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Making Investments Transparent (in English Education)

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ELA educators situate the relevancy of disciplinary content, while facing sociopolitical narratives that often challenge those contributions. “Making Investments Transparent” frames pre-service teachers’ reflections within an approach to English Education that illumines investments in students—a methodology applicable to students entering professional careers across disciplines.

In *Reform and Literacy Education* (2018), Cathy Fleischer asserts that the “vision of professionalism—of teachers as knowledgeable and responsible practitioners—has shifted greatly,” as indicated by “a public narrative that depicts teachers negatively . . . dismiss[ing] and demeaning [their knowledge]” (p. 210). Perhaps (and unfortunately), Fleischer’s concern is best illustrated by the current political rhetoric directed toward Kentucky’s teachers. Beginning with an April 2018 challenge to last-minute pension changes attached to a sewage funding bill, teachers have been publicly accused of leaving children vulnerable to sexual assault and districts have been ordered to account for leave requests during protests (McLaren, 2018; Watkins, Morgan & McLaren, 2018; Van Sant, 2018; Beam, 2019). According to Kentucky Education Association’s president Stephanie Winkler, the pension bill engendered an “overall environment of deception and mistrust” (Hess & Bell, 2018). And yet, despite this controversy and a climate of uncertainty induced by the defunding of education programs, many educators choose to remain in the state.

Kentucky’s communities are fiercely resilient and committed to supporting families. As an English Education instructor, I strive to provide our university’s pre-service teachers with opportunities to narrate this sustained commitment. “Making

Investments Transparent” points to the relationships between my investment in students and their investments in future generations of students; and while this article focuses on English Education, these methods are applicable to students entering professional careers across disciplines. Transparency in teaching and learning develops a bridge between students’ coursework experiences and the critical problem-solving skills that they will need to develop throughout their professional lives.

Re-Visioning English Education

Founded as a normal school in 1906, Eastern Kentucky University maintains its long-term commitment to educating future teachers. In addition to elementary and middle education programs through the College of Education, departments often provide a teaching emphasis for students seeking a secondary endorsement. In the Department of English, approximately 35-40% of our students are English Teaching majors. These majors complete extensive coursework in English and education, including 200 clinical hours in 2-3 years. By the time students enroll in my methodology course, “Teaching of Language Arts in the Secondary School,” they are completing final Praxis requirements and preparing for student teaching.

Unlike an English-focused or education-focused degree, English Teaching majors negotiate what John Staunton calls a “hybrid” discipline, likened to the “merman” in Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck” (1973). In *Deranging English/Education* (2008), Staunton argues for a “remap[ping] [of] the terrain of English and education”—developed from intersections, instead of divisions, between disciplines, between practicing and future teachers, and between theory and practice (p. 2). Indeed, classroom pedagogy itself constitutes “a hybrid act of being and knowing that is ever in the making” (Staunton, 2008, p. 97). A decade later, Modern Language Association (MLA) president Anne Ruggles Gere evokes Staunton’s claim. Pointing out that “today’s specialists in literary criticism, writing studies, and language sometimes engage in deprecations . . . [which, in part] . . . have roots in a tendency to see words such as literacy and literary, reading and writing, teaching and scholarship, theory and practice in dichotomous rather than mutually constituting terms,” Gere appeals to MLA members to “reconsider” these dichotomies and to “re-vision (in Adrienne Rich’s sense) our theories and our majors” (2018, p. 6).

My approach to this re-visioning draws upon these ongoing conversations and a constructivist pedagogy, which, first, deconstructs and then builds upon dichotomies to position students as teaching colleagues. Undergraduate research and student-faculty collaborations do not constitute unique approaches to instruction. In fact, in 2011, Joyce Kinkead and Laurie Grobman argued that English, specifically, should create opportunities for “authentic research experiences” and “routes for students to go from classroom experiences to expanded projects” (p. 227). By scaffolding instruction for these initiatives, while also leaving space for students’ ideas to develop organically, the intersections between *what it means to teach* and *what it means to*

learn become visible. Through this student-driven inquiry, I also facilitate students' "leap[s] from passive listeners to active agents" transparently, so that students "negotiate theory and its application" while "see[ing] their roles as advocates for social justice implications that arise from beliefs and practices" (Brauer, 2017, p. 392; Kander and Roe, 2018, p. 173). In Fall 2018, my methods course began with students' considerations of what mattered most to them about learning to teach. Their questions, "Guiding Inquiry," were integrated as the focus for subsequent classes. Each week, students completed instructor-assigned readings related to their inquiries, researched to find and share additional scholarship that expands upon or complicates those readings, and facilitated discussions about the issues that emerged from these queries. This process cultivated a collegial, professional community invested in learning about teaching.

