple once-over, just enough to be able to pass the routine plot quizzes. I gave hardly any effort at all in answering the critical thinking questions as I had been aware for some time that Mrs. Smith would rarely, if ever, actually read them.”

Fortunately, for Mark, all was not lost. Despite his sixth grade experience – the “long and well-organized assault upon [his] love for reading” -- the following year he signed-up for Reading class and while he was “hesitant to fill-in the empty box next to this class, afraid of another experience like Mrs. Smith’s lesson in reading as torture...I signed up for the class with the hopes that this time would be different.” It was. Once settled into his new reading/writing experience, Mark remembers,

much to [his] surprise, the first thing I received when class began was a writing assignment ... unlike Mrs. Smith who had assigned little more than plot summaries in the way of writing assignments, my new reading teacher, Mrs. McGregor, had asked us to write our first daily journal entry. Best of all, she was allowing us to write about anything we wanted to.

Mark’s memories of Mrs. McGregor’s class involve small and large group discussions, critical questioning, and “a passion for reading [that] was slowly returning. I was again reading each assignment multiple [times], taking notes, and bringing large lists full of questions to class to ask Mrs. McGregor.”

Mark’s first two narratives are marked once again, by teaching role-models, both negative and positive influences. In contrast to the other teachers, Mark is hesitant to
see himself as a teacher and express his identity as a preservice educator. I wondered whether if, when immersed in teaching within the English 1000 program and participating in the focus group discussions, Mark’s professional identity would strengthen, and if so, in what ways.

**Kevin: Nurturing Father-Figure and Gifted Storyteller**

A study in distinct contrasts with Mark, my final project participant Kevin, recognizes his “providential and compelling influences” that helped shape the direction of his life. A nontraditional student at age 52, Kevin has a personal history which is long by comparison, and is marked by many personal and professional challenges and triumphs. Richly reflective, Kevin can “spin a yarn” for long periods of time and in most cases, his audience feels compelled to listen. In his “short” reflective writing piece – Kevin filled a single-spaced full page, while the others remained true to my request of approximately 200 words – he allows that “in spite of trying for years to be somebody other than who I really was for everyone else, in the end, I could no longer deny myself of being me. I was never meant to be in the car business as a salesman, sales manager or finance manager; I was never meant to be an Army Ranger, in law enforcement, [or] in the restaurant business,” though indeed, Kevin was employed in all of these ways. “I have been led,” he writes, “every job, every step all the way, every providential experience, every gut wrenching laugh and broken-hearted tear, to this moment. I know I know, all this sounds too dramatic, perhaps romantic; however, this is who I am – I make no apologies. I am a teacher.”
Armed with a strong teaching identity, Kevin pinpoints key developmental experiences in his literacy narrative. Growing-up in a strictly religious home, Kevin struggles to remember significant reading and writing experiences other than those tied to the Bible since there was “no listening to rock-and-roll, no playing cards, no school dances, no movies, and no reading of anything other than the Bible,” and so “I read it – the Bible that is, from cover to cover.” Surprising even himself, as a young man Kevin willingly submitted to another “legislation” stricter than his parents when he registered to attend the Baptist Bible College and School of Theology in Clarks Summit, PA. Again, there would be “no playing cards, no movies, no dancing, no rock-and-roll, no smoking, no drinking, and no secular novels!” Here however, Kevin discovered the “great Reformers” and found himself infatuated with Jonathon Edwards; so much so in fact, that he read Edwards’ entire works and began researching other works by Edwards never published. “Long story short,” Kevin writes, “I connected with Andover-Newton Theological Seminary and gained permission to study and copy most of his unpublished work. Eventually I was contacted by, and subsequently submitted my work to a team at Yale who was putting together a fifty-two volume set of Edwards’ entire life’s work... It was an exciting time for me.”

Reflecting on the experience of immersing himself in Edwards’ work, Kevin considers, “But what was really happening to me was something that I was completely unaware of at the time. At first I was caught up in the academic research of a theologian that most experts would readily admit was the greatest theologian American ever produced. As I read, the substance of what Edwards was saying began to sink in...
deeply. He was so serious. His reasoning was so sound. He was so brutally honest. He was so genuine.” Later, in reflection, Kevin sees the situation even more clearly when he writes,

What Jonathan Edwards has done for me is simply to make me aware how lives can be changed by good writing and reading experiences. It was because of Jonathan Edwards, his brilliant logic, his beautiful style of writing and his command of the English language, his profoundly deep subject matter based upon truth and his sense of urgency, his choice words and phrases, his ability to stand in a pulpit, read his written sermons and move people to deeply consider great and noble things... that gave me the freedom to read ... *East of Eden*.

And with that, Kevin discovers Steinbeck who he credits as the “greatest writer who ever lived” and one whom would make a significant impact on Kevin as reader, writer, and thinker.

What strikes a chord in Kevin’s literary narrative is not the detailed description of each of his self-acknowledged important experiences, but more the sum of its parts and his ability to reflect and make sense of a variety of encounters. Kevin, at twice the age of the other project participants and having held-down an assortment of jobs and participating in multiple relationships, appears to have a reflective perspective which some of the others may not. This understanding compels me to consider the two major themes which seems to be emerging from my data: first, the positive and negative teaching role models and their effect on the teaching practices and the identities of these preservice educators, and second, how these preservice educators’ identities are tied-to their varying degrees of reflective judgment as it emerges in my participants and becomes apparent in the focus group discussions.
These participants' literacy narratives and first reflective essays indicate the strong presence of embedded memories and ideas which may influence their beliefs about teaching practice and identity, long before they embark upon their first independent teaching experience. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters of this dissertation, I examine the themes which emerged from the reflective writing assignments and served as precursors to our focus group discussions which directly followed. Unraveling the ideas which surfaced prompted lively discussions and enriching information regarding teaching temperament, positive and negative classroom practice, and the high and low regard for the teaching role-models which contributed to these preservice teachers' varied identities. What materialized from these instructors' written and verbal communication reveals much about how our literacy narratives, when mined and interrogated, can inform teaching practice and identity and how sharing those narratives with one another enriches novice educators' first teaching experiences.
CHAPTER IV

UNDUE INFLUENCE: INTERROGATING THE TEACHERS WHO HAVE SHAPED US

When the student is ready, the master appears.

~Buddhist Proverb

As I suggested in previous chapters, I began my project with a set of questions I anticipated would inspire thoughtful, reflective responses in my six study participants. I was interested in how their literacy narratives would identify and reveal their interesting and complicated literacy histories and expected the focus group discussions we shared would further investigate similar themes. What happened, however, veered from my proposed plans for my project in exciting, revealing ways. Their literacy narratives did reveal a wealth of information regarding why these students chose teaching as their profession and which influences from their past were the most significant. The written reflections I assigned as follow-up activities continued to probe the themes they had revealed in their literacy narratives and by repeating their reasons as to how and why these examples were chosen for the literacy narrative assignment, my participants stepped more purposefully into reflective behavior. Importantly and somewhat surprisingly, the next activity yielded rich, and somewhat unexpected, rewards.

We met in two small groups comprised of three participants each; in them, these young professionals had the opportunity to share the themes and experiences they shared in their literacy narratives with one another. While early conversations
initiated some moments of interest and exchange, later conversations became much more authentic and offered rich opportunities for the preservice students to interrogate their narratives in light of their first teaching experience as English 1000 instructors during their first professional practicum. They began to challenge each other to more fully examine their literacy histories and the strong influences exerted upon them, making them the teachers they are today.

Two Themes Emerge:
Teaching Role Models and the Application of Teacher Knowledge

Revealed through what my participants wrote and the conversations they shared, is insightful data which hints at the reasons behind the current beliefs and practices of the preservice educators themselves, but also the similar and strikingly dissimilar experiences they shared as past English language arts students. One particularly strong theme emerged: the importance of positive and negative teaching role-models and their influences upon these teachers’ identities as preservice professionals. This idea is one I will identify and explicate in chapter 4 and conclude in chapter 5, while I share pieces of their narratives, conversations, and my thoughts about those pieces of data along with scholarship which is applicable. A second theme emerged which was not revealed as information itself, but related to the actions of remembering and comprehending, and the application of teaching knowledge: this theme I will identify and consider in chapter 5. In chapter 6, I will consider the levels of reflection indentified in these participants and offer insight regarding how and why it varies between these six preservice educators.
Three Facets of Mining Their Memories: Viewing, Describing, Reflecting

Regarding the organization of data as presented in this chapter, I find the most useful methods involve these three categories: Viewing, Describing, and Reflecting. For the purposes of identifying similarities and differences in these actions, these definitions are provided:

- **Viewing**: Participants were asked to remember and recite memories of their literacy history for purposes of identifying what was important and why it remains relevant. The first stage of the project, the literacy narrative; and the second stage, the assigned follow-up reflective essays (transmitted via email before the focus groups met for discussion); invited participants, in isolation, to view their past experiences, and write about those experiences in two stages of written narration.

- **Describing**: Following the viewing stage, participants were brought together in two focus groups, with three participants in each group. Over approximately one hour, these preservice educators were asked to share with each other, some of the information they revealed in their two narrative approaches, and begin to discuss with one another the significances of their histories by reflecting on their own and their peers’ experiences. This act of describing invited interrogation of these experiences by both the individual sharing the memory and his or her peers who listened, questioned, encouraged, and challenged the thoughts and ideas of the preservice educator who shared.
• Reflecting: At each point in the study, the project participants were asked to reflect upon the previous ideas they shared through various stages of viewing and describing, and identify if their thoughts had changed. If so, in what ways? If their beliefs about teaching and/or their teaching identities had been reinforced throughout the semester they were asked to consider why, how, and in what ways. Reflecting marked the final stage of the process: first following the experience of writing their narrative and revisiting it in their reflective essay; second, following their reflective essays and revisiting ideas in focus group discussion; and third, following their focus group discussions and revisiting ideas in the final, full group interview.

Through the efforts of viewing, describing, and reflecting, these preservice educators made attempts to understand why they chose teaching as their profession and what influences exerted implicit and explicit power upon that decision. Participants examined what teaching practices they remembered in positive and negative ways and considered which ones they would employ in their own classrooms. Since the project was completed during their first semester of teaching, participants were able to “try out” their ideas and compare theory to practice, determining what worked or did not work and how they felt about the experience.

The goals of my project – examining the ideas behind the growth and development of preservice teachers, identifying the importance of our literacy histories, and considering how reflection can become an integral facet of teaching preparation –
all were met successfully through this study. To consider these concepts at work, I will begin with Hunter, a participant whom I earlier described as a "people pleaser and history buff" and a young man fully content with collegiate life. As a student, Hunter moved into and out of the classroom with ease, often showing up a few minutes late but also eager to linger longer to participate in rich conversations involving literature and history. Hunter built much of his teaching philosophy from his own experience as a once hapless high school student "discovered" by his AP English teacher during his senior year.

**Exemplar Magister: Hunter’s Model Educator**

Group one, Hunter, Claire, and Cole met regularly for lunch and almost immediately developed a camaraderie that involved a lot of laughter. All three had written about significant teaching role-models in their literacy narratives. Hunter’s was Mr. Johnson, his AP English teacher who invited him to dissect poetry into smaller pieces, making it more palatable and inspiring careful attention to detail. “Divide and conquer,” was a phrase Mr. Johnson used which Hunter remembered vividly; also a history major, it appears Hunter picked-up on many of Mr. Johnson’s favorite historical allusions. A major impression Mr. Johnson made on Hunter’s impressions of good teaching, involved his connections he made to other classes.

When the AP English students discussed metaphor and symbolism, Mr. Johnson also referenced archetypes from psychology class. Hunter found common themes in biology and economics, geometry and anatomy. He writes, “The multiple perspectives
on one concept were beneficial to me. If one teacher was vague with an idea or spoke in a language too advanced another teacher would say it in a different way. It also validated what I was being taught by showing how one idea or concept was relevant to multiple areas of study.” Of collaboration, Hunter writes that he’s learned about it in different subject areas, but “Mr. Johnson’s class was the first time I saw it in action. I started thinking about other areas where collaboration would be beneficial to students and came to the conclusion that my two favorite subjects, English and History, go well together.”

For their first reflective essay, a short piece I asked students to write before we met for our lunch meeting, I wrote this prompt:

| #1. One consistent feature in each of your literacy narratives was the presence and importance of at least one “favorite” teacher. Why do you think that teacher’s influence was so important to you during that season of your academic life? How has remembering his/her influence affected your planning for, and teaching of, English 1000? |

Figure 5. First Reflective Prompt

In his reflective essay #1, Hunter takes a step back from Mr. Johnson’s teaching practice, and considers the man as a significant figure within the school as a whole. “He was somewhat of a legend in my high school,” Hunter writes, “he had painted ‘Abandon hope all ye who enter here’ from Dante’s Inferno above his classroom door.” Hunter begins to describe in detail, Mr. Johnson’s physical features – “short and hobbit-like...
wispy grey hair... sweater vests, argyle socks, and snappy red suspenders ... the perfect scholarly English teacher.”

One may couple Mr. Johnson’s quirky style with Hunter’s memory of barely slipping into class as an “outsider,” and this teacher takes on a larger-than-life presence in his student’s memory: “His fairytale like appearance and reputation coupled with the actuality that he solely taught AP gave me little hope of being admitted into his class.” But with a little help from a guidance counselor who liked Hunter’s older brother, he was. This meant, “I was going to be in the company of twenty-ish AP students that had been clawing their way to the top of the academic food chain since sixth grade ... the feeling of being completely out of my element is one of the main reasons his class sticks in my head.” Yet to his surprise, “Mr. Johnson made no distinction between me and other students. I did not experience the scholastic discrimination I expected.” Clearly, Hunter’s memories of Mr. Johnson involve Hunter’s vivid recollections of what this teacher looked like and how he operated within an advanced classroom. They also involve the adolescent angst which Hunter brought to the classroom and re-engage his memory with a time when he was elevated as a “scholar” and began to see his academic interests – English and history – take shape individually and collectively.

Lortie (1975) concludes that students’ long apprenticeship of observing teaching often leads to a number of misconceptions; one being that teaching is easy. “Like audience members watching the orchestra conductor,” students observe the “superficial trappings of teaching, but not the underlying knowledge, skills, planning,
and decision making” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p. 367). A student’s limited vantage point does not lead to the acquisition of professional knowledge which allows teachers to make choices in support of different purposes for different students, but instead “produces a tendency to imitate the most easily observed aspects of teaching” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p. 368).

In Hunter’s case, this meant that his warm, empowering memories focused on Mr. Johnson’s physical appearance, his ability to quote favorite classic texts, both fictional and historical, and his larger-than-life teaching persona. Listening to Hunter’s vivid descriptions, one begins to think of Robin William’s portrayal of the English teacher in *Dead Poets’ Society*. Munby, Russell, and Martin (2001) add that even when observing good teaching or experiencing it for oneself, one cannot easily glean a deep understanding of the complexity of the work, and that “good teaching tends to reinforce the view that teaching is effortless because the knowledge and experience supporting it are invisible to those taught” (p. 887). For Hunter, the shaky road to success in teaching leads toward greater acquisition of knowledge — by reading the classics and developing an interesting teaching persona modeled after Mr. Johnson — versus the hard work of learning to teach by employing best practices, learning methods in classroom management, and all sorts of other discreet knowledge Mr. Johnson was probably employing but remained “invisible” to his students.

These details emerged in the “viewing” stage of Hunter’s literacy narrative experience. Whether these rather superficial observations would be challenged or
interrogated in the small group discussion remained to be seen. Hunter opened-up his conversation with Cole and Claire by focusing again in Mr. Johnson's appearance and persona. He used the words "elf-look" and "legend" in the same sentence. He was "famous," Hunter explains, for his "hard reading lists," and "famous lectures." In both his reflective essay and again in conversation, Hunter shares details of a tradition Mr. Johnson encouraged, having his graduating seniors put their "hands in paint, with other 3-D materials," and marking up one wall of his classroom; in essence, leaving their legacy. On more than one occasion, a friendly custodian called Mr. Johnson over the summer when his room was to be painted, and the teacher would come in to "save" his room from being redecorated. Even the principal "had it out for him," due to her jealousy over his popularity with students. Yet, "she left; he didn't." Claire and Cole sit in rapt attention. At this first meeting, little "interrupting" goes one; the emphasis appears to be on making room to share their stories with an audience who cares.

Moving into some new territory, Hunter begins to reflect on how prepared Mr. Johnson was for class each day. His preparation seemed to take the form of a "script," yet he would alter the script for different periods of the day, recycling old jokes and preparing anecdotes which would engage students. Shortly after he begins developing this new theme in musings, Hunter senses his audience is eager to tell their own stories. He looks around and shifts in his seat and my sense is that he is searching for exactly the right words to sum-up his experience. Hunter is mentally writing the script he will now read: "Some go into teaching because they were inspired," Hunter says, "but this sets some up for failure. They choose before they know their skill set... they see it as a way
to leave their mark.” He finishes, “Most teachers choose their profession because of good teachers,” and with little discussion, Claire and Cole tacitly agree.

Darling-Bransford and Hammond (2005) write “As teachers develop a vision for what teachers do, what good teaching is, and what they hope to accomplish as a teacher, they begin to forge an identity that will guide them in their work” (p. 383). Banks (1988) argues, “Teachers are even more important that the material they use because the ways in which they present material highly influence how they are viewed by students” (p. 88). As teachers bring their own beliefs and assumptions to bear upon the classroom materials, the way they interact with those materials influences the way in which students view the materials. Hunter’s expectations of how he’ll handle the “materials” of his English and History classrooms have been heavily influenced by the personality, mannerisms, and even dress of his favorite high school teacher. In chapter 5, I will revisit how this undue influence affected his success as a novice teacher in the English 1000 program.

Hunter’s experience provided an excellent opportunity to consider how his teaching role models, most significantly his AP English teacher, influenced his teaching identity in very significant ways. Through the act of viewing his experience – by means of the literacy narrative and reflective essays – Hunter isolated some key moments, mannerisms, and attributes he positively associated with his teaching role model, Mr. Johnson. By describing these ideas to his fellow focus group participants, and by listening to their stories, Hunter began to attach value to the uniqueness of his
situation, and also consider similarities with the other successful teacher/student interaction and relationships other participants shared with their model educators. Through reflecting on his earlier school experiences and considering how those experiences affected his teaching practice within the English 1000 program, Hunter was able to interrogate his memories and the value he ascribed them in effective, revealing ways. What he learned about himself in the process will prove invaluable as he continues to shape his teaching identity.

More than Observation: Models through Relationship

Lortie (1975) acknowledges the *apprenticeship of observation*, one which encompasses more than 13,000 hours of direct contact between classroom teachers and American primary, middle and high school students before they come to a undergraduate campus, usually is marked by relationship “which has consequences for the student and thus is invested with affect” (p. 61). Good students often “take the role” of their teachers, imagining what they’re thinking, what they want, and then they perform in those ways. The vantage point, however, is limited and the participation is imaginary. Also, due to various levels of immaturity, students may ascribe poorly intentioned lessons, or insufficient planning and its disastrous results to “a bad day,” or a teacher’s “bad mood;” in other work experiences, a more seasoned observer might look specifically at the amount of planning, the technique, or the skill that went into implementing the plan or program. A student’s apprenticeship is often less about knowledge, and more about imitation; Lortie (1975) suggests, the “conditions of transfer do not favor informed criticism, attention to specifics, or explicit rules of
Another opportunity to see the process of viewing, describing and reflecting at work occurs with participants Cole and Claire who considered the teaching practices of their favorite instructors in their elementary, middle, and secondary classrooms.

