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Preservice Teachers Partner with 9th Graders

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Abstract

The University/High School Writing Partnership illustrates the potential of university/school collaborations to support and expand each other's missions in teaching and learning. Writing serves as a platform for the partnership where 9th grade English students write on one topic over different genres, and preservice English teachers learn how to work with and teach adolescents by providing rounds of feedback and editing on the writing. Throughout the partnership, the university and high school instructors mentor beginning teachers helping 9th graders develop thinking and writing skills.

A Mutually Beneficial Partnership

The University/High School Writing Partnership brings together preservice English language arts (ELA) teachers in their methods course called Teaching English Language Arts in Secondary Schools and 9th grade English students. The respective learning needs of beginning teachers and 9th grade writers drive the semester-long partnership. It is worth noting that the University/High School Writing Partnership complements the required, ongoing work of both sets of students in their respective settings—a semester-long university methods course in teaching English language arts and a September to January block of 9th grade English. Ideally, the preservice teachers would visit the 9th graders in face-to-face meetings at their high school, but that is practically impossible with the schedules of two different institutions, about 50 high school students, and 20 or so university students.

The routines and interactions within the partnership provide beginning teachers with experience and opportunities for pedagogical and content-specific insight as well as targeted one-on-one teaching with students. The partnership creates opportunities for 9th graders to practice writing and revising their thinking through writing across several genres. The 9th graders write and revise throughout the semester under the appreciative attention of university students who offer encouragement and instruction on the work during this process writing approach collaboration. For diverse 9th graders experiencing their first semester in a regional high school, the partnership provides additional support for learning through one-on-one relationships with university students.

Manila folders bearing 9th grade word-processed drafts of writing travel to the university for the preservice teachers' review and commentary then back the high school for the 9th graders' review and revision of their writing. The cycle continues throughout the semester with folders of writing functioning as conduits for collaborative teaching, learning, and relationship building.

Literature Informing the Partnership

The partnership is informed by distinctive but complementary camps within education— teaching writing as part of the ELA curriculum in secondary schools, mentoring beginning teachers, and action research.

Teaching Writing as Part of the ELA Curriculum

The routines within the University/High School Writing Partnership deliberately incorporate many of the elements that Graham and Perin (2007) find characteristic of effective literacy and writing instruction in middle and high schools. In *Writing Next*, their large-scale statistical review of what works with student writing in classrooms, Graham and Perin report eleven, research-based elements of current writing instruction that help adolescent students learn to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning. These elements include:

1. Writing Strategies (involving teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions),
2. Summarization (involving teaching students to summarize texts),
3. Collaborative Writing (where adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions),
4. Specific Product Goals,
5. Word Processing,
6. Sentence Combining,
7. Prewriting,
8. Inquiry Activities (analyzing concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task),
9. Process Writing Approach (interweaving a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing),
10. Study of Models (for reading, analyzing, and emulating),
11. Writing for Content Learning (p. 4-5).

Applebee and Langer (2011) report that while the past 30 years "...have seen a great deal of development in teachers' conceptions of writing and its importance in learning," much of the writing students do in schools is reduced to filling in missing information, directly copying information, summarizing, completing worksheets, and conforming to essay structures to prepare for high stakes testing (p. 26).

Further arguing that we don't teach writing in ways that allow students to experience its transformative power, Yagelski (2012) wonders why writing seems to matter so little to schools and teachers even as it is always part of any discussion on school reform and believes:

...writing remains poorly understood. Writing instruction at all levels of education continues to be informed by a narrow conception of writing as procedure and by persistent misconceptions about writing (p. 189).

Mentoring Beginning Teachers

A useful way to learn to teach is to practice teaching with actual students under the guidance of an experienced educator during the preservice phase of training. Pierce (2007) recommends deliberately mentoring beginning teachers to expect locally-unique school cultures and inevitable awkwardness as beginning teachers entering established school ecosystems. Preparing preservice teachers to expect some interpersonal discomfort could ease transitions into professional teaching (p. 47).

McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005) also suggest some professional mentoring and explicit conversation at the university level to alleviate alienation often experienced by beginning teachers. McCann et al. maintain two factors create frustrations for beginners: (1) the significant mismatch between expectations for teaching and the actual experience of teaching and (2) new teachers struggle especially to shape a teacher persona (p. 158).