Investing in "Eggs"

When teaching students methods about writing units, or a series of English Language Arts (ELA) standards-driven lesson plans that both scaffold and connect learning opportunities, I begin with a list of ingredients—bacon, tomato paste, potatoes, onion, fish steaks, one fish head, a dozen eggs, and a loaf of white bread—from a recipe in Vivian Howard's *Deep Run Roots: Stories and Recipes from My Corner of the South* (2016). Once an English major and now a successful chef/restaurateur/author, Howard organizes each chapter to feature one ingredient's role in regional cuisine. While students may not know about Howard's investment in her hometown of Deep Run (and Kinston), North Carolina, which is recognized by organizations like the Southern Foodway Alliance, they are familiar with "EGGS." After sharing the ingredients list, I provide a copy of the recipe (Fish Stew). Then, I read from Howard's story about how local churches hold Halloween-time gatherings and serve this stew—the key ingredient being the dozen eggs, not the fish. While my instruction aligned with Halloween in 2018 coincidentally, the illustration scaffolds instruction so that students come to realize how Howard's use of eggs frames her narrative about a region's use of ingredients. "EGGS" evolves into a class model for developing cohesive unit plans, as well as a lens for thinking critically about our stories, how we tell these stories, and the significance of their telling. "EGGS" provides a foundation for working together to make the connections between our theoretical approaches and classroom practices transparent to (future) students.

Near the end of Fall 2018, "EGGS" also symbolized students' considerations about how the semester's research and discussions might inform approaches to instruction. The methods course's students worked through the brainstorming and planning stages of this process to draft, revise, and submit a collaborative article to an academic journal before the end of the term. Within a week of submission, the feature editor suggested that we expand the piece for an upcoming special issue. This development in the submission process necessitated further work during Winter Break, but students remained invested, communicating through text and Google docs. By

mid-January, they re-submitted the article. Presented below, “Investing in Students, Investing in Community” is the product of students’ collaborative effort to identify how their future investments in the classroom may benefit Kentucky’s communities.

“Investing in Students, Investing in Community”

Heather Fox, Brianna Parsons, Alesha Alexander, Sarah King, Cole Burgin, Kristine Wertz

Through reflecting and writing about our experiences as educators, we tell the story of our communities; we possess the power to reframe a community’s legacy with our words. At a regional university, English Education majors discuss the immediacy of political and financial challenges in education, but their focus continually returns to meeting the needs of (future) students: *How can we address disparities to provide opportunity? How can we cultivate learning experiences that extend beyond the classroom to positively impact students’ lives?* Their responses derive from a sense of place that both privileges community and acknowledges its challenges. Similar to Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle’s charge to “start with beliefs” in *180 Days* (2018), Brianna Parsons, Alesha Alexander, Sarah King, Cole Burgin, and Kristine Wertz synthesize coursework, clinical observations, and reflections prior to student teaching, in order to identify a particular investment—relationships, motivation, voice, relevancy, and creativity—that best articulates their philosophy in practice. Read together, these investments tell the story of a deep-seated commitment to a region’s future through the education of its students.

Investing in Relationships

Brianna Parsons

In my observations this year, I interacted more with students than previous pre-service experiences because there were less time constraints. Along with English Education methods coursework, I spent 80 hours in the classroom (for a total of 200 hours over two years), in my final semester before student teaching. I also got to know my students better because my clinical teacher positioned me as her colleague in the classroom. She shared the space with me as a colleague-mentor, instead of assigning work that distanced me from students. Unlike previous experiences, in which I felt more like a burden than a help, she facilitated my teaching so that I learned to convey content effectively, while also addressing students’ needs through building relationships and investing in their academic lives. This opportunity prompted me to ask about the one thing that students wish their teachers would do differently. Many confided that they would like to be consistently treated as smart and capable, despite preconceptions about their learning capabilities. Their response to my question informs my approach to teaching. Finding opportunities to understand students better makes a difference in a community where people know one another, celebrate those relationships, and face challenges together. Students respond better here when you show that you genuinely care about them.