Cole and Claire: Learning to Cook in the Classroom

Cole and Claire, the other two members present in our first small group discussion, spent much of their literacy narratives recalling teachers and experiences which empowered them through relationship. Claire’s memories were less vivid, but associated “favorite” teachers with creativity, organized rooms and lessons, and mutual respect shared between students and faculty. Cole was marked significantly by teachers who passed down their love for cinema and literature. In his first reflective essay Cole writes of “Ms. Watts ... Looking back, I realize the year I spent in her classroom was styled around me – or at least, styled for the person I am now.” He continues,

I developed a certain affinity for Ms. Watts. Because I found myself liking everything that she would do in class, I began to emulate her. I took her pride in MSU to heart (much to the chagrin of my family, longtime fans of U of M) and partially joined the band in fifth grade after her repeat French horn performances in class. She was an adult I could trust, and an adult who gave me both security and freedom. She challenged me creatively, and I responded enthusiastically because I wanted her approval. We were called the Sunshine Kids (on account of how ‘brilliant’ we all were) but she was the one spreading the light.

In the describing stage, once the small group had gathered and begun to share their literacy experiences with one another, Cole peppers his descriptions with humor, which is becoming a trademark to his style. “More Conan than Jay,” he says of
Ms. Watts, “more quirky than popular.” He describes how Ms. Watts “celebrated” her students and “shared her life – she was an influence then in the moment, and now on the rest of my life.” The challenge of trying to “stay unique but still relate to everyone” is one he sees taking shape in his teaching in the English 1000 classroom, just a few days into the experience. He tries to focus on her idea that “nothing you do is bad or wrong” and uses his own creative ideas to shape his assignments. Cole moves into specific teaching ideas such as using fan fiction to inspire students with “characters and situations they know.” “The style,” he says, “is easier to start. People don’t think about what’s in their lives – books in the classroom never focus on that.” When Cole talks about using clips from movies and YouTube in his English 1000 class, Hunter jumps in: “Clips are awesome!” A lively discussion of favorites and how they might be integrated, ensues. Importantly, Cole suggests, “I don’t want to teach “boring” like “those that choose not to remember their earlier years but focus on their college professors.” Leaning across the table to Claire and Hunter he asks, “Is that really what you want to do?” Shrugging and laughing, the three indicate, no, it is definitely not.

In describing, Claire’s focus shifts a bit from her “good” memories to memories of injustice and frustration. “Other teachers,” Claire asserts, “were jealous” of her English Language Arts instructor (whom she does not name). They were envious of how she “cultivated professional relationships” with her students and “helped us; letting us hang out in her room.” Claire shares that she remembers some of her bad experiences as a student, more than her good and talks about “cool projects” ruined by experiences with a teacher who “didn’t really care and the students could tell.” And those
instructors who “talked down” and “yelled” at us. She believes moments like these make up the experiences which shape preservice educators. “Before we actually practice teaching,” Claire suggests, “your memories are what you have ... and since we all have experience in a school setting some think they know how to teach.” Yet, Claire recognizes the danger is this assumption:

We all have experiences as learners not as teachers. Someone else in another field may not have any practice in the experiences [of the profession] they’re going into. But we do; we do have a way of thinking about our own experiences... I read an article recently that equated teaching to cooking. Just because you were a student doesn’t mean you know how to be a teacher; just because you know how to eat doesn’t mean you know how to cook.

Cole and Claire identify the importance of relationship in their earliest memories associated with literacy. Often, kids like Cole choose books, projects, even sports teams, in an effort to relate to, and win the approval of, a favorite teacher. It was interesting and revealing for Cole to consider why he fell in love first with The Wizard of Oz, and later Harry Potter not solely based on their literary merit, but because the teacher who introduced them was viewed so favorably by Cole. The ways they shaped the literature experience and the neat projects they crafted which tied-into Cole’s creativity, became models for his teaching identity and developing practices. They also became critical to his desire to avoid “teaching boring” by providing him a model to emulate that preceded his college professors.

By viewing their memories and describing them to members of their focus group, Cole and Claire were able to revisit the moments they remembered, but then
were asked to go deeper: to examine the how and why of what made those moments important. They were able to consider a bit of the underbelly of teaching and view, describe, and reflect upon other professional relationships affecting the teachers present in those memories. Claire, for example, thought about how the other teachers felt about her favorite teacher and for the first time, considered why they might have had those feelings. Claire also identified that many of the memories that shape her teaching identity and practice are in fact negative; this idea is one I will explore more deeply later in this project. Like Cole, Claire returns to her primary, middle, and secondary school memories to help define her role as teacher and clarify her goals in the profession; goals marked by student success and the presence of positive relationships. Their memories are enhanced, interrogated, and empowered through their sharing with one another.

**Teacher Talk: The Importance of Sharing Our Stories**

Valli (1992) reminds us that “learning to teach is just like learning anything else that is difficult, uncertain, complex, and infinitely challenging” (p. 188). When novice teachers like Cole, Claire and Hunter begin to teach, they are learning about teaching while they are learning to teach. They are constructing their own personal knowledge of teaching from a complex starting point which brings with it their prior experiences as students. Valli (1992) asserts, “For both the novice and the experienced teacher, knowledge is constructed and reconstructed over time; ideas and beliefs about teaching once held to be ‘true’ are rejected and reframed as new information becomes available and circumstances change” (p. 188).
Through their acts of viewing – on more than one occasion – and describing their experiences to one another, the preservice educators in my project speed-up the process of rejecting, confirming, and reframing their ideas about effective teaching. While on the one hand, they are in the business of “thinking on their feet” in front of their English 1000 classrooms, on the other, they are not faced with the complexity of balancing students and lesson plans while revisiting their memories in the very same moment, but instead, they sit comfortably with one another, enjoying conversation and laughing over their reflections. Some are warm and inviting; others bring discomfort. Valli (1992) writes, “In order to learn to teach, become self-conscious, and hence, speak their own truth ... the voices of these prospective teachers must be heard. Though this might seem commonsensical ... a teacher’s audience is usually herself alone, and the norms for listening to co-workers are often absent in schools. Teachers are often the silent (or silenced) ones” (pg. xxiv).

**Implicit Ideas and Preconceived Notions**

If “teacher talk” is indeed important, what conversations would fill the spaces created for preservice educators who lack much of the detailed knowledge that comes with experience? Much of what is shared is autobiographical knowledge mixed with personal experience, context, and practice. Schoonmaker (2002) identifies this as *personal knowledge*, and suggests learning activities and experiences within the preservice teaching curriculum can “bring prior experience to a conscious level” in order to facilitate examination and critique. Ideas and inclinations to respond can be drawn from personal knowledge and according to Schoonmaker (2002), “often present
themselves as ‘shoulds’: One should know how to teach; one should have a reservoir of knowledge and expertise sufficient to meet any and all demands, even as a beginner; and one should learn more from being in the classroom than from studying about the classroom” (p. 14). Britzman (1986) identifies these as cultural myths, to many of which, preservice teachers may unconsciously subscribe: “(1) Everything depends on the teacher; (2) the teacher is the expert; (3) teachers are ‘self-made’” (p. 448).

A preservice educator’s personal knowledge is constructed over years of observation and participation in the American educational system. Memories can be deeply embedded and while appearing “random” at first, students come to realize that they are no “chance memories” (Adler, 1931, 1964). Patterns within positive and negative experiences can be seen when preservice teachers expose their preconceptions about teaching. Hands-on learning, differentiated instruction, exemplary teaching practices become uncovered when the trappings of memories are peeled back to reveal core experiences. The literacy narrative offers students an opportunity to “get at” these core experiences and bring them to the surface to be examined, critiqued, deconstructed, and reconstructed in light of what they are learning in their education and methods classes about the practice of teaching in the 21st century. Some educators (Joram and Gabriele, 1998, p. 177) see these beliefs as “gatekeepers to belief change” in teacher education programs, and “call for more attention to teacher beliefs’ research” (Maxson and Sindelar, 1998, p. 7). The literacy narratives, reflective essays, and focus group conversations shared by study participants
Tessa and Mark, reflect the importance of both preservice teachers’ personal
knowledge and their teacher talk.

Mark and Tessa: Striking Contrasts with Surprising Comparisons

When focus group number two met to discuss the same reflective essay prompt
(i.e. One consistent feature in each of your literacy narratives was the presence and
importance of at least one “favorite” teacher. Why do you think that teacher’s influence
was so important to you during that season of your academic life? How has
remembering his/her influence affected your planning for, and teaching of, English
1000?) The group’s third participant, Kevin, did not attend the meeting due to a time
conflict, so Mark and Tessa were left to maintain conversation between the two of
them. Any irony that surrounded this common conversation – that two such radically
different preservice educators might meet to share a meal and tête-à-tête -- was lost on
them as they were unfamiliar with each other and their previously written narratives.

Tessa, whom I previously termed “high achiever and motivated competitor,” had
written about Mrs. Powers, her influential 6th grade English teacher who “had the ability
to make or break me while I was at such a fragile time in my life.” Mark, the “hapless
student (yet) promising educator,” wrote of Mrs. McGregor, also a middle school ELA
teacher, whose “influence was so important to me.” Perhaps they had more in common
than I previously thought?

In her reflective essay, part of the viewing process, Tessa identifies her middle
school years as “a fragile time” in her life. She writes, “I was starting a new school, a
new schedule; I had independence from my parents and my peers with my very own locker; I had new teachers, a new surrounding, and everyone knows that middle schoolers are going through the craziest phase of their life...” Mrs. Powers, she suggests, was a “personal cheerleader” for all of her work and seemed interested in all Tessa did, including her extracurricular activities and events. “What we did and what she did inside and outside of her class impacted my view of her. I was a sponge soaking up her every word and move.”

Mark’s experience with his middle school teacher, Mrs. McGregor, happened at exactly the same time: “I came to be in her class right around the time I started to discover that I really didn’t need to put any effort into school. Indeed, I had begun to take a more relaxed approach to my school work around this time, often completely blowing off assignments or doing them right before class if at all. But something about Mrs. McGregor’s class seemed different to me. Regardless of what I was doing [or not doing] in my other classes, I always made sure to do my work for her class.”

At this point in the viewing process, Tessa’s and Mark’s processes diverge conspicuously: Tessa’s essay goes on to examine, in the next 500 words, Mrs. Powers’ teaching practices for which Tessa notes, “reflecting on my reflection of an influential teacher has led me to some pretty big insights.” Mark, in distinct contrast, wraps-up his reflection in less than 100 words and only gives the equivalent of a verbal nod when asked why this teacher stands out in his memory: “Why? Well I suppose because her class was simply just more interesting than my others.” At this point, if Mark was only
asked to view his preconceptions in the narrative format, his work would be done. That Mrs. McGregor was simply “more interesting,” does little to encourage detailed discovery, close examination, or specific consideration of his preconceived notions regarding the practice of teaching. Yet when pressed for details in during the process of describing over their shared lunch, Mark begins to delve into his memories in order to clarify details for Tessa. “Well,” Mark begins (and it becomes predictable that Mark typically begins with “well” followed by several moments of silence), “Mrs. McGregor’s reading class involved small group discussion which was different than any other class I’d taken at this time. Most of the others just gave us comprehension quizzes and such. She let us sit down in small groups and talk about the book.” Mark chuckles and says,

She had one rule in class. If we were talking about something that we weren’t supposed to be taking about, in other classes my teachers would freak-out and send us out of the room or something, but Mrs. McGregor had what she called the ‘Elmo Rule’. This meant you could be talking about anything as long as you could get there in 3 jumps; kinda like talking about Elmo if we wanted, as long as we could connect it to what we were supposed to be talking about [he laughs] in three mental jumps. [If we did that] then we could continue to talk.

He finishes, “She would let us make the three mental jumps for her, and if we couldn’t than we had to go back to our group discussion and talking about the book. If we could do it, then she’d ask us, ‘What do you think about this?’”

When pressed as to why Mrs. McGregor might do something like this, Mark thinks aloud, “Probably to help us see a connection between literature and life, more often than we might realize.” Tessa jumps in, “I think maybe it’s a personal responsibility-type thing, her first introduction into she’s not going to hold your hand
through everything; she wants you to stay on task, but she wants to give you enough freedom to where you don’t feel you’re too restricted.” Mark is quick to agree with Tessa’s insights: “That,” he agrees, “sounds much more plausible.” Mark concedes he’s used the Elmo rule in his English 1000 class: “Yeah, yeah. When I’ve caught students talking about other things in my class, I’ve come up to the students and asked that what they’re talking about and how it related to what we were talking about and [he laughs] all the answers were clearly bullshit, but I think they were trying to come-up with a way to make it relevant.” With further reflection considering how the Elmo rule was one way Mrs. McGregor’s classroom energy seemed “more interesting” than the others in his middle school memory, Mark allows, “Um, yeah, I remember the teacher I had for my normal English class that year – if she caught you talking about something you weren’t supposed to – I got like a ton of detentions that year. I hated going to that class. I quit doing my work for that class.”

Other teaching practices Mark uncovers in his discussion with Tessa include the ways Mrs. McGregor edited student papers. “She would find one mistake and talk to us about it; we would find the others and revise before turning them in.” Mark continues, “I wish I could do that in my 1000 class. After seeing the grade we forget the comments.” As an encouragement, Tessa wonders aloud whether Mark can name a teaching practice that helps his students find their own voices as student-writers. He responds: “Um, well, I can’t say I’ve done anything necessarily to help my students do something as individuals. I guess I’d say I should but..."
She jumps back in: "My guess is that you’ve already done something but don’t know you’ve done it."

"Probably," Mark reluctantly agrees.

Tessa continues, "Any of the activities that’s not a cut and dry answer, you’re encouraging the student to figure out what to say and who they are. Helping them develop their own voice."

This emphasis on choice and development of the students’ self-concepts relating to their work in their English classes is a theme Tessa underscores many times during our focus group discussion. Mrs. Powers was the 6th grade teacher for whom Tessa holds very high regard. She played the “motherly role” and “supported these crazy middle school students” who were in “new environments and making new choices.” Tessa talks almost immediately about an assignment relating to poetry books Mrs. Powers used in their classroom. "A lot of what I remember involved how she taught us a specific type of poem but then we were on our own, practicing on our own. And then we could edit them together or by ourselves. We could go outside ...” She continues, "I see myself doing those things. Today [in class] we wrote about a childhood memory. I wrote mine last night and we went over it on the overhead, we talked about it together, [the] different ways to edit and revise by moving things around. It was me demonstrating for them how she did things for us."

This link between memory and practice is made very clear in this focus group discussion. What is especially interesting in Mark’s essay, which preceded the
discussion, was that he considered his memories of Mrs. McGregor in very general, non-specific ways, with almost no recognition of her teaching practices, only a general sense of warmth and regard for the feelings he carries from the class he shared with her. His viewing process was relatively undeveloped. Tessa, on the other hand, demonstrated her attention to detail within her reflective essay and continued to expand on her ideas during the process of describing her classroom experiences to Mark. Despite the different ways and means of viewing their memories in the essay, both participants gain rich insights into their teaching memories and current practices due to this process involving describing.

Valli (1992) recognizes that learning to teach is “difficult, uncertain, complex, and infinitely challenging,” and as novice teachers engage in the “phenomenon of teaching, and then explain what they are doing, as well as how and why,” they are adding to their development as professionals (p. 188). They are constructing their own personal knowledge of teaching. Valli continues, “For newcomers to the profession, the starting point from which they make sense of the complexity of classroom life typically comes from their prior experience as students (p. 188).

The literacy narrative taps into the preservice teachers’ beliefs about teaching before they experience the practice of teaching which will serve to challenge, support, or change their thinking. These challenges to preconceived expectations must be addressed for novice teachers whose sense of their professional selves is just forming. While Tessa speaks confidently and appears to be engaging in critical reflection by examining her practices in the English 1000 classroom, Mark does not. He is reluctant to
give himself credit; he remains unlikely to see his “method” at work before Tessa
chimes in with ideas for him to consider. For many teachers, “conversing,” or speaking
about their work, can be problematic for teachers. Valli (1992) contends much of the
conversing teachers do is with themselves – in the shower, while they drive, as they sit
hunched over lesson plans and papers to grade – and the “culture of teaching and the
organization of schooling both mitigate against teachers sharing with one another their
thoughts about the dilemmas of practice” (p. 189).

Teacher enactment is also an issue new educators must address. As evidenced
in their reflective essays and again in their conversation, Mark and Tessa see themselves
at very different places regarding their ability to enact. This “coming into force” can be
especially challenging to preservice teachers who may have long histories of observing
teachers, but little preparation for actually enacting their roles until they are forced to
jump into the icy waters of education. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) advise
this can be extremely challenging, as teachers are asked to do many things and once,
and for a large audience. “Developing an authoritative classroom presence,” they
assert, “good radar for watching and interpreting what many different students are
doing and feeling at each moment, and the skills for explaining, questioning, discussing,
giving feedback, constructing tasks, facilitating work, and managing the classroom – all
at once – is not simple” (p. 374).

Schon (1983) agrees that teaching is one profession for which important
information needed to make effective, professional decisions, emerges in the context of
practice. By applying what they have observed through their apprenticeship of observation, and drawing from the theories behind their teacher preparation programs, and by innovating “on the spot” in their English 1000 classrooms, Mark and Tessa are practicing three facets of their English teacher preparation program. They are engaged in various levels of enactment in their classrooms. At the same time, they are thinking and talking about what is happening while they teach. Importantly, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) suggest preservice candidates must “have opportunities to practice and reflect on teaching while enrolled in their preparation programs” (p. 375).

During the periods of their preservice training and their first years in the field, new teachers need the support and encouragement of peer teachers, and help in interpreting how to be more effective when faced with failed lessons. Studies (Cohen and Hills, 2000; Lieberman and Wood, 2003), suggest that teachers who are learning teaching strategies at a time when they can practice those strategies, and can “continue to refine with a group of colleagues in a learning community” are more able to “enact new practices effectively” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p. 375). Hints of these benefits can be seen through Tessa and Mark’s viewing, describing, and reflecting processes.

Another interesting similarity between Tessa and Mark’s middle and high school apprenticeships of observation, include their study of teaching contrasts. Both Mark and Tessa spend the majority of their literacy narratives and their first reflective essays highlighting the qualities of their favorite teachers. Yet, Tessa creates a striking contrast
with a "least favorite" instructor in her essay, and both Mark and Tessa speak of these negative role-models in their focus group conversation.