The Partnership as Action Research

The ongoing study of the partnership examines participants' observations and responses to questions about the partnership, writing, the writing process, and learning. Data from the 9th grade writers include writing products in the form of drafts, revisions, and final self-selected drafts of writing for inclusion in the published compilation. Data from beginning teachers include feedback commentary, editing commentary, and open-ended observations.

In addition to the writing and teaching of writing at the heart of this partnership project, all participants respond to surveys before and after the project regarding their knowledge about writing and experiences of the writing partnership. Another layer of data emanates from participants' written and spoken narratives about their specific partnership experiences. Questions that guide the ongoing partnership and its study include:

- How can we stage writing to help students develop thinking, writing craft, and writing skills?
- How can we incorporate research—like elements of effective writing programs—into our daily English language arts teaching repertoires?
- How can we create meaningful preservice opportunities for teachers to develop their pedagogical skills to help students learn?
- How can we create meaningful preservice opportunities for teachers to develop their dispositions and interpersonal skills to help students learn?

The various data are used as action research to inform curriculum and teaching practices of the university English Education program, the design and routines of the University/High School Writing Partnership itself, and—to a lesser extent—the high school English program since the partnership can accommodate only one English teacher's 9th graders. Paton (2002) depicts this narrow, program-specific inquiry as action research or action learning since it is:

“...aimed at learning, improvement, and development....These problem-solving and learning-oriented processes often use qualitative inquiry and case study approaches to help a group of people reflect on ways of improving what they are doing or understand it in new ways” (p.177-79).

Why Writing?

Of all the English language arts, writing uniquely and expansively serves the respective learning needs of preservice ELA teachers and high school students. One, writing can be taught as a skill and encouraged through stages like prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and a final product. And two, writing is a skill that can be used companionably with the other language arts of reading, viewing, listening, and speaking as well as across the subjects in other disciplines in school and life generally. In fact, learning to write across various genres figures prominently in the revised English Language Arts Standards and new “Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects” in the Common Core State Standards that emphasize fostering college and career readiness for all students (Council of Chief State School Officers, & National Governors Association, 2010).

The partnership routines are designed so that the 9th graders read and write on the same topic across three genres of writing as guided by their high school English teacher who provides models of texts for student writers to read and emulate in their work. The preservice teachers then read, review, offer feedback, and edit writing across the iterations of each piece of 9th grade writing.

Through the partnership experiences, preservice teachers see that the process of writing mirrors learning itself with its fits, starts, false starts, and accomplishment. The partnership helps preservice teachers appreciate the idiosyncratic and diverse ways that individuals learn. In reviewing the 9th graders' writing as it cycles through the semester, the preservice teachers encounter diversity in student learning needs and strengths as well as the stunning diversity among adolescents of the same age and grade level converging in a regional school. Across individual writing folders across time, the preservice teachers gain access to the unique composing processing and learning of each student writer. Flowers and Hayes (1981) suggest that the various stages of the writing process provide windows on cognition and creativity in action:

...if one studies the process by which a writer uses a goal to generate ideas, then consolidates those ideas and uses them to revise or regenerate new, more complex goals, one can see this learning process in action. ...some of our most complex and imaginative acts can depend on the elegant simplicity of a few powerful thinking processes. ...By placing emphasis on the inventive power of the writer, who is able to explore ideas, to develop, act on, test, and regenerate his or her own goals, we are putting an important part of creativity where it belongs—in the hands of the working, thinking writer (p. 386).

As they witness development of ideas and writing over time, preservice teachers experience firsthand the teaching of writing as more than the mere assignment of topics and subsequent grading of papers. Part of my responsibility as a teacher educator is to help my beginners notice and articulate the significance of

seemingly small episodes of teaching and learning before they hit the field as student teachers and first-year English teachers.

Explicit Teaching and Mentoring

The University/High School Writing Partnership exists to teach 9th graders how to write more and better and to mentor preservice teachers in how to teach and learn what their students need to grow. Because the high school English teacher and I return to the partnership with new students each September, ours is an ongoing relationship. From our first introduction to students, we model the enjoyment and friendship that is possible within professional collaboration. In addition to the comfort of professional collegiality, our respective students help each other learn in ways that would be impossible if we were the sole instructors operating in the vacuum of our institutions. Our respective students simply learn more than when we operated in isolation. Not only do we explicitly model collegiality during the partnership, we invite preservice teachers into the conversation where we ask questions about the effectiveness of our teaching and the individual and collective needs of students.