Whether a response to legislation or standardization, classrooms often seem more content-driven than student-focused. The content that we teach is important, but impacting our students’ lives by building positive relationships between students and teachers also benefits

instruction. Jantine Split, et al. (2011) call this constructing “quality relationships” and argue that not much learning takes place without cultivating these opportunities (p. 459). Quality relationships occur when teachers take the time to let students know that their work and knowledge matter. In my observations this year, I noticed that the teacher had the type of relationship with the students that allowed her to joke around with them. Her rapport created an environment that made them feel as if that they could come to her when they needed help with something.

On the one hand, we cannot be a “friend” because we evaluate students in terms of objectives, but on the other hand, we should demonstrate our care for students’ well-being in our approach to teaching. One way that I will do this is by learning about their interests, challenges, and the ways that I can help them as their mentor from the first day of class. As Harry Wong recommends in *The First Days of School* (1997, 2009), I plan to begin each year with a personal letter to my students that tells them about myself and invites them to share their goals. This early communication will become the foundation of my community-building initiative. Teachers impact students’ lives in ways that cannot be measured by curriculum standards. Investing in relationships with students communicates that they are smart and capable.

Investing in Motivation

Alesha Alexander

I took a geology class in college, even though the content did not interest me because it seemed unrelated to my future career. However, my teacher made all the difference. She approached the content with enthusiasm and helped students make connections between geology and life experiences. For example, she discussed how people sometimes build houses without realizing that their property backs up to a sink hole, which forces them to move. She also talked about the purity levels of the water that we drink and how even the water that we use when showering has the potential to change the texture of our hair. I became interested in geology because my teacher related what we were learning to familiar experiences and previous knowledge. Because she taught this way, I was motivated to listen and to do the work.

As a future English teacher, I notice a common theme: an apathy toward learning among some students--whether it be in response to something happening outside of the classroom, a feeling of inadequacy about the content, or their ability to complete an assignment. I understand that not every student will come to my class eager to learn about reading and writing, but by relating what I teach to students’ lives, I hope to lead students to a place where they feel motivated to learn, just as my geology teacher did for me. In one of my clinical experiences, the supervising teacher sent a postcard to a student’s home, simply telling him how impressed he was about an insight that he shared with the class. The student came to school the next day eager to participate in discussions. His positive response continued throughout the remainder of my observations. Watching this student, who started the semester without motivation, inspires me to encourage students in my classroom.

In the same way Brianna intends to build relationships with students, I plan to motivate students who struggle with guidance about future career options in our immediate region. For

some students, school seems like a roadblock or diversion, instead of an opportunity. There is a sense that if a job addresses basic needs, it is sufficient, even if a student demonstrates interest and aptitude for a different career path. To cultivate motivation in my classroom, I will explain how content relates to career aspirations when introducing an assignment, and I will relate what they are learning to their lives. Furthermore, if students are struggling, I will encourage them individually like my supervising teacher. Relationships with students and motivation go hand-in-hand, and teachers, who build relationships with their students, can use this knowledge to help to motivate them. If we can motivate our students, we will create a future in which students believe in themselves and won't give up easily when life gets tough.

Investing in Voice

Sarah King

It was not until I enrolled in a college course, in which participation was a significant component of my grade, that I figured out how to contribute to class discussions. When analyzing Seamus Heaney's "Digging," I remember feeling a deep connection with the speaker's rural roots and a relationship with his writing. I wanted to join the conversation but could not find the words. It was not that I felt unprepared; instead, my fear related to previous classroom experiences, in which my ideas were either brushed off by the teacher or rebuked by peers. What transformed out of this realization was my investment in the development of students' voices. A student's voice is their story, a combination of values, opinions, self-perception, and experiences. I view a student's understanding of their voice's contribution as the most important factor in achieving a meaningful lesson.