Mrs. Smith was the ELA teacher who Mark had at the same time of the same year he enjoyed reading class with Mrs. McGregor. Regarding his own teaching practice, Mark makes some connections with his past experience. Mark allows, "Um, well, for the most part I’m trying to stay away from things [in my classroom] that will bore my students. Like grammar worksheets. Mrs. Smith was all about those. There was never any discussion or anything like that. Here, Mark’s voice takes up a nasal, whiny tone. “It was always ‘read this chapter and then we’re going to take a quiz to make sure you read it.’ Lots of grammar worksheets on comma splices.” He allows, “Granted Mrs. McGregor’s reading class wasn’t geared toward those kinds of activities anyway, but I try to do a lot of small group work in my class to allow students to work together to express their thoughts. A smaller, safer type of environment vs. raising your hand and putting yourself out there to look like an idiot.”

Tessa also witnessed this study in teaching contrasts the same year of her middle school experience. “My science teacher was a really big lady who freaked me out. She was really loud. I was only four feet tall. I was intimidated.” Tessa’s comparison which appears to focus on physical features reminds me of comments made by Claire, a participant from the first focus group. When thinking through memories of her past teachers, Claire commented, “I personally have ignored appearances” but instead she
focused on her feelings about the style and personalities of the two contrasting teachers in her memory:

I'm affected just as much by bad teaching experiences as good; if not more. I think that it's a lot easier to pinpoint things you don't want to do, or a person you don't want to be. I had a teacher in high school that was really smart, obviously knew the material she was teaching.... [but] she was really mean. She didn't really care if she formed any kind of relationship with her students. People didn't want to be in her class and she knew it. She didn't care.

It was kind of strange the way that I had two different teachers -- both were really smart, but had really good project ideas, but one was getting really good responses and the other was struggling to have people even interested in what she was saying. The material was great. It's just how she was. How she talked down to people. Yelled at people. I've learned that that's not the way to get the right responses from people. Now reflecting on it, I can see the big differences in their teaching styles.

For Claire, Tessa and Mark, the styles of their teachers -- both favorites and least favorites -- have become topics for reflection. These topics have surfaced in a variety of places: in their literacy narratives, in their reflective essays, and/or finally in their conversations with one another. Regarding this ongoing process of viewing, describing, and reflecting, Mark allows, “It’s forced me to think about how I’ll be received by my students. How I reacted to my teachers and whether it was positive or negative and why and how to avoid doing things I disliked and what I should try and emulate ... I’m doing more avoiding; I should try and do more emulating.”

Tessa intercedes, “I think when I wrote the literacy narrative it subconsciously more or less got me – brought me [the details of] my subconscious to my conscious. It
made me aware of, like, the different things that made me want to be a teacher and the different things these teachers did to make me like their courses.” She continues,

And I think the biggest piece that made me think about it was the essay prompt you asked me to do. Of really thinking about how it affected my teaching and what that teacher did, like, everything about the environment and what she did that made the class do what it did. I recognize what I do that emulates what she did. I see this [teaching 1000] as my first teaching... I think it’s that bridge, that the importance of it forces you to recall what teachers did that you enjoy and that you liked and you remember more about those classes and what was good about them and it’s easier to incorporate it into your own teaching, rather than going into teaching and you didn’t think about anything that happened before but, you know, you’re thinking here and there, what good things might happen but you don’t know where they come from. I guess ...

As Tessa trails off, this time it’s Mark who picks up the conversation, “Maybe without any opportunity to practice we wrote about, I don’t know that it would have affected me.” This bridge -- from narrative to conversation, from conversation to practice and back again -- appears to be strategically linked in the viewing-describing-reflecting process. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) wrote, “what is missing from the knowledge base of teaching ... are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretive frames teachers use to understand and improves their own classroom practices” (p.2). While this approach can be highly directed or loosely open-ended, its emphasis should be on teachers’ own descriptions of the highly personal circumstances which have affected their literacy narratives – on the page and in their lives.
This narrative view is sympathetic with Schon’s (1983, 1987) notion of “giving reason” to their stories and understanding how those stories affect actions and practice. Schoonmaker (2002), in her text titled Growing Up Teaching, considers how themes, both negative and positive, follow patterns in teachers’ reflections. The majority include a teacher relationship or special notice, an honor or achievement, or a special project or event. Minor themes have surfaced including friendship or camaraderie, intervention in a difficult situation, or special responsibilities and leadership roles (pp. 23-30). Many of these themes surfaced in the literacy narratives, reflective essays, and discussions between my study group participants.

Negative personal knowledge can come to mind even more quickly than personal ones. And as Schoonmaker (200) warns, even as “adult understanding” tempers early recollections, this maturity does not erase the emotional impact of unhappy events. Common themes in negative recollections include being humiliated or diminished, suffering unjust treatment, unhappy relationships with peers, or being forced to do something “distasteful or beyond the ability” of the student, and perhaps most obvious in this study, suffering in “a bad classroom environment” (pp 32-41).

These positive and negative themes in recollections; and the examination, critique and interrogation of those themes; can contribute to a teacher’s knowledge base for teaching. Schon (1983) refers to this knowledge base as an “appreciation system” which contains “the teacher’s repertoire of theories, practices, knowledge, and values which influence how situations are defined, what is noticed, and the kinds of
questions and decisions teachers will form about particular actions” (Valli, 1992, pp. 151-2). While some of teachers’ professional knowledge is “packaged” in their teacher preparation programs — in the underlying principles, theories, projects, and condoned practices — the “bulk of [teachers’] learning comes through continuous action and reflection” (Valli, 1992, p. 152).

As evidenced so far in this chapter through the words, both written and spoken, of Hunter, Cole, Claire, Tessa, and Mark, the literacy narrative, reflective essays, and focus group discussion unequivocally lend themselves to underscoring these ideas of continuous action and reflection. In chapter 5, Kevin is re-introduced. After missing our first focus group conversation, one might guess Kevin would be “behind” in his establishing peer relationships and in his ability to contribute to group discussion; however, Kevin’s personality and his teaching talents establish his strong presence as soon as he sits down. His presence will indelibly change and enrich the group’s dynamics and add another layer to this very rich experience the study participants are sharing.
CHAPTER V

LIVING A LITERATE LIFE: EXPERIENCE AS THE TEACHER

*A single conversation with a wise man is better than ten years of study.*

~Chinese Proverb

As I suggested in chapter three when I introduced the project’s participants, Kevin played a significant role in our group dynamics. A non-traditional student at age 52, he brought a wealth of experience to his teaching and to our table. Kevin’s literacy narrative was a lengthy description of his childhood and adolescence marked by religious fundamentalism. His education moved him from private religious schools to a mid-size, urban, public system; this presented a shock to his sheltered system. In his literacy narrative he moves quickly from July 1966 (during his adolescence) when he climbed atop his roof to secretly read his first novel, O’Hara’s *My Friend Flicka*, to the mid 1970’s when he was enrolling in a small, conservative Christian college in the east. This moment brought an ironic chuckle to him, as he thought, “I was sure no one could be stricter than my parents, but there I was signing, submitting, and allowing yet another authority to legislate what I could choose to read and write. No playing cards, no movies, no dancing, no Rock-and-Roll, no smoking, no drinking, no secular novels!”

Much of the rest of Kevin’s literacy narrative considers his introduction to Jonathan Edwards, whom he (and according to Kevin, “most experts” would agree) would “readily admit was the greatest theologian America ever produced.” Kevin began to study Edward’s unpublished work and was contacted by a team at Yale who were
putting together a fifty-two volume set of Edwards’ entire life’s work. Even Edward’s
descendant, a long-removed grandson, was on the team. This experience, one so large
for such a novice scholar, was significant not for the professionalizing influence on
Kevin, but for the emotional connection he made with Edwards. He writes,

I have discovered that being a gifted writer is of secondary importance to
the subject matter. I believe a person of average ability can write truly
engaging material, especially when the subject matter is augmented by
profoundness and truth...What Jonathan Edwards has done for me is
simply to make me aware how lives can be changed by good writing and
reading experiences. It was because of Jonathan Edwards, his brilliant
logic, his beautiful style of writing and his command of the English
language, his profoundly deep subject matter based upon truth and his
sense of urgency...that gave me freedom.

Kevin’s ability to remember and reflect upon these life-changing moments
infused every conversation he shared with his peer teachers. While I knew that Kevin
had lived a life marked by various educational experiences and jobs of several sorts, his
peers teaching with him in the English 1000 program were not yet privy to his
background. He would make-up for lost time when we sat down for our second focus
group meeting.

Positive and Negative Perceptions

Prior to our sitting down together for a second time, I sent-out a prompt inviting
members to respond via. their computers. This marked a third opportunity (following
the literacy narrative and the first reflective essay) to engage in “viewing” their literacy
histories and reporting on them:
#2. Many of your essays focused on teaching strategies you found helpful or destructive as students in secondary English classes. Focusing on a particularly negative memory, briefly describe what happened, and how that experience has shaped your preparation for teaching. Next, focus on a particularly positive memory; briefly describe what happened, and how that experience has shaped your preparation for teaching.

Figure 6. Second Reflective Prompt

Focus Group I: Cole, Claire and Hunter

In the first focus group, Cole discussed contrasting teaching styles – positive and negative -- by the same teacher; this seemed interesting in and of itself. In particular, he remembered one “bad” semester when his teacher required all students to memorize Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem Paul Revere’s Ride. At that young age (13) Cole decided it was a worthless waste of time and “she failed me” because “nearly every day, time was spent memorizing and reciting the poem.” In retrospect, the wisdom and maturity gained by years of experience, Cole recognizes that his teacher was the union representative during negotiations, and this was her way of managing the class but freeing herself to do other work. Even as a middle school student, Cole says he recognized there was “no use” in memorizing it, and that it “lacked meaning, [and] purpose.” In contrast, during another semester of the same year, Cole says he really enjoyed her “big personality” and remembers fondly the “opportunities [she gave us] to respond to the subjects which we were currently studying, and ... [the] license to create whatever I dreamt of.” He credits her as “the reason I am a history minor.”
Regarding her own positive and negative recollections, Claire shared feelings of frustration in classes where she was asked to do things she didn’t understand, and epiphanies associated with “getting it” in math class. Hunter kept his group laughing over stories surrounding Dr. Bird, his 7th grade science teacher. She was “Crazy, kooky. She had fossils lying all over the place.” He shared, “Her lectures were all science stories. She would get through two questions, then the rest of her lecture was her ‘two cents’ about whatever.” As a student he reports he was “totally” aware that Dr. Bird’s class was a “waste of time.” She was “such a character. It was such a frustrating experience.” However, he allows that because the administration encouraged everyone to have an after school club, Hunter was a member of Dr. Bird’s “Horticulture Cuisine Club.” It appears all was not lost: “I did learn how to germinate.”

Focus Group II: Kevin, Tessa and Mark

In the second focus group, the tone was more serious. Making up for lost time in the first meeting, Kevin opened the discussion with a not-so-brief personal history which reiterates the main ideas of his literacy narrative and reflection, and shares his background as the son of a recovering alcoholic. It is a personal experience which has deeply affected his professional life. After his dad became sober he became a devout Baptist and moved his children from public to private schools. This came at too high a financial cost however, and after one year, Kevin was back in the public high school. He felt the experience stuck with him in many regards. Because the private school was “advanced academically and snobby,” Kevin was enrolled there in remedial math which he found “humiliating.” He recalls a teacher once told him that “Satan accomplished his
greatest work in the public schools,” and that while it was “not his fault he was from a bad environment,” he should “get used to struggling for the rest of his life – it was God’s providence.” Kevin allows that these memories convicted him that he should never “look down on students.” Surprisingly however, he discovered, “humiliation can be a good pedagogical tool”: It made him want to work harder!

Back in public school as a 9th grader, Kevin spent a good majority of his time fighting off bullies. It was an electric time – the atmosphere charged by bussing previously segregated races of kids to shared schools – and he spent most of his energy “trying to keep myself safe.” He recalls however, Mr. Hicks, his history teacher, who was “determined to make sure he didn’t forget what it meant to be a kid” and encouraged fun and memorable learning experiences. “I got an “A” in that class ... and finally figured out that I wasn’t a dummy. I wanted to please him – he was like my friend – he wasn't my ‘fishing buddy’ but he was my friend – and I wanted to do well for him.”

Ever prolific in her prose, Tessa’s reflective essay was over twice the length of Kevin’s and over three times the length of Mark’s. Tessa focused on a negative memory she ascribed to her 11th grade English class. During the first semester, this class was based mainly on reading, followed by analyzing and critically responding to the text. It was “meant to develop our critical thinking abilities and help us interpret and pick apart the text.” Yet Tessa couldn’t seem to develop any thoughts beyond “surface questions” and felt she failed at critical thinking. Secondly, she feared this teacher’s policy of
“randomly call[ing] on people to get them involved so he did not keep hearing from the same people.” While she sensed this could be a way to get students involved, she notes, “I feared going to class because I felt I would be embarrassed, and I think most students who didn’t speak struggled with the same things I did; we just didn’t know what we were doing.”

Like Cole, Tessa’s good experience came from the same class, same teacher, but during the second semester when the class took on a different focus. “We did writing workshop, but different than any other I have experienced.” The class had guidelines of how many pieces they needed to write, yet the teacher extended choices regarding genre. Students could sit in the hall, in the classroom, or go to the library, “just as long as we were writing.” “This experience,” Tessa concludes, “is where I truly began to take ownership of my writing process and connect with writing as more than just for school.” It has “shaped who I am as a teacher because I’m constantly trying to get students to take ownership of their own writing. English 1000 deals directly with this issue because it is all about students developing their own process and finding their way as a writer.”

Mark’s response is summed-up his first sentence which reads, “As I think about this question, it occurs to me that every English teacher I’ve ever had has taken one of two approaches: telling us the answers, or challenging us to find our own answers.” In direct contrast to Tessa’s experience, Mark’s satisfaction generally surfaced in his literature classes as opposed to his writing courses. As the describing process unfolds in the focus group discussion, Mark gets more specific. “As I was trying to think of positive
and negative experiences I was thinking I could classify all of the English teachers I’ve had into one of two categories: one who would stand-up in front of the classroom with a book with a bunch of answers they wanted us to learn; another who would try to get us to find our own answers.” He sees that the divide fell between literature classes vs. general English and writing classes, and allows, “I guess I couldn’t say I got much of [that] good working knowledge of grammar, etc...from cramming rules down my throat. Compared to other English classes which were more discussion [based], more trying to find answers for yourself – critical thinking – I don’t remember the other classes very clearly. No fond memories.”

Thoughtful Silences: Engaging Conversations

This conversation seems particularly important; it is testimony to the fact that every student is different and in the case of Mark and Tessa, their memories exist in distinct contrast to one another. Tessa recalls writing class and the freedom she found there developed her own writing process; it was an opportunity which allowed her “to take ownership of who [she] was as a student.” In opposition, Mark fondly remembers literature classes which focused on open-ended discussion questions. He felt silences in those classrooms actually encouraged thought and helped develop a student’s sense of responsibility for contributing to the conversation as opposed to others where “some students liked doing the worksheets, trying to get the good grade, [appreciating that] more than the actual experience.” He does allow, however, that in his own practical teaching experience unfolding in English 1000, “I’m finding it much more difficult to talk about critical thinking, to make sure it actually happens on a daily basis.”
It is here, in this moment when Mark hints he is struggling to make exciting things happen in his English 1000 class, where Kevin feels compelled to jump back in to the conversation by reflecting on his past: “There always seemed to be – those students who were the smarty pants; they didn’t seem to have any trouble. They grasped everything the teacher said. The majority of the class was like, ‘now what are we supposed to do?’ Then there were those three or four others ... I fell into that category... that didn’t get it. They didn’t swim well.” Mark and Tessa look around, wondering where Kevin is going with this. He continues,

What I discovered was, because of my poor education when I got into high school, I had difficulty still – from an academic standpoint – but if I discovered I was, if I had difficulty understanding what a teacher was saying, if I asked another student, ‘Could you please tell me what they mean. What that last concept was?’ And I’d instantly get it. I’d understand immediately. And that, um, always amazed me; [that] it worked that way. What I want to do, with teaching, is to connect with students on their level, rather than just lecture, [giving] terms, definitions, keeping in [them] in mind constantly . . . As students there are always a few left thinking, ‘What did he say?’ Leaning over whispering, ‘What did he say?’ I don’t want that to happen in my class.

Tessa enters the discussion, visibly excited about contributing, “Not speaking at their level, I find myself trying to relate...I explain something one time and then I look at their faces – blank stare – and so I find myself trying to reword myself and put it a different way, then give an example from my experiences, something of my own work, just so they can relate to it.”

Mark turns to Kevin and responds, “Well, like you were saying. When I try to explain something, I’ll give them this explanation that I’ve spent all this time preparing
and I think it’s really great. Then I’ll explain it and look at their faces. It’s clear that they
don’t get it. So I try to explain it again. Generally it doesn’t help very much.”

Tessa jumps back in, “I’ll say ‘Do you have any questions?’ and someone typically
will raise their hand and say, ‘I don’t understand that’ and I’ll say, ‘Can someone else
explain this better than I can?’” Mark looks doubtful.

Kevin proceeds carefully, “I find myself doing that constantly. I think something
we need to do immediately is ask our students, assess our classes and, um, individual
students, and see what kind of a class we have. For me, I was a kid [for] whom writing
was one continuous act of pain and frustration, but reading was fun. I would want to
know that about a kid.” He allows, “Writing was horrible. You said [Mark] that you were
having trouble teaching citations. Let me tell you about how I do minilessons in my
class. I’ve tried to assess my students and find out what they’re good at.” Kevin
continues, sharing how he’s asked students to lead various minilessons, giving them
opportunities to teach each other. “For citations (which tend to be kind of boring) I first
thought I’d just pick the smartest, but instead picked kids who were the most fun and
outgoing. They came up front to teach MLA. The rest of the class listened. It worked!
The class was laughing and learning and it was great. I think it’s really important to
assess the class right away... and work with them accordingly.” It is here that Kevin
pauses, sits back in his chair, and speaks softly but intently from his life experience:

I learned this lesson a long time ago When I went into the military at 24
years old. Most kids were 18, 19. They chose platoon leaders, went by
age, so I got chosen to be a platoon leader. Well if the whole platoon did
well -- made their bunks, kept their shoes polished, cleaned the floor ‘till
it shined like glass – the whole platoon would get a 2 or 3 day pass. [At first] I had everyone do everything. I went around and looked for the beds made the best, those that you could bounce a dime off of, perfectly tucked-in corners, and I found perfection in those beds . . . so I gave them that job.

Then I found a couple of people who were the janitors for school systems, and they loved to buff floors – gave them job. They never had to do anything else. I assessed every person, what they were really good at and that’s what they had to do. We never lost, never got beat. [You can] assess them where they’re at. Some can do minilessons on citations; others learn how to do peer editing.... Find ways to help them based on their strengths and weaknesses.

Mark’s eyes light up. He clearly understands the concepts with which he was initially struggling. As evidenced in this teacher talk, Kevin has put into practice the very idea he introduced earlier in the conversation; using his strength as a communicator, he speaks from practical experience to illustrate a difficult teaching concept. The “teachers” to which Kevin refers, come from all walks of life. And he has walked many paths; his experience is varied and rich in resources.