Thanks to the partnership and collaborative modeling of the methods instructor and high school English teacher, preservice ELA teachers experience key elements of effective mentoring described by Grossman and Davis (2012): “Effective mentoring includes three features: highly trained mentors, a focus on content, and allocated time for mentoring” (p. 55).

The methods’ course work in the 9th grade writing portfolios focuses on the content of student writing. Throughout these workshop sessions, preservice teachers ask easily for advice and discuss handling feedback. Sometimes, a preservice teacher will ask questions aloud to the group at large, and we consider and discuss appropriate instructional moves. Sometimes, a preservice teacher will call me over to read and quietly consider a problem within student writing. Although I taught high school English myself for over 20 years, my responses are slow and deliberate; my preservice teachers observe the thoughtfulness and care student work requires. One strategy that I encourage beginning (and experienced) ELA teachers to employ in responding to student writing is asking students specific questions about the writing rather than telling writers what to do. For instance, in a piece about a grandparent, instead of saying to a writer: “Use more specific details to describe your grandmother,” try this approach: “What are some of your grandmother’s favorite expressions? Could you use some of them in dialogue so we can hear her?” This kind of professional practice might inoculate new English teachers against the frustrated isolation experienced by many beginning teachers who report finding few opportunities to converse with collegial peers about their teaching and students’ learning.

Working with student writing and responding in writing to students about their work helps the preservice teachers to develop their teacher dispositions and personas. The partnership routines and writing folders show preservice teachers how their own responses vary to 9th grade writers and that there is indeed an idiosyncratic relationship and way of relating between each teacher and student.

Preservice teachers also learn that there is a difference between offering feedback on writing and editing writing—a very important distinction that allows for a learning draft to be just that. In order to provide appropriate comments during the editing round, preservice teachers are required to use *A Writer’s Reference with Resources for Multilingual Writers and ESL* by Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers. It is vital that preservice teachers understand the rudiments and rules of writing themselves as they make suggestions to their students. This editing phase also emphasizes the usefulness of teaching the mechanical aspects of writing in the context of students’ own work rather than in an isolated skills and drills approach.

Findings: The Importance of Teaching Students not Subjects

Ostensibly, the methods course focuses on subject area pedagogy and expertise; however, without sustained teaching practice with actual students, the work of the university methods course can be superficial and impractical.

Perhaps the most significant finding from study of the University/High School Writing Partnership is that the partnership provides a professional development window onto the lives and learning of adolescents

through 9th grade writing. With 9th grade writing splayed out over workshop tables at the university, preservice teachers discuss and explore relevant and specific teaching strategies with peers and experienced ELA teachers. Below the surface features of the writing, the 9th graders' stories, poems, and essays reveal the anxiety and excitement of adolescence—predictable and stereotypical of the age. But as preservice teachers open an individual writing folder, they immediately understand the 9th grade writers are no mere stereotypes but young people struggling and striving to make their way through high school and life. By turns silly and heartbreaking, the writing talks about online bullying, good and bad friends, heroic brothers and sisters, sick parents, dying pets, winning ballgames, and losing grandparents. The writing content helps preservice teachers understand that effective and satisfying teaching must combine subject matter expertise with an ability to see each student as a unique individual with various strengths and needs.

Loughran (2006) suggests that if a “genuine pedagogical relationship is to exist between teacher and student(s),” it requires understanding of individual student needs, needs of the group, and their effects on each other (p. 86). Indeed, the purpose of a university-based methods course is to learn how to engage and teach authentically; the partnership creates such authentic opportunities. In contrast to the frenetic pace of student teaching and beginning teaching, the partnership provides opportunities within the methods course to look closely and deliberately discuss students' learning and lives as manifested in their writing. These observations about the partnership reveal how beginning teachers appreciate students as people:

...there is always a journey inside the simplest topics... . Not all students have the same way of writing, and all writing is going to be different.

... it was really great that we got to work closely with students ... allowed me to understand their side of things because after a while you forget after studying to become an educator.

On a more ELA content-related note, another preservice teacher says: “Students can be so strong in one genre and have major difficulties in another—yet make similar [mechanical] mistakes (comma overuse, for example) across all genres of writing.”