Making Sense of It All

After their undergraduate training in various education classes, Tessa and Mark have both learned about engaging students, using minilessons, and connecting difficult concepts to practical examples; all for the purposes of engaging students more effectively. Yet it appears their teaching methods teachers have failed to resonate in some key areas – Mark allows he doesn’t “remember much of my education classes. Just brutal quizzes [and] all the “best practice” talk meshed in with those ideas.” Valli (1992) underscores that teachers are learners, and although formalized preparation
and the “credentialing system” is important, “we often lose sight of the critical importance of learning” (p. 188) that goes on in professional practice like the sharing of ideas demonstrated in this community of educators teaching English 1000.

**Constructing, Defining, and Dispensing Knowledge**

Dewey’s (1933) notion of reflective practice places teachers within the process of acting intently and responsibly as they examine the many complex aspects of their classroom practice. As they examine their practice, they learn about themselves and their work; consequently, they construct knowledge about the practice of teaching and their profession. Teacher-learners are both “constructors” and “definers” of knowledge, as well as “dispensers” of it (Valli, 1992, p. 188). Conversing about it with one another provides a need way for making sense of it; this mechanism of explanation is crucial to teacher education.

Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) suggest that “learning how to think and act professionally is unusually difficult at the start of a teaching career” and that “book learning rather than opportunities to practice and reflect” in teaching classrooms leads to teaching ineffectiveness (p. 375). Critical to developing successful teachers, is the opportunity to practice and reflect on teaching while enrolled in their preparation programs. “New teachers need support in interpreting their experiences and expanding their repertoire,” as evidenced by the conversations shared between the participants in this study’s two focus groups. By viewing, discussing, and reflecting on their own experiences and their first practical attempts at teaching, these novice educators are
more able to enact in practice, what they are learning. This reflects the findings of Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) who suggest that “when teachers learn content-specific strategies and tools [in this case, practices applicable in reading and writing classrooms] ...they [must be] able to try [them] immediately and continue to refine [them] with a group of colleagues in a learning community [and then] they are more able to enact new practices effectively” (p. 375). Novice teachers need every opportunity to engage with one another and practice what they have heard preached. Still, even despite these advantages, sometimes new teachers fail; Hunter provides us an unwitting example.

**Mimicry vs. Modeling: Failing to Form His Own Teaching Identity**

Richardson and Placier (2001) have documented the beliefs about teaching that preservice teachers carry into their classrooms; often those beliefs consist of unexamined assumptions not yet explored. These views might focus on affective qualities (for example, caring) in their teaching role models, style, and particular relationships with specific students; yet they may not take into account social contexts, subject matter, or pedagogical knowledge. As Paine (1990) notes, from a study of five teacher education programs, preservice and beginning teachers typically bring “an enthusiastic appreciation of personality factors and an underdeveloped sense of the role on content and context” (p.20). Richardson and Placier (2000) suggest that many preconceptions in these preservice teachers are difficult to change and require “interventions” that stretch education programs in matters of time and difficulty. Yet, if these preconceptions are left uninterrogated, preservice teachers may carry
problematic beliefs into their professional teaching experiences. Hunter wrestled with this difficulty throughout his semester teaching English 1000.

As exemplified at the start of this chapter, Hunter had a strong memory of one particular teacher, Mr. Johnson, his A.P. English teacher from the 12th grade. Hunter spent most of his literacy narrative writing about the model Mr. Johnson created for him—an instructor who was bright, creative, empowering to students, ruggedly individualistic, if not a bit arrogant. Surfacing in his reflective essay and the ensuing focus group discussions, his anti-hero, Dr. Bird, was all that Mr. Johnson was not. Hunter does not mince words when he says, "If there was one teacher that wins the award for biggest time waster, it’s Dr. Bird. To me, she is the model of a bad teacher. If the downside of teacher unions needed a mascot, it would be Dr. Bird.” Despite being a member of her after school club, Hunter’s memories are almost all negative regarding Dr. Bird; for Mr. Johnson, they are in direct contrast with almost an almost perfect approval rating. Hunter also shared his high regard for Mr. Dunbar, his high school history teacher.

Hunter has been working within the teacher education program, with majors in English and history, for over 5 years. He enjoys learning and his nature is reflective and thoughtful; he shared with me that he and a high school buddy have a “Carpe Diem” club. Every so often, they touch base to challenge one another to explain how they are making the most of life. Desperate to not waste a moment, Hunter relishes the journey and at times, this fascination with sucking the marrow from life appears to threaten his reaching both his personal and professional goals.
In the second reflective essay, Hunter viewed his experiences with teaching strategies in specific ways. He writes, “A teaching strategy that I find engaging is one that places the responsibility for success in the hands of the students.” He planned to meet this expectation for success by employing “long to short essay exams” with “a controlled show-what-you-know” component would “allow students the opportunity to share their individual ways of connection with the material.” These strategies were those largely modeled for him by Mr. Johnson in the context of 12th grade A.P. English and by Mr. Dunbar, in his high school history class.

For our third reflective essay, I sent the following prompt:

3. **Before teaching this semester, what did you think your first classroom would like?** Imagine your students, their behaviors, their responses to you, your curriculum, the classroom set-up, etc... What defined your expectations of your future classroom? For example, what media, books, experiences, etc... shaped your imagination? How has your English 1000 experience resisted, challenged, or supported these imaginings?

*Figure 7. Third Reflective Prompt*

Before discussing Hunter’s response, I’d like to take a look at Claire. In her essay, Claire speaks from experience, first as a student, and second as a teacher: “In school, I was always the student that would raise their hand to respond when the awkward silence occurred when a teacher’s question went unanswered. In my English 1000 classroom, there are no such students.” She has made adjustments, “I call on them specifically or make sure that everyone must respond at some point.” All is not lost
however; Claire suggests, “I did always imagine that I would have some type of relationship with my students. Just today we had a really great class session ... [yet] this was in sharp contrast to my class session on Tuesday. Tuesday was just one of those days where no one wanted to participate or be in class. It was a difficult day, and I left very frustrated.”

In this process of viewing, Claire concedes, “I would have to say that my expectations have been defined mainly by my own experiences.” Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) note that “constructivist theories play a major role in modern theories of learning and teaching, and that they are theories of knowing – not theories of pedagogy (teaching)” (p. 369). Much research shows that individuals learn and process information (correctly and incorrectly) based on prior beliefs and personal histories, and they may fail to “remember, understand, or apply ideas” without “connections to their experience and no context for acquiring meaning” (p. 369). Particularly for novice teachers, the ideas surrounding the transmission of learning have changed; research shows that students learn through a variety of means and these are often very different than the secondary school experiences of the preservice teachers when they themselves were middle and high school students.

Hunter has had to make the necessary adjustments to increase class participation, as has Claire. He writes in his third response,

I didn’t give much thought to my seating arrangement. I figured I would let my students nest wherever they felt comfortable and adjust my staging accordingly. Seating has only recently become an issue as attendance has dwindled. Half of the students that regularly attend sit in
desks lined up along the right wall and the other half along the left, leaving a distractingly imposing no-mans-land in the center of my class.

Since Hunter’s expectations were set in high school where attendance was both required and had strong parental and student expectations at the A.P. level, Hunter was ill-prepared for college students choosing not to attend class. “As fascist and industrial as it sounds, consolidating their seating seems to have led to an increase of attentiveness and class participation. It’s almost as if they feel obligated to add to a discussion whereas before when they were spread out, it was easy for one side of the room to assume the other side would do the talking.” Choosing words like “fascist,” “industrial,” and “obligated,” smack of direct contrast to the “show what you know” approach for which Hunter hoped.

While he’s been able to increase eye-contact with many of his students, Hunter is still uneasy regarding their investment in the classroom community. “What I’ve found is that my class is a mix of – in order from largest to smallest percentage – apathetic zombies, eager to please compulsive hand-raisers, and the self-righteous militants who feel that graduating high school means they have nothing else to learn from a teacher.”

Mr. Dunbar’s exquisitely scripted, staged lessons Hunter idealized in his memory have been replaced with a more practical approach: “Whereas I used to write lesson plans like a scientist might write a controlled experiment, I now write lessons like a choose-your-own-adventure story with endings influenced by variables that take Murphy’s Law into account.”
In the act of describing his teaching practices at our focus group discussion, Hunter concedes, "I just watched that movie *Man on a Wire* and that’s how I’ve felt all semester. During orientation I was like, where’s our packet? Where are the handouts? Come the last day, I’m like, alright, I guess I’m on my own.” When asked what that did for him, Hunter responds, “Well, I have had to create a lot of my own stuff. Had to plan lessons and carry them out. But a lot of them were dependent on my students participating and having group discussions … but there are [just] four guys I can depend on. Others might shoot them down.” Hunter’s vulnerable now, opening himself up to his peer teaching group he’s come to appreciate and learn from all semester:

Every past teacher I’ve had, they’ve all warned me about that first year of teaching and how it would be crazy… I think I went into it thinking it wouldn’t be me. It’s not going to happen to me, it’s just not going to happen to me. But yes, it happened to me. It’s been really tough. It’s affected my personal life. I think I went into it thinking I was going to be the champion. But I definitely got my nose bloodied.

In an attempt to encourage Hunter, the group starts to talk for a few minutes about the successes they’ve witnessed in their English 1000 classroom. Like many first year teachers, the emotions for them run very high and very low; often these extremes are visibly different than the consistent approaches of the stoic teachers they remember from their own high school classrooms. Mark jumps in here, happy to contribute something positive: “It kind of put a smile on my face for the whole day when I had a student show-up for my office hours. I was shocked. I wasn’t expecting someone to show-up. It just kind of gave me the feeling that he cared about how class went for
him...I guess I never thought about my professors and if it bothers them that no one shows up.”

Claire offers, “It’s [this joyful feeling] been much more subtle ... but like when a student is excited about their project and stays after to talk with me about it... [and] yesterday, we used laptops, had workshop, and everybody was working ... and I was like “whoa” and it was kind of crazy. Kind of joyful.”

Cole adds, “My best days were the ones when the class as a whole went well, not something that I did... A place where I can step back and ask them to do something willingly and they do.” Hunter smiles; he clearly appreciates these gentle reminders of achievement.

The Heavy Burden of Ensuring Student Success

Preconceived notions before the semester started led some instructors to believe that the success of the class hinged solely on their classroom management and teaching style; these preservice teachers carried tremendous burdens for the success of their students. Hunter admits that after having his “nose bloodied” several times, he has really begun to notice both his shortcomings and strengths. “I didn’t think about messing up before. Now I do. Yeah, I definitely know I’m going to mess up.” In fact, now that Hunter has engaged with students who have challenged his “perfect teacher” narrative, other memories regarding Mr. Johnson and Mr. Dunbar, have begun to surface. “I remember when I went back to visit my high school teacher and he [Mr. Dunbar] made a point to show me how differently he teaches his classes. The same
lesson but totally different for first and second periods ... I hadn’t really thought about that memory until now, I just stored it away. But now, after this experience I can revisit that memory and think about what was really going on there and how the class make-up totally affects how I will teach.”

In his final reflective essay for the project, one where I asked these novice teachers to design their own kind of narrative response to reflect upon their experiences over the semester, Hunter sent a 2500+ word essay. He filled it with details regarding the highs and lows of his classroom teaching, some insights into all he expected from his English 1000 class experiences, and thoughts as to why he expected them.

A lot of these questions,” Hunter writes, “especially those asked during the participation of this study, have fleshed out much reflection regarding past teachers – some good, some bad, but all significant.” He continues, focusing again on the male role-models who have shaped him:

My reflections on Mr. Dunbar have made me a better student, teacher, and historian. I try to communicate my thoughts clearly and thoughtfully because of him . . . Where[as] Mr. Dunbar was humble and mild-mannered, Mr. Johnson was pretentious and bombastic. I never doubted either’s sincerity and competence, but Mr. Dunbar seemed genuinely interested in enlightening us whereas Mr. Johnson seemed to be feeding a fire. I find these observations significant as I discover and develop my teacher self, especially regarding the traits I wish to emulate and those I wish to repel.

In his essay, Hunter spends a good deal of time and energy writing about growing up with his dad who suffers from manic depression and with whom he’s had a stormy relationship, and about a third teacher, Mr. Hartford, who faced similar mental
health struggles as did Hunter’s father. “Maybe I made too much of the connection between Mr. Hartford’s depression and my dad’s, but hearing about Mr. Hartford [from another teacher regarding his depressive struggles] hurt just as bad as the day my mom told me my dad had to be hospitalized because it wasn’t safe for him to be alone. It was like discovering the supposedly invincible Superman was crippling by kryptonite, but he wasn’t even real – he was a character in a comic book.” Clearly for Hunter, his role-models and the fact they were falling from the very high pedestals he had crafted for them, was very, very real. That sense of the “crash” is one he has had to deal with again as he concludes his first semester of teaching in English 1000.

Despite that fact that Hunter is wrapping-up his first professional teaching experience, he speaks as one with a tremendous history. In the following comment he emphasizes the fact that he’s thought of himself as a teacher for some time: “I’ve changed a lot as a teacher over the years. I’ve wanted to be a teacher since middle school and my reasons for doing so constantly change.” Continuing, he says, “My younger self [would say] something about liking school and feeling safe... early in college I would have given some grandiose Mrs. Johnson-esque answer about shaping young minds. My answer would later have developed into something about teaching as a means to pursue justice and foster knowledge.” In closing, Hunter quotes Aldus Huxley, from his essay *Tragedy and the Whole Truth*: “Experience teaches only the teachable.” The fact that Hunter is so teachable seems to suggest that he’ll be back for more experience and most likely, he will continue to grow from it and feel more and more effective in the classroom.
With the viewing component of the final reflective exercise completed, the focus groups gather for a last time as one large community of teachers, to offer final insights into their experiences. Much of this discussion I’ll be writing about in chapter 6, but Hunter’s thoughts continue to lend relevance to this final portion of chapter 5. Here I am considering how, through his viewing, describing, and reflecting processes, Hunter revealed his tendency to depend too deeply on mimicking his favorite teaching role-models, and did not effectively establish his own teaching identity.

In contrast to some other participants who admit they were inspired to teach differently than did the poor teachers they had witnessed as students, Hunter remarks,

I definitely am the kind who is trying to emulate my good teachers but ran into a brick wall this semester. I kind of ran into a brick wall the first two months because I was trying too hard to be someone I wasn’t. So, yeah, for Mr. Johnson, Mr. Dunbar, Mr. Hartford, their teaching style worked great for them, because that’s who they were; but it doesn’t work for me, and I found it out the hard way.

In fact, he concedes, “I’m kind of waiting for the semester to end – after setting that precedent for the first 2 months [the students’] opinions are set about how the class is going to be and what my expectations were.”

Later in the course of our discussion, Hunter returns to his ideas regarding what he would do differently if he could. “I was thinking that I wish I could take my [teaching] methods classes over again. When I took those it was in the summer, with a small group... and I was always thinking about what it would look like in my class, but when I actually entered my 1000 class, my expectations just went out the window.” He admits, “It was completely different. When you’re sitting with a group of aspiring teachers,
we’re all so eager ... I just wish I could go back and take those classes knowing what I know now. I know what doesn’t work. I know what not to do.”

Through listening-in on the teacher talk shared amongst this project’s two focus group participants, rich insight is gained regarding how beliefs about teaching are formed in distinctly different ways from highly individualized situations. Both chapters 4 and 5 offered interesting insight into the influences which have shaped these six study participants. Favored and least favored teachers, parents, coaches, and peers have all played a role in the development of their teaching identities. Teaching practices have informed their thinking and motivated both mimicry and change. Particularly Hunter provides an excellent example of the charged “apprenticeship of observation” and the both subtle and overt influences it can have on the formation of teacher identity.

Importantly, the time and space to view, describe and reflect have unearthed ideas of which these preservice teachers were previously unaware. Chapter 6 attempts to unpack these study participants’ ideas concerning reflective thinking and offers a model for reflective judgment by which they can be assessed. The data explored offers an interesting view into the memories and minds of these six richly contrasting, playful, thoughtful, and creative preservice educators.
CHAPTER VI

TAKING STEPS TOWARDS REFLECTION: IDEAS THAT SHAPE OUR THINKING

There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience, and that is not learning from experience. ~Laurence J. Peter

Many of the ideas for this project are grounded in the belief that reflective thinking, a part of the critical thinking process which employs analyzing and making judgments, leads to more effective teaching. Dewey (1933) proposed that reflective thinking is persistent, active thinking that calls into question a person’s beliefs and prior knowledge and considers them by examining the grounds upon which that thinking is supported. It also examines the conclusions to which that knowledge leads. Learners can be more active in controlling their learning, and teachers more active in assessing their teaching practices, by questioning what they know and why they know it. They will discover gaps in their thinking and consider how to bridge those gaps during situations involving critical thinking, and in the space following that decision-making time, they can reflect on their processes of learning and teaching and find ways to improve their education.

King and Kitchener’s Reflective Judgment Model

The Reflective-Judgment Model (King and Kitchener, 1981, 1990, 1994) is one which considers a progression of development, occurring between childhood and adulthood, involving a person’s “process of knowing” and in ways concerning how a
person justifies his or her beliefs about problem-solving. As a young woman develops, for example, she will become better able to assess claims regarding knowledge and better prepared to defend her convictions and opinions. King and Kitchener (1994) suggest, “The ability to make reflective judgments is the ultimate outcome of this progression” (p. 13). This progression of qualities is especially important to teachers. When entering their classrooms for the first time, novice teachers are overwhelmed with new situations regarding which they must make sound judgments. The choices they make will resonate in their classrooms for years to come and will affect the teachers themselves as well as their students.

Seven smaller segments outlining the progression and development of reflective judgment can be linked in three larger stages: Smaller stages 1, 2, and 3 make up the "Pre-Reflective Thinking" Stage; stages 4 and 5 make up the "Quasi-Reflective Thinking" Stage; and Stages 6 and 7 can be called the "Reflective Thinking" Stage. Less important to this study is the idea of what happens at each of the particular seven stages, but it is more helpful to consider the larger ideas behind "Pre-Reflection," "Quasi-Reflection," and "Reflection." The following information regarding the larger divisions within King and Kitchener’s Reflective Judgment Model (1994) is useful:

- **Pre-Reflection:** Knowledge is gained by direct, personal observation or through an authority figure. It is “absolutely correct and certain” (p. 16). Teachers in this stage would emphasize a one-size-fits-all solution, not anticipating gray areas or conflicting details which might exacerbate finding a solution to the problem at hand.
• Quasi-Reflection: Knowledge claims contain “elements of uncertainty,” and the idea that some situations are truly problematic. Individuals recognize that judgments can be individualistic and idiosyncratic, leading to ambiguity as to how to solve problems. Teachers in this stage anticipate grey areas regarding problems they will face, but find themselves at a loss as to how to solve such problems.

• Reflection: Knowledge is understood as being actively constructed and that some interpretations and/or knowledge claims are more credible than others. Reasonable explanations become important. Teachers may use these criteria when assessing problems: “conceptual soundness, coherence, degree of fit with the data, meaningfulness, usefulness, and parsimony” (p. 17). Teachers in this stage anticipate problems which may come from many sources with various degrees of complication relating to the above list of criteria. They feel equipped to assess and address most problems “on the spot” and are quick to reassess their decisions after-the-fact.