The 9th graders and their writing benefit from the preservice English teacher's attention and feedback on their work. Bringing three pieces of writing through the writing process and across various genres, the partnership enlarges the scope of learning for the 9th graders during their first few months of high school. The high school students write more and engage with multiple audiences thanks to the partnership. As one 9th grader explains: “My editor said that I should use an introductory paragraph to make a point because it makes it easier for the audience to get on my side.”

Practicing Skills and Much More

So 9th graders practice writing and preservice teachers practice teaching throughout the partnership, and the design of the partnership includes generative routines that cycle through the semester. Each preservice teacher is assigned two or three 9th grade writers who receive close readings of their work and plenty of feedback on their writing—a luxury of time and attention no one English teacher could afford. The partnership provides the 9th graders an audience for their work beyond a single classroom teacher, and it also provides another level of interest and support. Each week that the folders of writing are returned to the high school, their teacher reports that students anxiously grab the folders to see what their university partners have to say and suggest. One 9th grader says: “I learned how to be a better writer and put more details in my writing, more detail about everything.”

An interesting mark of the maturity that develops among these high school freshmen is reflected in the pieces of writing that each selects for the individual contribution to the culminating compilation of writing. During both years for which we have data, fewer students selected the first genre—the narrative—for final submission. Eight out of 41 students selected their narratives in 2011, and 10 out of 48 in 2010. This trend seems to suggest that the 9th graders outgrow their beginning writing style and choose to include in the published booklet their more sophisticated writing efforts in poetry or opinionated essay. The poetry

requires skillful manipulation of words and ideas, and the essay requires development and sophistication of thinking and personal opinion. In 2011, 23 out of 41 students included their opinionated essays in the final compilation attesting to the emergence of the 9th graders' maturity and confidence to share publicly their thinking, beliefs, and writing.

Conclusion

Students at our universities and schools will not ask for meaningful learning relationships; but they hunger for them, and so do their instructors. The University/High School Writing Partnership adds value to both the Teaching English Language Arts in Secondary Schools methods course at the university and 9th Grade English at the high school.

Through the partnership, the university English Education program has created a meaningful preservice opportunity—a field experience—where preservice teachers develop their pedagogical skills in order to help students learn but never leave campus. Analysis of preservice teachers' feedback and editing commentary suggests the importance of allotting more time during the methods course to discuss the written commentary and feedback they offer to 9th graders. Increased vetting of commentary during the course workshops has resulted in kinder and more constructive writing commentary from preservice teachers over the three years of the partnership.

Additionally, individual preservice teachers select one 9th grader's work to examine in a case study discussion about writing in the ELA classroom. The case includes artifacts from the 9th grader's writing as well as incorporation of research on the teaching of writing. The case studies conclude with preservice teachers' speculations about their own ELA teaching practice grounded in current research and the practical experiences of working with 9th graders. It is useful for preservice teachers to understand the variety and uses of research relative to teaching ELA—especially evidenced-based, longitudinal literacy studies that can inform the practice decisions in their own eventual classrooms. It is also important that beginning teachers appreciate their own agency in continually developing a professional life that taps trends, standards, and research in literacy studies as well as human resources in students, mentors, and peers.

Engaging adolescent students around their work informs beginning teachers about how they might employ their own subject knowledge, dispositions as teachers, and emerging teacher identities—before service. As they head into their internships and teaching careers, our student teachers in English report a bit more professional confidence thanks to the mentoring and bonafide teaching experiences within the partnership. Examining transference of skills from the partnership into actual professional practice remains an area for future study and follow-up. The partnership adds rich opportunities and learning for one English teacher's 9th graders. Comparatively, 9th graders who participate in the partnership produce and revise three more pieces of writing than other freshman in their high school and discussed their writing and writing craft with preservice teachers via their writing folders. During the partnership's final celebration held at the high school library, the 9th graders' writing adorns the walls for an appreciative audience of parents, high school students and teachers, and our university methods class. To memorialize the semester's partnership, the university gifts the 9th graders with a bound collection of their self-selected writing.

Yes, we help each other. But the beauty of collaboration in a university/school partnership like ours is that it does more than merely lend a hand to the other. Together, my partner and I invent opportunities for our students, ourselves, and our respective institutions—opportunities that expand learning and revive us all. The success of our University/High School Writing Partnership suggests the untapped potential for collaborative efforts where colleagues and students might benefit mutually, productively, and invaluablely from each other's resources and company.

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