Assessing Reflective Judgment: The Past and How It Shapes the Future

Assessing teachers’ reflective judgment is important for many reasons. At the training or “pre-service” stage for teachers, it becomes an essential tool in determining how teachers will handle unexpected problems which will most certainly arise in today’s classrooms. This “on-the-spot” thinking is essential to an educator’s effectiveness but it is challenging to teach. Since Dewey (1933, 1938) defined the concepts, and such teaching experts as Schon (1983, 1987) and Zeichner (1987, 2003) have continued the scholarly conversation, many teaching professionals have embraced concepts of reflective thinking and reflective judgment in their models for teacher development.
King and Kitchener's Model for Reflective Judgment (1994) is just one in a list of judgment models, and specifically draws from the work of Jean Piaget.

Piaget determined that the ways humans function intellectually is characterized by organization and adaption, and adaption occurs through joint functions of assimilation and accommodation. These abilities to assimilate and accommodate information become more defined as people age and mature; and thus, intellectual capacity increases (Piaget, 1970). Some researchers (Kohlberg, 1969; Flavell, 1963, 1971, 1977) have argued that these cognitive structures (which as they become stable are called "stages") are distinct and rather rigidly sequential. In defining their Reflective Judgment Model however, King and Kitchener (1994) would argue that a person can operate amongst many stages at one time; yet still, "longitudinal studies support the sequentaility of the ... Reflective Judgment stages," and the model provides an effective framework for describing the development of reflective judgment (King and Kitchener, 1994, pp. 22-7). Thus, the model can be extremely useful for the purposes of training new teachers. First, because preservice teachers are continually being asked to imagine what they might do in particular situations, it is important they consider their decisions regarding how they plan to act and react, and what is behind those decisions. Second, once these teachers have entered into their first teaching experiences, they will practice making judgments on-the-spot. They should understand the value of reconsidering what they have done and why they have done it; and they should consider ways they might diverge in knowledge and practice in the future.
Making the Acquisition of Reflective Thinking Valuable for Preservice Teachers

Learning to think reflectively means more than learning discreet skills; preservice teachers must be willing to consider their experiences and the assumptions they hold based on those experiences. This quality is one which will help define them as effective teachers. Berliner (2001) warns that while we often think of expertise as characteristic of a particular person, "typically [it involves] an interaction of the person and the environment in which they find themselves"; expert teachers are a sum of their parts – past and present – and are defined by the choices they make in the moment (p. 466). Despite the importance many teacher educators see in developing reflective thinking in their preservice teachers, some candidates still see time spent in developing reflective judgment as "wasted" and it is important to consider where those attitudes come from and why they exist. Detrimental to the acquisition and embodiment of reflective teaching thoughts and behaviors are what Zeichner and Liston (1987) suggest, "the still prevalent attitude[s] among student teachers that time spent on inquiry and reflection is time 'taken away from' the most important tasks of applying and demonstrating knowledge and skills" (p. 41).

In comparison to their total life experiences as students and citizens, the preparation for and the semester of the student teacher experience represents a very small portion of their "socialization" to teaching. There is little doubt, according to Feiman-Memser (1983) that students' histories, existing outside the boundaries of formal teaching programs, exert an immense influence on their temperament toward the teaching role and their attitudes about education. Zeichner and Liston (1987) warn,
“Much unlearning has to go on before most students are willing to accept the need for a more reflective approach to teaching” (p. 42).

While this study involves students’ work and reflection over a short sixteen week time period, it does demonstrate a variety of means and assignments to get students involved in the selection, identification, description, and interrogation of a variety of memories which will influence their teaching. By viewing, describing, and reflecting on their experiences, these preservice teachers begin the process of “unlearning.” As they compare and contrast their memories with one another, the preservice educators begin to assess their reading and writing histories as composing a single, individual, lived experience and begin to understand that an isolated occurrence does not speak for all students in all learning situations. In this respect, students are beginning to “unlearn” the experience and consider other ways they might have acted or reacted in that situation.

Another factor which contributes to students’ success in developing reflective teaching characteristics and considering that learning useful is one which determines how preservice teachers and their professors and supervisors are positioned in most teacher preparation programs. Often, lead teachers and education professors “require” reflective learning and seek evidence of that learning through graded assignments and teacher-led discussions. Supervisors may visit classrooms or lead seminars once-a-week at best; limited resources lead to heavy workloads and the acquisition of “less expensive” mentors.
At some universities and schools for teacher preparation, supervisors may even be graduate students who typically do not have the years of teaching experience behind them that would prove most beneficial for a novice preservice teacher. These factors serve to complicate the kinds of relationships shared between preservice teachers and mentors and may not facilitate honest reflection and a whole-hearted attempt at unlearning past experiences by opening themselves up to more challenging reflective thinking thoughts and behaviors. For the purposes of creating preservice learning opportunities and the most helpful kinds of internships for English education teaching candidates, it is important that university education programs consider how the dynamics of these relationships are best handled. What choices would facilitate the best opportunities for reflective growth?

Attributes, Experiences, and Rewards: Contributions to the Success of This Study

Because this study was grounded in the English 1000 teaching experience it held distinct and unique advantages in several spaces which contributed to these participants’ acquisition of reflective teaching ideas and practices. The six participants had all completed their teaching methods courses in literature and writing, and were well-versed in “best practices” for both. This was important in creating a collective understanding for how best practices may be different and in many ways more effective, than the teaching methods they had experienced in their middle and high school reading and writing classrooms. These beliefs grounded our conversations in shared terms and complicit understanding (if not agreement) regarding current trends and practices at work in their English 1000 classrooms.
The English 1000 instructors who participated in this study had already been interviewed and hired to teach within the program, and thus saw themselves as "selective" candidates. This may have been an important factor which contributed to their willingness to be honest about their experiences and in their regard for the contributions of all group members. In contrast, in methods classrooms and student teaching seminars, our most effective preservice teachers may be mixed in with educators who are less motivated to grow into their dispositions as reflective teachers; therefore, the sharing of ideas relating to honest assessment of teaching ideas and practices may be less robust than the ones evidenced in this study.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these assignments and conversations were not "graded" but were created as foundations for viewing, describing, and reflecting upon their experiences as individual educators, and for sharing with one another. In my role as researcher, it became obvious to me that students became more and more willing to share honestly with one another when they were sure that I was not going to "supervise" or evaluate their choices. Honest reflection was met with laughter, increased responses from other participants, and a sense of personal fulfillment by the individual who shared. The value of these exercises became intrinsically valued, in contrast with extrinsically valued grades earned in a class, or behaviors or practices produced for mentor teachers or supervisors who might be writing a recommendation or evaluating a teacher's experience in their student teaching seminar or first semester of teaching. All of these factors contributed to the rich data I was able to collect and consider over the course of this project.
This was not a project collecting quantitative data over a long period of time for a large number of people; I was most interested in the relevant data from each of the six participants regarding evidence of reflective thinking. I was not trying to establish findings or identify significant variances for example, based on gender, age, level of education, etc... I was interested, however, in each person's story and how that story was told over time, stemming from these students' initial writing of the literacy narrative; through their reflective essays, three focus group discussions, and final full-group discussion; and their final reflective essay. Any conclusions I might draw from this project is particular to these participants, and while it may generate theory, it does not test or confirm that theory.

**Identifying Trends: Generating Theory Related to Reflective Thinking**

All but one of my participants (Kevin) fell into the category of “traditional-age” college students. Barry Kroll (1992) suggests that at this age, students are abandoning “ignorant certainty” in favor of “intelligent confusion.” He reminds us that this change towards uncertainty over certainty paves the way for better reasoned, thoughtful ideas and judgments in the future. College students, especially in the majors including English and history, have learned that their questions and answers are created and chosen in context; they are not simply “given.” The same is true in their educational curricula. In most cases, preservice educators are presented with problems such as “What would you do if a student...?” Most teacher educators avoid dictating “should” statements and are more inclined to “could” statements. Those that rebuff this trend and try to tell
students (with absolute certainty) what they should do, are met with student skepticism, as one will note in their responses which follow.

Kevin, the project’s oldest participant at age 52, falls outside the norm and into the “Nontraditional-Age” college student bracket. He is an important participant for many reasons with his age being one. Many campuses are dealing with larger numbers of non-traditional students, due in part to returning military personnel, those out-of-work and looking to upgrade and enhance their skills, those longing to redefine themselves through a second or third degree, and those seeking a first degree in the vocation of their choice following years spent at home as full-time caregivers. In my personal and professional experience, I have found that many older students are drawn to the vocation of teaching for multiple reasons. It is a career which lends itself to making a difference, and in this profession, age can work to enhance the persona of a teacher by lending that person authority.

This contrasts those professions which question an older person’s relevance by labeling that mature adult as “outdated” in, for example, vocations involving new media or technology. Kevin’s age might have influenced his motivational level; older students tend to want to get the job done quickly and efficiently. He was eager to learn and saw himself as someone who needed to gain a good deal of knowledge since he has been “out of the loop” of college-level thinking for some time. As evidenced through his data, Kevin brought rich resources of knowledge based simply on life experience; he understood a great deal about human nature and students’ propensity to learn in
different ways basically because he had been “observing life” for a longer period of time than had the other five participants in this study. For many reasons relating to factors listed above, I am choosing to focus this chapter’s findings on Mark, Tessa, and Kevin by considering their levels of reflection and looking to see how those might have grown, diminished, or remained the same throughout our project.

Mark and Tessa: Apples and Oranges

Mark was the participant with the least amount of experience relating to teaching. He was a traditional college-aged student who spent the first part of his college career spinning his wheels, uncertain of what his career might be. His literacy narrative was the shortest of the group’s and while he did compare and contrast his best and worst encounters with teachers, the final section which focused on his own (intended) teaching practice was rather vague and smacks of “pie-in-the-sky” ideals. He writes in the conclusion of his essay, “One cannot choose what they will encounter during their experience of what we call life. One must take everything together, and all in stride; the good, the bad, and the ugly.” His first email response, regarding how he sees himself developing as a teacher, indicates his angst: “I have to say that the only thing I claim with any certainty to know of myself is that I simply don’t really know myself.” Yet, he writes, “I bring with me a desire to make something of my life for the first time. I bring a desire to find meaning and purpose within my educational career.” Read one way, Mark appeared ripe for reflection; another, he was feeding me a line. Neither I, nor I suspect did Mark, knew which purpose he intended.
At the first focus group discussion, Mark and Tessa talked without Kevin, who missed the meeting due to another conflict. Mark began the discussion but talked quietly. He preempted most of his comments with “um” or “well” and often allowed Tessa to finish his thoughts. His discussion surrounding the “Elmo Rule” identified previously in this paper indicated he had done some thinking before we met. What interested me is that while Mark effectively recalled the exercise of his teacher who employed the Elmo Rule, he did not consider why she might have employed that particular practice. When pressed as to why Mrs. McGregor might have used the Elmo rule, Mark hesitates and says vaguely. “Good question. Um, well, maybe she was trying to get us to find connections between literature and life, more than we might realize,” (he coughs uncomfortably).

Tessa steps in, “maybe it’s a way to promote personal responsibility...” and she continues for quite a while, adding detail to her explanation.

Mark responds, “That sounds much more plausible than mine.” He is quick to abandon ownership of the solution to this problem.

Later in the discussion, Mark talks broadly about encouraging discussion in his English 1000 classroom and reflects on wanting to avoid the practices of Mrs. Smith, the teacher embodying his negative teaching associations. He speaks of wanting to encourage students to “find their voices” in his classroom, but struggles to define how he can specifically make that happen: “Um, well, I can’t say I’ve done that yet, not
necessarily done anything to encourage that as of yet. I know that ... I should” (he laughs).

“My guess is that you’ve done it already, without knowing you’ve done it,” Tessa says encouragingly. She then goes on to provide an example involving the l-Search paper assignment where she thinks Mark has probably made room for students’ interests and ideas to come into the classroom. “Any of the activities that don’t require a cut and dry answer -- this is the right way, this is the wrong way -- allows the students to develop who they are individually.”

Tessa is considerably more willing and able, throughout our discussion, to provide examples to back-up her “larger” statements of what she’s trying to do within her classroom. When pressed for specifics, Mark shies away from contributing to the discussion, but he listens intently and seems engaged throughout the conversation. Particularly in the second half of the discussion, Mark listens more than talks; Tessa speaks more than she listens. Tessa’s control over the conversation is reminiscent of her reflective essay where she admits she is “too independent sometimes... where [she] can’t say no to other people...where she has anxiety to the point that [she] is afraid of things going wrong all of the time, which I turn leads [her] to be extremely organized and aware of the details.” She writes, “I am a great communicator, I want to know what’s going on, what’s wrong, and what can be done at all times so I am constantly asking questions, or researching.”
Tessa writes that she has had a lifelong apprenticeship of observation: “I attribute my strengths, weaknesses, and motivation to be a teacher mainly to my family and the teachers I had growing up. I have a brother who ... is a motivational speaker for youth... my parents are givers... my teachers were amazing, always motivating me and helping me become the student I am. Because of them I loved school.” This is in direct contrast with Mark who says nothing of his family, or the teaching profession, and suggests his voyage into the field of teaching will be the first opportunity to “sift through the rubbage for a nugget of pure identity.” After prompting himself with the question, “What do I know about myself?” He continues, “For years now I have been at one and the same time the scholar and the slacker; the writer and the gamer, the dutiful son and the dedicated swindler. When I get right down to it, I suppose all that I can claim to know of myself is that I want an answer to the question.”

Conversations as a Precursor to Critical Reflection

Alsup (2006) writes, “Identities occur; they are formed in social, communicative context for socially significant reasons. Through engaging in certain types of discourse during their education, preservice teachers might be able to avoid replaying the same old tapes and imitating the teachers of their youth, and might also be able to modify the often stagnant cultural model in significant ways (p. 45). Tessa’s traditional models of the “teachers” in her life being motivational, highly conversational, and positive, contrast Mark’s lack of role-models and his reluctance to engage too heavily in “teacher talk.” In his role as an English 1000 teacher, he challenges her currently-held ideology about what a teacher should be; what a teacher should look like. For Mark, Tessa
represents a peer who embodies confidence and a good deal of expertise in her teaching practice, even at such a young age. Alsup (2006) notes,

Working with peers ... is important for the students to sustain their motivation and confidence concerning themselves as teachers. Without their peers and friends as role models and points of comparison concerning educational discourse, the participants [in my study] sometimes found themselves floundering in terms of crafting their teaching identities... apparently, excited and positive models of educational discourse are important to sustaining and nurturing preservice teachers and helping them be reflective about their developing identities (p. 117).

Engaging in these focus group discussions appears to be stimulating divergent thinking in both participants. It is providing educational discourse grounded in the practical experience of teaching English 1000, a first for both participants. Schon (1983) reminds us that experience by itself is not inherently useful; it is helpful only if “it is subject to critical reflection” (Alsup, 2007, p. 87). These conversations recalling memories and sharing current teaching practice for Tessa and Mark are ideal opportunities to interrogate their ideologies and encourage reflection.

In our second reflective essay, Mark again writes of general teaching practices such as “short answer...and essay question[s],” and “teachers [who] chose the former option tend[ing] to be large fans of things such as reading comprehension quizzes...grading essays and papers heavily upon correctness of format and citation .... And bringing their red pens down upon the heads of anyone who failed to meet that standard.” This time, however, he follows up his general criticism with an example from his own practice. Mark writes, “I’ve been trying to ensure that this preference is
reflected in my planning by avoiding just telling my students the answers.” “For example,” he continues, “in my introduction of project 2 I gave my students examples of \( l \)-Searches written by other students and challenged them to define an \( l \)-Search paper for themselves based on the examples, rather than just giving them a handout with a neatly packaged definition and list of expectations.”

True to form, Tessa’s second reflective essay is long and detailed. Her memories involve specific occasions from her educational experience; she writes in length of a unit involving the novel *Lord of the Flies* and the frustration she felt regarding her teacher’s wish that his students develop a line of critical questions about the book, but offered little by way of defining exactly what a “critical question” was and how to go about defining one.

Her second, more positive response to the question is developed just as intricately. She writes a detailed account of the writing workshop she participated in as an 11\(^{th}\) grader, the two weeks it covered, the 10-15 pieces she created and the drafting process. Tessa wraps-up her essay by writing, “I have seen both of these experiences shape who I am as a teacher. The negative experience because I try not to call on students in my class out of the blue. I have created a relaxed atmosphere where I would say 13 out of my 17 students participate in class discussions on a regular basis.” She concludes, “My positive experience has shaped who I am as a teacher because I’m constantly trying to get students to take ownership of their own writing. This course has been set up in a way to allow me to fit directly my ideas and concepts of teaching in
with this course and not feel like I am having to change those to fit the course.” Tessa is clearly comfortable noting how her memories affect her teaching practice in the reflective essay, while Mark is just beginning to make those connections.

Naming, Creating, and Defining Their World

Regarding the involvement of ethnographic writing in our English Education classrooms, Alsup, Emig, Pradl, and Tremmel (2006) identify the important work of the critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970) who defined dialogue as a fundamental form of communication because it requires participation by all involved and is “created by human beings for human purposes” (Endres, 2001, p. 409). Freire’s fundamental belief is that we must have the capacity to name, create and define the world through language, and that doing so gives us each a measure of agency to change it. Shannon (1995) notes, “My ability to use negotiated meanings [from texts] in order to make sense of my life, history and culture; to make connections between my life and those of others; and to take action upon what I learn about myself and the world gives me some power and enables me to have some control over my life.” He continues, “This literacy empowers me to read and write the past, the present, and the future – it offers me freedom to explore and act” (xii, xiii). Teachers must feel they have this capacity in their classrooms. They must see their words in print and hear themselves speak in critical conversation. They will seek and discover their sense of agency through this process.
In their third reflective essay, Tessa and Mark again reveal their oppositional thinking. Tessa writes, “I always thought my classroom would be like my English classrooms in high school.”

Mark pens, “To be perfectly honest, I really wasn’t quite sure what to expect in my classroom before this experience [of teaching].”

Of their students, Tessa suggests, “I imagined that I would have a few difficult students who would resist me, but mostly I would have students who would give an effort for a grade or maybe even generally like English. I guess in my own naïve way I was expecting that all of the students would generally like me if they didn’t like English.”

Mark again provides his contrasting viewpoint when he writes, “I imagined that the group of students I would be working with would, for the most part, be students who generally allowed their school work to take a backseat to socializing and partying. As for how I expected my students to respond to me, I would say that I was a little concerned that my age would be a source of some trouble.”

Tessa had some clearly defined expectations for what her students would be like; in fact, they would be like she was in freshman English: eager to please, excellent students, hungry for high marks. Mark hadn’t really thought about his expectations until asked, and then seemingly indiscriminately, entered a guess that they would be like he was in freshman English; comfortably indifferent, haphazardly accountable, yet thirsty for relevance! Holding strikingly different expectations, both arrived at similar
conclusions when considering relatively the same set of criteria. Both participants, when pressed for evidence of how their expectations had been met, said they were somewhat surprised. Tessa clarifies, “I don’t want to say that what I envisioned has been shot down, but my exposure to the reality of life, to the reality of the state of schools... let’s just say, has opened my eyes a little.”

Mark shares that he got what he expected on some level: “While I did find some success in these attempts [at engaging them with student-driven instruction], often times I found that a lack of effort from my students ... led to a good deal of confusion.” Yet, he concludes, “I do have a few students who are always at class and on-time ready to learn and participate.” Both seem to find some level of satisfaction in their teaching reality even if they are not always greeting eager students ready to engage.

Tessa concludes, “My future classroom may not be what I had in high school, but I know I can make a classroom my own, and I can make my teaching experience what I want it to be. I am in control of the kind of teacher I become.” In our focus group discussion, Tessa continues these ideas regarding her agency as a teacher by shifting the focus of the discussion away from the students and toward her expectations for herself as a teacher. She says, “The expectations were more for me than for my students. English 1000 has made me realize that different people have different goals in life and that for some of my students their goal is not to be at school, but that it’s just the next step. I guess I put them [my students] in my shoes ... in the classrooms of the teachers that I liked.” She continues, “I didn’t realize how much I would feel I was responsible for
the students' success... going home and emotionally thinking, 'how in the world can I get this student to...'. I feel like it's my job, my responsibility, to make sure he's successful later on. I'm such a perfectionist that it plays even a bigger role.”

Mark, like Tessa, is surprised by how important he feels he is to the success of his students. Earlier in this study, I shared an illustration of Mark being surprised when his student showed-up unexpectedly for office hours. For the first time, Mark considered what it feels like to be the invested teacher, not the hapless student: “It kind of put a smile on my face...I guess I never thought about my professors and if it bothers them if no one shows up.” Still unwilling to commit to a future firmly planted in education, Mark finishes, “I'm not sure if I want to teach. But I definitely have found myself enjoying it more than I ever thought I would.”

Of these expectations for their students, Grossman [1989] writes “the disjunction between these teachers' implicit ideals of students and the realities of student ability and motivation is particularly problematic, especially as new teachers are unlikely to teach the advanced courses in which they might find the students they would most like to teach. Without help, teachers may learn to blame students for their lack of ability or motivation rather than to re-think their assumptions about a teacher's responsibility to reach a wide range of students” (Howey and Grossman, 1989, p.30). My project contends that the “help” to which Grossman refers can take the form of reflective writing assignments and conversations with other teachers, working with similar students in similar classrooms.
Grand Narratives Lead to Compelling Conversations

Florio-Ruane (2001) warns beginning teachers may use schematic “grand narratives” which reinforce member’s sense of self, ways of seeing other, and [making]sense of the world; yet if the preservice teacher’s primary discourse as defined in this grand narrative is not interrogated, it becomes the mode by which the teacher makes sense out of all teaching and learning. Importantly, conversations with peers who are reading the narrative within a different mode, whose narratives contrast with others in the group, offer fresh perspective and new insight. The “function of oral and written engagement with others,” Florio-Ruane (2001) writes, helps teachers “experience transformations in their thinking about culture, literacy, and autobiography” (p. 126). As evidenced by the reflective essays and conversations shared between Tessa and Mark, opposing narratives can refine teachers’ ideas and practice.

Reflective thinking, and in particular reflective judgment, are important ideals to cultivate in teaching candidates. To assess reflective judgment, King and Kitchener (1994) have developed the Reflective Judgment Interview (RJI) which was “developed to elicit information regarding individuals' fundamental assumptions about knowledge and how it is gained” (p. 99,100). It appears to be a valid tool to assess some key factors in identifying stages of reflective judgment; but the authors themselves suggest, it is not the only means by which that can be done. A variety of questions can be used to elicit information from individuals concerning how and why they make judgments based upon
reflective thinking. The goal is to inform and design educational practices to assist students in developing reflective judgment.

For the purposes of my study, I was most interested in seeing how the assignment of the literacy narrative, the writing of the reflective essays, and the conversations these novice, preservice teachers shared together, could and would affect their thinking. It appears that Mark and Tessa, while drastically different candidates in the ways that they viewed themselves as professionals, shared similarities in the expectations they had for teaching, and the ways in which they saw their teaching practice confirm or challenge their beliefs about teaching; and both grew in their abilities to think reflectively about their teaching. The stage of “pre-reflection,” where “Knowledge is gained by direct, personal observation or through and authority figure,” and it is “absolutely correct and certain” took place before they arrived as part of my study group. (King and Kitchener, 2007, p. 16). I believe that Mark entered his English 1000 practicum in the stage of “Quasi-Reflection.” His knowledge claims contained “elements of uncertainty,” and even as he recognized that judgments can be individualistic and idiosyncratic, he faced ambiguity as to how to solve those problems. Tessa too, while she could better anticipate grey areas regarding problems she might face, found herself at a loss as to how to solve such problems.

Throughout the semester however, it appears that with the high levels of reflection she was willing to engage in, Tessa made significant steps towards the Reflection stage. She understood that her knowledge was being actively constructed in
the process of teaching, and recognized that working in Mark too. In fact, on more than one occasion, Tessa pointed out to Mark the effective formation of his knowledge. While some interpretations and/or knowledge claims were more credible than others, reasonable explanations become important. She was able to anticipate problems and felt equipped to assess and address most problems “on the spot.” Importantly, Tessa was willing to reassess her decisions after-the-fact which indicated she was aware of her thinking and disposed to change it based on context, practice, and the consideration of new sources of information.

Kevin: Contemplation’s Cornucopia

The focus group’s final participant, Kevin, represents a third and particularly interesting preservice teacher, regarding his individual levels of reflection at work and the ways in which he influenced the dynamics of his focus group. Kevin’s literacy narrative was a space where he explored everything from his rollercoaster relationship with his strict Baptist parents, to his first experience doing research on Jonathan Edwards, to his hopes and dreams for his teaching career upon which he was embarking during the second half-century of his life. In his conclusion, Kevin writes, “I never want a student feeling compelled to ‘sneak’ into his life that which is enthralling him, empowering him, and broadening his life experience. I want my classroom to feel ‘guilt-free’ and happy. I want to create an environment so open and free that each student gifted or not, will be in perfect touch with their ability, creativity, and self-empowerment.” Kevin’s highly emotional, caring, optimistic attitude is present in his literacy narrative. At the point in which he wrote his essay, he had not experienced the
practice of teaching and was just making friends within the educational arena. The shared experience in this study would shape him and his peers in significant ways, and much credit for that can be ascribed to Kevin.

In his first reflective response written during the viewing process, Kevin embraces his new identity as “teacher.” He writes, “In spite of trying for years to be somebody other than who I really was for everyone else, in the end, I could no longer deny myself of being me...I am a teacher!” In between his introduction cataloging self-denial, and his final proclamation of reaching “teacher-dome,” Kevin lists the many jobs he’s held in his lifetime and the skills he thinks those vocations have nurtured in him. At this point in the reflective process, he appears to make no connections between the skills he has gained elsewhere to the ways in which those gifts and talents might affect his new career.

Because Kevin missed our first focus group discussion due to a scheduling conflict, his second response is written while Kevin is still “isolated” within the viewing stage; in it he wrestles with memories of his own academic experience. Reflecting on his experiences in both private and public schools he writes,

I learned then what academic and religious posturing was all about. I also learned that while I was behind academically, I was light years ahead in politeness, etiquette, and true religion. I have learned from that experience [particularly private school] never to treat a child so poorly... nothing can be so damaging as to feel all alone among kids your own age, [and] teachers who are supposed to be understanding, and fellow Christians (kids and adults alike) who treat you like a step child / brother instead of a true family member!
Kevin’s reflection is all about him -- his experience, his pain, his plans -- but he shares little as to how it might affect his teaching or how he thinks his teaching may change, surprise, or inform him. When he sat down with Tessa and Mark, Kevin immediately steps into the conversation and begins sharing his educational experiences. As he talks, he assesses Mark’s and Tessa’s levels of involvement by looking them in the eye and speeding-up or slowing-down his story to keep them engaged. He closes his “talk” with ideas he thinks might move the focus to another participant and his or her experience. He says, “I never let the kid inside of me die. I don’t want to forget to let my “kid” guide me – to communicate that to my students. There’s nothing wrong with a student wanting to do well because he or she likes the teacher.” Had Kevin thought about these memories before being asked to write his reflection? “Oh yeah,” he agrees, “Definitely. I’m the kind of person that keeps events fresh in my mind forever. I’ve often thought about if I was a teacher. I would want to be like that.”

Mark shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “Mine wasn’t so specific. My memory.”

Tessa: “My positive and negative experience came from the same year and the same teacher.” And she’s off, explaining in detail the critical reading experience (bad) and the writing workshop adventure (good). Kevin listens intently.

After Tessa has finished speaking, Kevin addresses his audience again. “My mom and dad would adjust their vocabulary – kneel down and come to eye-contact with us.” Kevin explains where he’s going next: “As teachers we tend to look down, talk down
unintentionally.” He begins to describe the experience I outlined in chapter 5 where Kevin recalls his military experiences and speaks about how this “job” might inform his new career and the choices he makes as a teacher. He concludes by pulling in another leadership role: coach. “We never lost,” he says of his experience as platoon leader, “Never got beat. Like a coach – it’s the same thing in these classes. Assess them where they’re [the students] at; find ways to help based on their strengths and weaknesses.”

Florio-Ruane (2001) writes, “Teachers need to study the webs they have learned to create and in which they are suspended...languages make talk possible; shared systems of meaning make our everyday lives sensible but limit our understanding of others’ systems; our ways bias our interpretations” (pp. 28-9). Kevin’s experience – grounded in his middle and secondary education in the 1960’s and 1970’s – is foreign to the other members of the group. He seems exotic, different. His ability to “spin a yarn” is not lost on his eager audience; as he tells his stories, he becomes more aware of his prior knowledge and how that was shaped. By addressing questions about his experience, he begins to recognize his own understanding is not “natural” or “normal” but culturally-made. The same is true for his listeners; the fact that Kevin’s experience is so different, calls into question their own.

The Culture of Isolation

“Much like their pupils,” Florio-Ruane (2001) writes, “teachers converse in instructional settings where story and dialogue are absent. It reinforces their assumptions about what it means to teach, how students learn, and the role of talk and
text in these processes” (p. 58). Teacher talk, as exemplified in these focus group conversations, encourages reflection of their own stories, and inspires new ways of thinking about their experience. It encourages a broader mindset regarding the diversity of attitudes, religious and cultural experiences, and levels of ability students will bring to their classrooms. Duffy (1994) writes, that unfortunately, “A culture of teacher isolation is common to many departments and schools” and that “this isolation severely limits teachers’ access to the curricular and instructional ideas of colleagues and shields them from both constructive criticism and positive recognition of their instructional practices” (p. 37).

By encouraging conversation during their preservice training and especially during their first practical teaching experiences, new teachers will learn the importance of sharing ideas and that they should not feel ashamed of trying and talking about practices that fail. “The culture of isolation,” which Duffy (1994) suggests is present in our schools, “leads some teachers to withhold from colleagues their ‘hard earned’ instructional ideas.” Currently the nature of education inspires a sense of competition over cooperation; teachers learn to keep their failures to themselves for fear of reprimand and recrimination. Consequently, for many new teachers who fail more than succeed due to the limitations of time, energy, and experience, their first teaching experience can leave them feeling isolated and alone.

Kevin’s history working within multiple vocations and in them meeting various levels of success, gives him confidence as only experience can. He brings that
enthusiasm and self-confidence to the group. Ericsson and Charness (1994) claim motivation and interest give rise to expertise; Berliner (2001) suggests “the acquisition of experience does not automatically denote expertise” (p. 466). While Kevin’s leadership experience is not in education, his rich resources of knowledge and understanding tied to his youth, adulthood, various vocations, and his detailed rise-and-fall-and-rise again pattern of self development, inform his teaching practice. After rediscovering his story through his reflective writing assignments, Kevin is able to reflect and consider ways in which his life affects his teaching.

**Opportunities to Consider, Explore, and Investigate**

Yinger and Clark (1981) argue that journal writing and ethnographic writing assignments, “put writers in a position to learn at least four important things about themselves: (1) what they know, (2) what they feel, (3) what they do (and how they do it) and (4) why they do it.” The information Kevin gleans from his reflections is key to understanding his own practice, but without encouraging conversation with other preservice educators, his experience informs his own practice exclusively. In order to more fully appreciate and share his experiences, thus informing other’s teaching practices, he needs the opportunity to converse with other teachers.

In their third focus group discussion Kevin surprises the group by saying “My students are like exactly what I thought they’d be like.” He explains, “Most of them are really good kids, really have a lot of depth. None of them care about English, or at least that’s what I thought.” Tessa looks confused, so Kevin continues. “I went to an inner-
city school, always in that group of kids that ended up in remedial sections. All of this
feels kind of familiar to me.” This most certainly does not feel familiar to Tessa, an “A”
student throughout her high school career. Kevin admits, “They’re a lot like me in high
school. I suspect a lot of them; they all seem bright enough [but] lack preparation. It all
seems familiar to me.”

Tessa shares, “My own experience in high school as a teacher’s aid, a tutor, I
helped to grade papers...I think my perception [about students] came from those
experiences in high school and helping out other students.”

Kevin responds, “For me, it’s not validation but fulfillment. I’ve raised four kids,
taught a college career class, taught theology at the jail, taught at my church. I’ve been
involved in teaching one way or the other [since] way back when.” “Now,” he shares,
“I’m full-circle. I want to teach high school. I just adore young people. Especially young
men who need guidance in their lives.” For Kevin, teaching English 1000 has “totally
validated my plans. Nothing against the classes in critical theory, etc... But I’m not
interested in working with college seniors. I like the realness of the younger students.”

Tessa concludes, inspired by Kevin’s thoughts, “I want to impact young people,
especially now, there are so many kids out there that don’t have any type of role model,
any direction. If I get them earlier I have that chance to touch them, mold them earlier.”

Kevin smiles, agrees.
Valli (1992) writes that “the idea of teacher conversation has embedded within it the concept of ‘voice’ – the use of language to explain, describe, question, explore, or challenge” (p. 189). Conversation and explanation, and the voices implanted in it, are critical to cultivating teacher reflection and reflective judgment. Cultivating and considering language shared between learners and teachers, is crucial to the field of education and its students. Valli (1992) notes that voice is important at two levels: (1) voice and speaking one’s truth, and (2) voice and being heard. By encouraging the various means of viewing, describing, and reflecting present in this dissertation study, participants engaged in both levels of discovering and articulating with their voices, and speaking to be heard. Valli (1992) draws clarifying connections between the women’s movement and effective training for teachers:

Just as in the women’s movement when women began to speak for themselves and define their own lives and experiences that the critical process of consciousness-raising teaches, talking about their lives and work is a critical methodology for teachers. The process of consciousness-raising gives teachers the opportunity to claim their work as their own and the responsibility to define their reality from their own historical experience. By giving voice to their experience, teachers speak their own truths. (p. 190)

For preservice teachers, the opportunities to view, describe and reflect on their own experiences become crucial to the process of learning to become reflective teachers. They can examine preconceptions, articulate ideas and beliefs about teaching, and interrogate practices which fail or succeed. “Knowing how to speak, including how to frame questions, how to grapple with answers, how to identify problems and focus solutions, how to use theory to inform practice...is as important as knowing what to speak about” (Valli, 1992, p. 192). Equally important is what Nieto (1994) calls the
development of a “caring loyalty” for one another, present in conversations shared between those who care enough to talk about the same issues such as facing difficult tasks and learning to teach effectively. Out of such encounters, Florio-Ruane (2001) writes, “we do not necessarily achieve consensus, but we create new understandings ... new relationships and activities” (p. 153). This is the reality which unfolded among members of the focus group with members Tessa, Mark, and Kevin.

What was Learned?: Choosing How They’ll Be Remembered

For Mark, Tessa, and Kevin these practical teaching experiences tied to reflection have offered them insight into what they believe as teachers, why they cling to those values, and from where those ideas come. Understanding the process tied to reflective thinking and consequently, reflective judgment, allows them the opportunity to interrogate, change or more consciously support the ideologies they embody. When considering what was learned through this study, several ideas surface: The critical influence of teaching role-models, the variety of practices and teaching styles which can contradict and complement one another when shared between teaching peers, and the benefits of reflection for teachers linking their memories – those tied to both literacy and life-in-general -- to their teaching practice playing-out in their first classrooms.

Role Models and Their Limitations

Before participants gathered for a final focus group interview together, the six preservice teachers took an opportunity to consider which conversations over the
course of this project stood out in their minds. In particular, they mused over which
moments of viewing, describing, and reflecting made a significant impact, if in fact they
did, upon their teaching style or classroom strategies they employed in English 1000.
Cole and Hunter were drawn to the time and attention students gave their teaching
role-models, both good and bad. Hunter writes of the time when he and Cole and Claire
were discussing those role models: “It tied into our discussion about how we can be
equally inspired by good teachers as by bad teachers. I aim to emulate my great
teachers and fill in the gaps where my bad teachers were lacking.”

Cole suggests that reexamining their role models was instrumental in shaping
their teaching identities. The strength is “in having a lot of perspectives. All of them
combined – I don’t want to do this or that – to form the perfectly bad teacher.”

Gathered for a final face-to-face conversation, Hunter acknowledges, “I think it
was Claire that said there were two kinds of students going through the education
program. Those inspired by good teachers, and those who are in it so they can, you
know, do better. He reflects for a moment on his negative teaching role models. “If I
expect my students to come to class prepared, I need to come prepared. I don’t want to
be that teacher that’s all ‘do as I say but not as I do.’” They all nod in agreement.

Multiple Practices, Multiple Perspectives

Kevin chose to focus his final reflection on a variety of teachers and topics which
“really hit home” with him. “Hunter,” he writes, “is so down-to-earth. I really love the
practical advice he gives, especially about not abandoning the classics and how useful
tradition can be when implemented with Best Practice. He continues,

To be honest, this was a very special group of teachers – advanced way
beyond their years. I think what I took away was a balanced approach to
teaching. Best Practice is very very cool – however, it’s not the end to all
answers. Listening to the experiences of others, their original techniques,
ideas, and even their frustrations, helped me to not only validate what
I’m doing is right but also to realize . . . I’m not alone!

Schoonmaker (2002) writes, “In entering the classroom, student teachers are reentering
a world of familiar social realities. They are already experts on teachers, students and
schools, but their expertise has been developed from the perspective of a student” (p.
60). Kevin’s honest reflection identifies that no matter how old the intern, anxiety
exists in relationship to the lack of experience preservice educators have at the front of
the classroom. By sharing their diverse historical perspectives and ideas about
classroom practice, teachers can and will expand their notions of what a classroom
might look like, reducing their anxiety and helping prepare them for what may come.

Still, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) warn “even when novice teachers
have developed solid ideas about teaching, putting them into action is extremely
challenging.” Schon (1983) suggests effective teaching decisions emerge in the context
of practice and “cannot be fully known ahead of time in the abstract” (p. 374).
Application and innovation, two key areas for effective teaching, are woven tightly
together, and need to be learned in concert, “in the context of a schema that provides a
means for reflection and future learning” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p.)
This study provided just such an experience and offered an opportunity to consider the ways in which it worked to make essential space for literacy histories, practical knowledge and real reflection to impact its participants and inspire effective teaching.

**The Benefits of Reflection: Practice is Key**

Tessa focused on the benefits of reflection when considering her own teaching practices playing out in front of her in her English 1000 classroom. She focused on her personal experience when she shared, “I brought up my experiences as two I had in the same year, same classroom, and with the same teacher for both my good and my bad experience. The reason this particular conversation sticks out to me is because I really was able to take a look at what had happened during those experiences and what I liked or didn’t like about them and how I could implement those experiences into my own teaching.”

Importantly however, Tessa does not stay within her own knowledge and understanding but she looks to her colleagues’ experiences as well. “One other important thing I have tried to think about throughout this semester,” she writes, “is an experience that Mark had in one of his classes...” She goes on to describe, in great detail, the “Elmo Rule.” “I think it is a good tool to have in the classroom...I have tried to implement it in my classroom where my students can feel relaxed, but still be expected to participate and learn from the experience.” In the course of our shared semester, Tessa faced the uncomfortable reality that all her students were not, in fact, like her.
She grew in her understanding that some students would veer off topic, look to engage in outside discussions, etc... and the Elmo rule was one teaching practice she could implement to help students feel committed to the classroom community and connected to the conversations.

Mark too, reflected on the importance of his peers’ experiences and how those informed his limited perspective. “What sticks out in my mind,” he shares, “is Kevin’s story about his experience in the military. Specifically, his story of how he, as platoon leader, capitalized on his fellow soldiers’ strengths, and how he applied this method to his teaching.” By discussing the other vocations he held, Kevin enriched the definition of “teaching” as time not solely tied to the classroom, but to any instructional activities imparting knowledge or skill. Mark continues, “I feel that this story of Kevin’s, strengthened my own ability to implement student-driven instruction. I had been using this method but had not given much thought to the strengths and weaknesses of my students in assigning them tasks. Since then, I have tried to do so...”

Kevin sits and listens, then enters the conversation. He, like Tessa, begins with his personal experiences but moves to consideration of outside perspectives: “It’s like my police officer training where we talked again and again about how to handle a domestic violence situation and then you bust in a door for real and all that stuff kicks in big time and you remember what you’re supposed to do.” The rest of the group leans forward, drawn again to listen to and learn from Kevin’s experiential knowledge: “It’s like that in a methods’ course, if it’s based on reality – the questions that are asked – the
right questions and they’re based on true experience, it’s going to really cement what we know.”

Tessa challenges Kevin, “We can’t reflect on something we haven’t really done.” She shares frustration over this chicken-and-egg question, debating which should come first, the practical experience or the chance to consider teaching practices and approaches for handling that experience. “We have no control over the situation [described in a methods’ class]; we don’t have a relationship with our students; we don’t know our students.”

“Still,” Kevin continues, “some of those unknowns don’t even really matter. The fact is that it’s going to happen and you’ll have to react.” Again, linking practical experience to teaching concepts, he continues, “What do you do if you catch on fire? Stop, drop and role. If you went to a class and learned that, if it happened -- you’d stop, drop and role -- even if you’d never practiced it. In a method’s course there [should be] this opportunity to have good reflection, but it has to be facilitated in the right way.”

Excited, Cole jumps in to the conversation, finding himself agreeing with both of his colleagues on some level. “When you learn about stop, drop and role, you practice [it] but in methods classes we don’t get to practice it. Most of our education classes are not doing what they should because we never get to that practical standpoint. Yes,” he continues, “we learn about Piaget and others – if I could go to a classroom while I was learning and watching a kid, it would mean more. But I don’t – we’re essentially getting only half of what that class should do for us.”
The blend of the practical and the reflective inspires strong responses from the group. In King and Kitchener's text (1994) examining reflective judgment, chapter 9 is titled, “Fostering Reflective Judgment in the College Years.” In it, the authors list seven assumptions which ground their suggestions for helping students develop reflective judgment:

1. Individuals actively interpret and attempt to make sense of what they experience.
2. How individuals interpret events is affected by their epistemic assumptions.
3. People's ways of making meaning develop over time.
4. Individuals function within a “developmental range” of stages.
5. Interactions with the environment strongly affect an individual’s development.
6. Development is stimulated when an individual's experiences do not match his or her expectations.
7. Development in reflective thinking occurs within the context of this individual's background, previous educational experiences, and current life situation. (pp. 226-230)

The seven assumptions are clarified by the viewing, describing, and reflecting processes made evident by the data of our shared project. Teaching, as a complex and highly personal process, is shaped and developed by individual and collective experiences. Preservice teachers must be given the incentive, time, and space to reflect as individuals, but then an added crucial component is the opportunity to see their practice in action, followed-up by reflection with members of their future profession.
facing similar challenges. They can learn from their own experience and the teaching and learning episodes of others.

Tessa shares, “In a method’s course the students are expected to dig deeper into what other students are saying but two things can happen. Students can think of questions to ask but they don’t think it’s relevant and they just don’t ask it... or nobody wants to hurt someone else’s feelings so they avoid confrontation, afraid they’ll take it the wrong way.”

Cole continues,

It also has to do with numbers. [In a methods course] too many -- too many people to talk, too many toes to step on, a lot of people to be embarrassed in front of. But also, we’re not being graded on this. You’re not our teacher. We’re choosing to write these things for you and talk...it doesn’t matter what we say or don’t say, or choose not to say... it’s a carefree environment.

This kind of real reflection -- rooted in students’ histories, practical teaching experiences, and developed and shared between peers -- is richly rewarding for these preservice educators. Claire shares, “I don’t feel like it’s competitive but more camaraderie.” We’re “bouncing ideas back and forth. It helps to bring them into class.” This opportunity to feel safe in reflecting on who she was and what she’s become, allows Claire to share what comes next,

Being a first time teacher you pretty much have to evolve and change into what you thought you were opting to be like into what you [actually] turn out to be. With each class you’re a little different. At first I was the person I thought I would be but then I had to see who they were and began to change and evolve to work with them, what they’re going to respond to ...
In this shared situation, the course, the context, the materials are all the same. Tessa reveals, “Here we all have the same resources, the same situation. We all have different teaching styles but we’re not competing with each other. It wasn’t something we were getting graded on... but everyone had something to say and wanted to get ideas.”

In his trademark style, Cole sums our up discussion simply and succinctly: “Here we needed it and since we needed it...it mattered.” Clearly appreciative of their time together, he leans back in his chair and chuckles, “Yeah, we arrived at a goal: never say or do something stupid enough that kids will laugh at 10, 20, 30 years down the road. We choose how we want to be remembered.”

Implications

As participants in this project shared progressively more honestly with each other during the project’s development, their conversations increasingly opened avenues for consideration, exploration, and interrogation. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 considered the rich data these six study participants provided through their literacy narratives, their reflective essays, the focus group conversations, and our final full-group discussion. Chapter 7 will ascertain the implications of these findings for the field of English Education and the future training of teachers.
CHAPTER VII

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT MATTERS TO TEACHER EDUCATORS AND WHY IT SHOULD

In the final analysis, the challenge of college, for students and faculty members alike, is empowering individuals to know that the world is far more complex than it first appears, and that they must make interpretative arguments and decisions – judgments that entail real consequences for which they must take responsibility and from which they may not flee by disclaiming expertise.

(“The Challenge of Connecting Learning,”
The Association of American Colleges, 1991)

To live remains an art which everyone must learn, and which no one can teach.

~Havelock Ellis

Thirty-five years ago, in 1975, when Dan Lortie published his game-changing text, Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study, he acknowledged the considerably tricky task of training a teacher. “Teachers ...” he wrote, when they speak for themselves, maintain that “they do not belong to either of the major camps arguing the matter of teacher education” (p. 67). They acknowledge that while learning subject matter is indeed important, so is the specific training and education in pedagogy. “They believe,” Lortie (1975) suggests, “that their work is complicated and difficult and requires more than subject matter knowledge, but they are not strong defenders of the current level or kinds of pedagogical instruction being offered. They are, in fact, critical of the preparation they received” (p.68). Despite the time and attention spent on teacher education in the last quarter century, in this vein, not much has changed.
From other perspectives, however, a great deal has been altered. Regarding the professionalization of teachers, education faculty have had to face the reality that simply thrusting novice teachers into internship experiences with a sink-or-swim mentality, does a poor job of turning out the best and the brightest, who will in fact, stay in the field long enough to develop as teaching experts. “Many kinds of teacher knowledge and experience,” contribute to the larger context of teacher quality, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) acknowledge, “including teachers’ (1) general academic and verbal ability, (2) subject matter knowledge, (3) knowledge about teaching and learning, (4) teaching experience, and (5) the set of qualifications measured by teacher certification” (p. 15).

Accumulations and Losses

Importantly, teachers need to emerge from our education programs ready to serve the very first students they teach. In this age of assessment painfully present at every level, our teachers need to be able to prepare and equip their students to compete on tests, in classrooms, and in life. Regardless of their skill-level, students deserve teachers who have been competently trained and highly developed during their educational preparation. This study has attempted to consider what factors contributed to the effective training of English teachers in the context of the English 1000: The Writing Process practicum, at Western Michigan University. What was gained and lost for a these students, during their shared first-teaching experience, provides the context
for examining what factors contributed to the successful internships for these 6 preservice teaching candidates.

The Indisputable Persistence of Personal Knowledge

Preconceptions and implicit theories about what good teachers look like, what they do inside their classrooms, how they contribute to the greater good for students and schools, existed in every individual within this study. From Mark, who never really thought of himself as a teacher until this semester when he began to teach, to Kevin, who saw all paths leading to this teaching crossroads in his life -- all 6 participants saw themselves as a sum of their past experiences with teachers, pedagogical tools and methods, and literacy experiences inside and outside the classroom. In particular, the presence of favorite and least favorite teachers wielded heavy influence on their development.

The literacy narrative first brought these ideas to the surface of their memories where these preservice teachers could view their histories in an effective way. This notion of “giving reason” (Schon, 1983) allowed these preservice teachers to examine the public and private influences upon their identities, pedagogical practices, and reflective tendencies. The literacy narrative gave many of them a first chance to speak of the influences upon their lives and remind themselves (and eventually inform others) why they wanted to become teachers. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) wrote, “what is missing from the knowledge base of teaching... are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretive frames teachers use to understand and
improve their own classroom practices" (p. 2). The literacy narratives offered this textual approach as a means of getting the essential conversations started for these novice instructors.

Accessing prior experience is just the first step in dealing with preconceived notions and implicit knowledge. According to Dewey’s notion that education is the continual reconstruction of experience, it makes sense that one must examine her experience in order to effectively reconstruct it. This reconstruction can be a messy process: real and fictitious events, and the thoughts, feelings and impressions of them, all collide in teachers’ memories as they seek and define important moments. Preservice educators must be given the time, space and incentive to consider the implications of their personal experiences. If they do not effectively unearth and examine these memories in the context of theoretical and professional teacher education, these memories can and will infuse a power and influence upon their practice when teachers become rushed, stressed, and overwhelmed during their first teaching experiences. Consequently they will revert to what they “know.”

Positive and negative recollections and the examination of them, lead to self-understanding which can be “related to the individual’s search for meaning, which is grounded in the dialectal relationship between one’s cognitive, physical, emotional, aesthetic, spiritual, and social being” (Jersild, 1955). Learning to teach starts with learning about one’s self. The literacy narrative offers a first opportunity to explore the ideas which have helped shape these novice educators and thus teaches them about themselves.
Promoting Reflection in the College Years

Developing reflective practice is an important goal for any person and particularly important for teachers; yet, "challenging college students to ask more complex questions and make more effective judgments is no small undertaking," warn King and Kitchener (1994, p. 222). Teaching students to think complexly and clearly, to examine their thoughts, behaviors, and ideas in order to reconsider prior judgments and move towards reflective judgments, is a difficult process; still, it is essential for teacher educators. From their very first experiences in college, preservice teachers should be asked to deal with difficult problems and identify possible solutions. They should be asked to wrestle with complex circumstances and diverse scenarios involving students with many cognitive, social, and behavioral challenges. In essence, student teachers should be asked to think and rethink teaching tasks and how they'll deal with them.

In compiling observations and proposals for helping college students develop reflective judgment, King and Kitchener (1994) list eleven suggestions (pp. 230-257). Here I have compiled a shorter list appropriate to those in the field of education.

• Show respect for students as people regardless of the developmental level(s) they may be exhibiting

• Understand that students differ in regard to their assumptions about knowledge

• Create multiple opportunities of students to examine different points of view on a topic reflectively

• Create opportunities to provide encouragements for students to make judgments and to explain what they believe
• Informally assess students’ assumptions about knowledge and how beliefs should be justified
• Provide challenges and support in interactions with students
• Recognize that challenges and supports can be grounded emotionally as well as cognitively
• Foster a climate that promotes thoughtful analysis of issues throughout the educational program

These eight suggestions underscore several key factors contributing to the support and development of reflective thinking in teachers. Preservice educators enter their programs at various levels of development. Some, like Tessa and Kevin, have considered themselves “teachers” for a long period of time; others, like Mark and Hunter, have done little to develop their unique teaching identities. This delay may be due to their later-in-life decision to make teaching their profession, or the result of a professional “mimicry” of their favorite instructors; in either situation, the consequences include ineffective development of their own teaching identities.

Preservice educators must be asked to examine problems with multiple solutions and identify what choices they would make and why. This collective sense of sharing information leads to the interrogation of their beliefs and provides an important stage upon which students can take a stand for what they believe in regard to classroom practice, must answer questions, and defend their choices. By sharing ideas, telling stories, and explaining pedagogical beliefs, students can inspire change and improve practice in one another. Tessa and Mark identified these concepts at work when they
discussed the differences in their reading and writing classrooms and expanded each
other’s notions of what effective classrooms look like.

Preservice educators should be bolstered with support. While this
encouragement can be modeled from the top down, the real assistance will come from
the bottom up: students helping students. To create and sustain foundations of
cooperation and collaboration, education programs should employ professional learning
communities comprised of novice teacher educators grounded in the same field. Each
and every one of my project’s participants indicated they were better equipped to begin
teaching due to the fact they were able to talk with one another, sharing ideas about
teaching English and venting frustrations regarding their experiences in the English 1000
practicum.

Teaching candidates should be required to write and reflect on their literacy
histories early in their program. They should be separated by content area, then invited
into professional learning communities where they can continue to write short
reflective pieces which interrogate particular themes in their original narrative
assignment. Schoonmaker (2002) suggests personal knowledge and prior experiences
often involve four kinds of agency – who or what is acting and acted upon:

- Teacher agency is the result of teacher initiation or focus on the teacher.
- Self-agency involves initiative and/or focus on the self.
- Group agency involves classmates or significant others such as family.
- Circumstance involves a situation or force that does not involve direct initiative
  by the teacher, self, classmates, or family.
Members of my study all wrote and talked of moments involving the themes of agency listed above. Negative recollections from Cole, Hunter, and Claire involved teachers and circumstances which underscored feelings of frustration and inadequate learning environments in their past. Mark, Kevin, and Tessa wrote and spoke of positive recollections involving taking initiative to prove themselves as teachers and involve members of their classroom communities to improve practice. The giving and sharing of stories and advice between one another created a community of caring that could not fully be experienced in a typical classroom setting. In our final group meeting, project participants shared that while conversations in methods classrooms can be helpful, they are not as valuable as those created in the context of this group. These learning communities were created and maintained not for the purposes of earning a credit or evaluation, but for support, encouragement, interrogation, and amusement; these groups inspired teachers to help teachers for the purposes of collaboration, assistance, development, and friendship.

Challenges to Enactment

As suggested above, issues involving agency existed as some of the most challenging features of preservice teachers’ first experiences in the classrooms. These trials can be linked to what Mary Kennedy (1999) has termed the “problem of enactment.” It is difficult to prepare preservice teachers to think and act like teachers; we must prepare them to instinctively respond to situations they have not yet encountered. In many professional schools, faculties have turned to “case-based” and “problem-based” instruction. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) write,
Students work on cases over some fixed period, set learning goals for acquiring new information that is needed to solve the problem, and eventually discuss their ideas with classmates and with a professor. Ideally, students move from simple cases to more complex ones. In the process, they acquire relevant knowledge while learning to analyze problems, set learning goals, and present and discuss their ideas. Overall, these kinds of experiences appear to help students think and act more professionally when dealing with everyday problems relevant to their disciplines. (p. 373)

While usually applied in the fields of business and medicine, the case-study approach offers important concepts that can inform educational pedagogy as well. Teachers carry strong preconceptions into their practice, rooted in long histories of apprenticeships of observation. Once equipped with solid ideas about teaching, during an internship and in the first years of teaching, it is difficult for novice teachers to put them into practice since they are asked to do many things at once, for many people. Schon (1983) suggests teachers are a prime example of professionals who discover how to make effective decisions in the context of practice; therefore, it cannot be fully learned ahead of time in abstraction. Importantly, “application and innovation” are tightly intertwined in the context of good teaching; they “need to be learned together, in the context of a schema that provides a means for reflection and further learning” (Darling-Hammond and Branford, 2005, p. 374).

Valli (1992) notes that “perhaps the central feature in stimulus for reflection” can be found in programs which develop and use teaching seminars (p. 71). The seminar format provides students and professors to engage in “orderly but informal” conversations regarding content material. Students may have their beliefs challenged
by their supervisor and by each other. Because the students are tied to one another and to their program director, there is joint responsibility for the success of the program. They are encouraged to measure and assess information and accept or reject knowledge “in relationship to their own values, ideas, and conceptions of teaching” (Valli, 1992, p. 71). Professors and supervisors may allow students to experience stress associated with teaching, as a way to encourage self-analysis.

Devising a program like *English 1000: the Writing Process*, offers just such an approach for secondary English education majors. After years of theory-building, methods courses, and pre-internship experiences, teaching within the English 1000 program allows teaching students to enact their teaching identities within the context of real classrooms. They participate in team-building exercises with other members of their staff. They help define the curriculum by collaborating on projects and defining assessment tools.

In addition, preservice teachers work in the context of their own classrooms but are assigned a “teaching partner” who meets with his or her own class at the very same time, right next door. Teaching partners are encouraged to work together and combine their classes on occasion to facilitate larger group interactions and peer review sessions. Forced to apply and innovate in the context of their practice, these preservice teachers make mistakes, and learn on their feet. Friday afternoon mentoring sessions offer opportunities to meet with their supervisor and talk with one another. Most participants in my study suggested this was the most valuable component of their English 1000 program – the opportunity to “download” all they learned the week before
and ask for advice regarding difficult students and particularly challenging teaching tasks.

In our final focus group discussion, the study participants weighed-in on their experiences. Claire shares, “If I’m having an issue in class, they (the peer teachers) can give me a specific idea or practice I can use in class. Actual resources.”

Kevin responds, “It sometimes feels like therapy...”

Notes Tessa, “Clustered with the same kinds of teachers in the same subject area, we can bounce ideas off each other, [share] experiences with each other. It wasn’t necessarily something we were getting graded on but everyone had something to say and wanted to get ideas, like how they could handle a student in class, etc...” She continues, “We’re all in the same position together – we’re all starting together – we’re all in our first time teaching and we don’t feel like we’re in left field. That’s kind of how I expect to feel when I start my internship and I think that it’s helpful to bounce ideas off of each other, learning things to do and things not to do at the same time.”

These teachers are constructing identity and practice as they do their work. Conversation and explanation are critical to the process. In viewing their literacy histories through their written assignments, and by describing these defining moments to their teaching peers, the six participants in my study defined their teaching identities and discovered key practices and innovations of which they were not previously aware.

What they also discovered, is that teaching is contextual. They shared ideas with one another in our small focus group discussions and larger mentoring sessions on Friday but discovered that for their students, in their classes, the same practices may or may
not have worked. Claire shared her frustrations with a class that was reluctant to speak. Cole remarked that his class just “wouldn’t shut up.” Same practices; different contexts. Real teaching scenarios provided their best education.

“By giving voice to their experience,” Valli (1992) writes, “teachers can claim what they do and what they know” (p. 190). The opportunity to write, describe, and reflect on their actions, ideas, beliefs, and their feelings is all “part of the process of learning to be a reflective teacher” (p. 191). Discovering how to talk with one another, learning to be brave in sharing frustrations and failures, and associating success with camaraderie and community, are all part of the defining process in professionalization.

Valli (1992) writes, “Teachers aren’t heard because they don’t speak. And they don’t speak because they are part of a culture that silences them ... by overwork, low status, and an externally defined standards for performance. ‘Being heard’ as a description of teachers’ experience in the work environment represents a relatively revolutionary position rather than a position that is normative in the profession” (pp. 193-94). The current practice for teachers in our schools is often competitive and isolating; in contrast, educators could be encouraged and supported by infusing their workplace with these optimistic, self-confident teachers who have learned that sharing their trials and triumphs is good practice.

**Community: Fostering Collaboration for the Purposes of Developing Effective Educators**

The essential element when preparing a formula for creating reflective educators who can learn from experience and use what they learn to their (and their students’) advantage in the classroom, is community. Current conceptions regarding learning to
teach have been informed by theories surrounding learning in a community (Au, 2002; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999; Grossman and others, 1999; Oakes, Franke, Quartz, and Rogers, 2002). Building a community of educators who care about their work and who like and support each other, is crucial to a new teacher’s success. A select few novice educators can survive without it, but they are typically less satisfied with their work and more likely to leave the profession after five years; thus, the field loses the benefits of the growth and reflection these new teachers acquired. A “family” of colleagues supports one another by meeting regularly and sharing in the ups and downs of their teaching lives. They engage in group curriculum planning and collaborate on effective teaching plans. They lend professional support like presenting at and attending conferences together and sharing articles and ideas about education with one another.

Communities foster intellectual engagement in their members. Dewey (1933) addressed the importance of this when he said “upon its intellectual side education consists in the formation of wide-awake, careful, thorough habits of thinking” (pp. 248-49). This is a key feature for many young educators who are overwhelmed with the day-to-day tasks associated with running their classrooms. Members of the communities talk about leaders in their vocational field who are pressing ahead and offer hope and encouragement to one another regarding advanced degrees and potential steps forward in their profession. Most importantly, they validate that teaching is an important intellectual activity. In contrast to the popular public assumption of late, that teachers
must be told what to teach and how to teach it, these communities of support validate the individual ideas and practices of educators who seek excellence in their vocation.

In addition, professional learning communities make room for educators to assume leadership roles and take charge of their own learning and development. Schoonmaker (2002) suggests, “Life in the classroom is fast-paced, and schools are under constant pressure to raise achievement scores... but dealing with pressure (can be) erased by a school environment that encourages collaboration...with other teachers” (p. 114). University-based teacher preparation is vital in creating a foundation for the dialectical relationships between “knowledge and coming to know, cultural history and knowledge and pedagogy” (Schoonmaker, 2002, p. 135). It should provide the underpinning of support for preservice educators to reflect on what they know, interrogate its worth, and move forward in their quest for greater enlightenment and enhanced practice. Meaning must be constructed from what teachers know – personal, practical, and “official” knowledge – and melded together to enhance their performance in the classroom. Instead of working to demolish the prior knowledge these young professionals bring with them to their teacher preparation programs, education faculties should move towards modes of deconstructing it: this happens by viewing, interrogating, breaking-down, and rebuilding those ideas worth keeping.

Multiple literacies will continue to infuse our American classroom communities and teachers must be prepared to meet them and move students forward. Darling-Bransford and Hammond (2005) warn “teaching is never routine” and because students’ needs are diverse and ever-evolving, teachers must “constantly cope with changing
situations, learning needs, challenges, questions, and dilemmas” (pp. 377-78). Because teaching recognizes multiple goals and is done in relationship to a more and more diverse group of students, teachers must exhibit and integrate multiple kinds of knowledge and employ copious practices to reach all of their students.

These “notions of knowledge for practice,” developed within professional learning communities, inform and reflect ongoing practice of new teaching strategies and successful student learning. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) explain, “Working together in communities, both new and more experienced teachers pose problems, identify discrepancies between theories and practices, challenge common routines, draw from the work of others for generative frameworks, and attempt to make visible much of that which is taken for granted about teaching and learning” (p. 293). The same can be true for preservice teachers in their development communities. By viewing, describing and reflecting on their literacy histories with one another, preservice educators expand their notions for what works and what fails in the classroom; they infuse educational theory with their own practical knowledge and effective teaching practices emerge.

Another benefit which may materialize as a result of preservice teachers engaging in learning communities is developing an understanding of cross-cultural issues outside the educator’s individual scope of experience. Surveys suggest that many Caucasian teachers have limited awareness of these issues (Sleeter, 2001) and “this lack of experience may lead them to unintentionally or unconsciously accept forms of racial, ethnic, language, or cultural discrimination” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005, p.
Because many preservice teachers have trouble imagining what multicultural teaching can look like (Goodwin, 1994), it is crucial that interns are exposed to diverse histories and literacies these communities may represent.

Those in the business of teacher education argue that teachers need to have deep understanding of their subject and know how to make it accessible to others (Shulman and Shulman, 2004). They need to embrace the essential content knowledge, methods, purposes, and forms of communication vital to English education. To put these understandings into practice, “teachers need to develop tools” (Grossman and others, 1999) – conceptual and practical resources for use in the classroom ... to help teachers work smarter and to enact their intentions in practice” (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2002, p. 387). In addition to practical concerns, professional learning communities can support English language arts teachers in developing a set of dispositions – habits of thinking and action – which Stover (2006) suggests include a diverse set of expectations for students, the power of rhetoric and writing studies, and personal and professional growth. “Beginning English language arts teachers,” she asserts, “respect their own uniqueness as individuals and as teachers who bring much richness to their classrooms. They must be committed to professional growth, and they must realize that by expanding their horizons they increase their ability to serve their students” (pp. 13-4). This notion of “expanding their horizons” must be established in their preparation programs as a credible means for enhancing their personal and professional lives; it must appear relevant and it must matter to them. Consequently, this emphasis on and appreciation for teaching candidates’ personal histories, and the
expectation that they will both celebrate and interrogate those memories, should be acknowledged as a fundamental feature in their teacher preparation programs.

**Equipping ELA Teachers for Their Profession: An Enhanced Framework for Growth and Development**

In their quintessential 2005 text, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World*, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) provided a “Framework for Understanding Teaching and Learning” as part of “A Vision of Professional Practice” tied to the far-reaching concepts of *teaching as a profession* and *learning in a democracy* (p. 11). Based on my study of the vast body of literature surrounding the preparation of English Language Arts teachers and my particular interest in literacy narratives as a means to begin the process of interrogation of preservice teachers’ literacy histories, I began this project with six preservice teaching candidates. Following my data collection protocol, my study considered the effects of these novice instructors’ “apprenticeships of observation” with teaching role models, and their past experiences with successful and unsuccessful teaching practices; and it provided shared communal experiences with other teachers, in what we now recognize as our professional learning community. As a result of this study, I propose to enhance Darling-Hammond and Bransford’s “Framework” by adding a fourth area of teaching development and growth deserving attention in the teaching training curriculum:
Preservice Teachers' Literacy Histories; Viewing Describing, and Reflecting in the Context of Learning Communities.

Figure 8. An Enhanced Framework for the Growth and Development of Preservice Teachers
Personal knowledge should be identified early-on within the assignment of the literacy narrative. Within the context of learning communities, teaching candidates can view, describe, and reflect upon those early influences and begin to consider the ways in which that personal knowledge will surface in their acquisition of practical and official knowledge as tied to their education program. As one of the four key features of their teacher training program, its influence is recognized as important and the infusive nature of personal knowledge is identified in its link to the other facets of acquired knowledge.

In regard to future research opportunities in the areas of classroom practice and teacher identity as tied to early influences upon preservice teachers, the field is ripe for harvest. A case study which follows the development of teachers involved in learning communities established during the very beginnings of their teacher education programs and lasting throughout their tenure in them, would yield rich insights into the imagined importance and shaping influences of ongoing inquiry into teaching candidates' personal and educational histories. A second case study opportunity could be explored in the context of the teachers' internship experiences. By clustering groups of intern teachers together according to the middle school or high school in which they are teaching, learning communities could be created within this mix of teachers from various subject placements. With their interest and emphasis on "survival skills," during this highly-charged internship experience, the students could be more or less interested in interrogating the shaping influences of their past and its influence on their practice and identities. Finally, research opportunities examining the development of reflectivity
during the college years could yield rich rewards for the continued study of teacher
development. By examining the shared assignments, the opportunities for
conversations and growth amongst teachers moving towards their intended vocational
placement, and the obstacles hindering the development of reflectivity, such a study
would enhance our understanding of preservice teachers’ levels of reflectivity and this
avenue of intellectual inquiry.

A Community of Teachers: Exploring the Ties That Bind Us

The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.

Sydney J. Harris

Creating strong teaching professionals -- those willing to explore and learn from
their past and use those experiences to shape their futures, and consequently the
futures of their students -- is the goal for every teacher education program. Teacher
education programs are traditionally dependent on strong leadership from department
chairs and administration, and rely on the enthusiasm and expertise of teaching faculty,
the administrative acumen of education department staff, and professional
relationships created with the public schools willing to apprentice new teachers. Often,
due to conflicting agendas involving time and resources, building a sense of community
for our preservice teachers can be a trial.

This challenge is not insurmountable however. By examining and reflecting upon
the most successful aspects of this project as attached to English 1000: The Writing
Process at work on Western Michigan University's campus, teacher educators can learn how help facilitate growth in their interns as tied-to their personal and professional development in the areas of reflective thinking, reflective judgment and ways of learning from their past experiences. For the six preservice educators who participated in this study, assessing the influences of the past on their present teaching practices facilitated greater understanding, intense interrogation, and moments of celebration connected to the memories which surfaced. As a result of making this journey together, the six members of this study discovered that a shared journey is one which offers greater rewards for both group development and individual growth. I'd like to suggest, based on the levels of laughter and delight surfacing in our focus group discussions, it is also more fun. The sense of discovery and community we shared is an experience which cannot be duplicated, but should be attempted. It is one which greatly enriched my own personal journey as reader, writer, teacher and mentor; and one which provides a strong model for other teacher-educators seeking similar results for their own preservice educators in their teacher preparation programs.
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APPENDIX A

Effective Learning Communities: Rules, Relationships, Dispositions and the Assignments Which Foster Reflection
Effective Learning Communities: Rules, Relationships, Dispositions and the Assignments Which Foster Reflection

In order to make professional learning communities a positive addition to the curriculum and training expectations for preservice teachers, a few guidelines should be established. Participants should be placed in small groups, based on their intended field of study, early in their academic careers. If students consequently change their teaching majors and minors, this may or may not affect their ability to continue in the group. Several of the participants in my study benefited from the knowledge they shared as tied to their minors - Spanish, math, history – but all agreed that sharing their teaching major, English Language Arts, was a key factor in their ability to encourage, challenge and grow alongside one another.

Creating A Sense of Community

Students themselves should help establish some “ground rules” for their individual groups. Where will they meet? What should be the protocol for missed meetings or rescheduling? Is there a minimum participation level for participants? Will any member of their group take a “secretarial” role by coordinating meetings or is this a collective mandate shared through a blog or Facebook page established to coordinate schedules and set meetings? Are there “rules for engagement” regarding preparation for the meeting or the tone of the conversations? In my experience, I have found that the more ownership individual groups take for the success of their particular communities, the more effectively they function. Supervisors can step-in to work with
dysfunctional group members as needed; but typically, the healthiest groups emerge from the context of self-discipline and when they function as independently as possible.

Learning communities should revolve around a few key assignments with specific tasks being assigned early in their inception. Potential assignments promoting the processes of viewing, describing, and reflecting are outlined in the next section of this chapter, and could be used to launch contemplation and discussion. As the participants in this study demonstrate, the ideas behind these three processes – viewing, describing, and reflecting – are all important to the teachers' growth and development. Education faculty must provide some incentive for students participating in the learning communities through the form of credits, hours, etc... but they should resist the temptation to “score” everything they ask the communities to produce. Early in their academic careers, assignments should focus more on the students' literacy histories and experiences. Later, assignments should move towards the consideration and implementation of teaching concepts, and review of how the individuals' experiences and practices have played-out in their pre-internship and internship experiences.

It is essential that the students sense the intrinsic value for sharing their literacy histories and practical knowledge with one another. Once a supervisor steps in to evaluate the work of the group, it becomes less valuable as a real resource for growing and developing reflective practitioners. Students may begin using “teacher-ese” to impress their instructors and miss the opportunity to authentically engage with the members of their groups. One helpful suggestion is to incorporate the first assignment,
the literacy narrative, in the first education course required; next, build the learning
communities out of that experience and use that assignment to move the group
forward. Supervisors can assess how much freedom groups should enjoy and whether
these freedoms can be lost or gained due to levels of responsibility demonstrated.
Importantly, the groups must function *differently* than those tied to particular courses.
It is in their uniqueness that professional learning communities establish their value.

Because students have historically found inquiry and reflection time as “wasted”
(Zeichner and Liston, 1987), it is important to coordinate expectations for their groups in
ways which seek to “minimize pressure on students and maximize the chances for the
acceptance” of the group’s value (p. 41). Expectations for inquiry assignments should
be heaviest at the start of each semester while students’ responsibilities for other
course work and interning expectations are lightest. As each semester ensues, the
emphasis should move to the participants meeting with one another as a group and
talking about how they see the inquiry assignments playing-out in their practical
experiences. Indeed, students do not need more “busy work,” but they should find
their training enhanced by the “teacher talk” which often eludes them in their
preparation for teaching. Ideally this tendency toward sharing professional
conversations will surface again when they begin to teach and they will avoid the
“culture of isolation” (Duffy, 1994) that often plagues those in the profession.

Finally, students should occasionally be asked to take reflective surveys on how
their groups are functioning and what they’re learning as a result of being a part of their
professional learning community. By making their learning visible, the group takes on a value that cannot be duplicated in the form of credit or grade evaluations. My study group participants, by valuing the input from one another in ways a supervisor could not, established that their time was well-spent. Again, the group mattered because what was learned and shared in the group enhanced their teaching practice and affected their growth and development as teachers. It is extremely important to make these gains visible.

Creating Assignments Which Foster Reflection

Assigning a narrative at the start of each semester can serve as a launching pad for the viewing, discussing, and reflecting which follows. I briefly introduce several such assignments below. Some are assignments I have created and used as part of this study; others I have taken from the literature which has informed this project. Citations are noted for those I have borrowed.

- **Literacy Narratives**: Literacy narratives examine the influences from our past, involving reading, writing, and communicating with others. Many are tied to school experiences, but others may interrogate or celebrate language as it is tied to home, community, and culture. Students are asked to start with a “life graph” which charts the highs-and-lows of their literacy histories. They can write about one or several of these moments, or incorporate several of them into a narrative which functions as some form of a chronology. The second half of their literacy narrative focuses on ways their literacy histories may affect the choices they make as teachers of reading and writing.
• **Going Multimodal**: Representing the next step to the literacy narrative process, "going multimodal" asks students to take the central image or idea from their narrative and make it visual, auditory, or appealing to one or more of their other senses. Students are encouraged not to “do everything” in this form of their narrative, but choose a central idea and develop it as the meta-symbol for their experience. To enable “viewing” their multimodal projects, the classroom or learning community can set-up “galleries” where students can view each project in silence. Designers and audience members inquire, “How well does the composition speak for itself? After viewing the narratives, students are asked to listen as the designer describes and reflects on his or her experiences for the benefit of the audience.

• **Constructing a Symbol**: Taken from Schoonmaker’s text *Growing Up Teaching: From Personal Knowledge to Professional Practice* (2002), this assignment requires students to take an “inward look” and bring prior experience to a conscious level so they can “intentionally critique and reconstruct it” (p. 12). Students are asked to construct a symbol which represents one of their most positive memories from elementary, middle, or secondary school and share it with their peers. Groups are asked to think about what their experiences have in common and what this might inform them about, in regards to teaching. Negative experiences are examined in a similar way.
• **Mapping Your History:** Taken from Hamilton’s chapter in Tremmel and Broz’s 2002 text, *Teaching Writing Teachers*, this assignment asks students to use the “metaphor of mapping” to “explore the experiences they have had as writers” (p. 148). Laid-out on paper and visually mapped, students seize the opportunity to trace the different assumptions and beliefs about reading and writing they have come to hold. Beyond viewing and describing their maps to other group members, students engage in making their ideas surrounding reading and writing experiences transparent. Hamilton writes, “It also encourages them to think more carefully about how they will map their own writing instruction when planning for their first full year in [the] classroom” (p. 149).

• **Genre Reflection:** In Margolis’ 2002 article, “Re-form-ing Reflection (and Action) in English Education,” the author writes, “As teacher educators, we search for ways to help our student teachers make meaning out of their field experiences. We try to balance theory and practice, nurturing and pushing. We encourage them to try new approaches” (p. 214). Genre reflections allow students to address their memories of their own literacy experiences or moments “found” in their current teaching practicum experiences through the genre of their choice. Margolis’ students wrote their memories in forms of monologues, poems, and portraits; they interrogated their current teaching moments in dialogues, one-act plays, and multimodal projects. He reminds us that if we think of teaching as art – nonlinear and multidimensional – than it “makes sense to search for ways of understanding teaching” in similar forms (p. 231).
• **Reflective Essays:** These narrative responses allow students to email one another, or their supervisor, with some gut-level reactions to questions posed seeking clarification of ideas they have earlier introduced in their literacy narratives. The purpose is defined as one which builds upon the ideas they have already shared in their narratives, but interrogates more specifically the thoughts and themes which have surfaced. Groups can participate by reading each member’s literacy narrative, looking for patterns, themes, or points of divergence, and writing reflective questions themselves; or, supervisors can create questions to stimulate reflection and further conversation among the groups’ participants.

• **Surveys and Responses:** As a follow-up to the process and progress of each group, teachers and/or supervisors might design a survey which inspires reflection and evaluation of the group’s purpose and design. Surveys and responses can be manipulated to best address the needs for each group. Importantly, these survey responses make the viewing, describing, and reflecting processes visible for group members and lend credibility to the group as it functions as a valuable tool for teacher growth and development.
APPENDIX B

HSIRB: Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval
Date: June 30, 2009

To: Jonathan Bush, Principal Investigator
   Cheryl Almeda, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 09-05-01

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Composing Ourselves as Teachers: Knowledge and Reflection-in Literacy Narratives" has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: June 30, 2010