During my preservice teaching observations, I noticed that the difference between a successful and a challenging class discussion could be traced to the incorporation of students' voices. When teachers allowed students to relate the content to themselves through reflection and analysis, their engagement with discussions increased. In fact, most of the time, students led the discussions and actively developed their learning without even realizing it. For example, rather than identifying theme and its significance in William Shakespeare's *Othello*, students reflected on their experiences with race, jealousy, gender roles, and manipulation, articulating how this play could be read as a cautionary tale for their own lives. They discovered their voices through this process, a discovery that could then be applied to writing assignments. However, in classes that did not privilege students' voices, I observed that discussions often remained limited, silent, and disengaged.

An emphasis on voice is specifically important for the education of Kentucky's youth. Whether an urban or rural community, student voice is being lost due to the focus on workforce readiness and benchmark achievement. This is less about standards and more about the de-emphasis on cultivating meaningful connections in the classroom. The future leaders of our regions, state, and nation need the opportunity to develop their voices and to listen to the perspectives around them. One way that I plan to help students develop their voices is through sustained practices, such as writing in a notebook each day. Both in my own experience and observations, this has been a key factor in learning and using voice. I will also privilege collaboration and focus on process, such as peer review presentations that invite students to articulate

their ideas alongside readings of peers' ideas. This combination of reflection and communication will create an environment that nurtures students' voices. By emphasizing the value of individual voices, Kentucky classrooms encourage connections between all of our stories.

Investing in Relevancy

Cole Burgin

Some of my best memories from high school involve assignments in which I was able to learn more about myself and/or ideas that connected to previous experiences. For instance, one teacher began each class with a humorous prompt about local current events, even if it was just about the first call for snow. Students were always eager to write because the prompts seemed relevant to them. Making activities relevant can be as simple as a prompt about weather or can go deeper, such as engaging students with consequential topics. In the classrooms that I have observed, assignments that most interest students consistently allow them to explore interests or to connect tasks to their lives in some way. For Kentucky, relevancy takes the form of exploring sensitive issues unique to the region. As a high school student in Somerset, Kentucky, I remember hearing about a project at a nearby school in which students drafted letters to a coal-fired power plant about the emissions that affected air quality at the school. This motivated the students to learn the skills necessary for the assignment because it related to their lives.

National topics are just as relevant. The current all-encompassing divisiveness in our political climate comes to mind, as does the assault on international cooperation and globalism. High school students tend to be informed by the opinions of their parents. While it is not the goal of a classroom teacher to undermine this, it is important that students explore issues to broaden perspective, because joining the national conversation can lead to a more informed and diverse public. In my experience, students tend to be resistant when divisive content is introduced but ultimately arrive at the conclusion that learning about it is worthwhile. For example, when reading Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, students initially dismissed any relationship between the term "witch hunt" in the play and its contemporary applications. After assuring students that it was all right to express dissent as long as they could explain their beliefs, productive discussion proceeded that not only deepened the students' understanding of the play but also how they viewed relationships between literary studies and contemporary moment.

My classroom may be one of the only places in which students feel free to explore and deepen their understanding of literature as it relates to their lives. Therefore, it is important to structure it as a safe environment that promotes reflection and critical response. Drawing upon my clinical observations, I plan to use editorials to teach the writing process and rhetorical devices. By combining the teaching of nonfiction work, writing journals/free-writing, and using real-life connections to illumine fictional readings, the daily content of my class will relate to students, even when a required reading appears disconnected from contemporary events. Finally, keeping content and writing assignments relevant will teach students to write with *kairos*, something our society values through its reliance on social media. Teachers of English motivate students best by developing writers and readers who make connections between disciplines and life experiences. In Kentucky, the classroom should be a place where students

feel safe to explore diverse perspectives and to express their thoughts.

Investing in Creativity

Kristine Wertz

I once took a stagecraft class that introduced me to backstage planning in theatre. For one production, we built a bed that rolled, so that it could be accessed on stage but would not be visible all the time. This experience required engineering and visualization skills as part of a problem-solving process, but I also associate it with personal tragedy. On the opening night of the show, my Girl Scout sister took her own life. As I grappled with my response to the news, the theatre production community supported me in a way that I had not experienced previously. They showed me that it was okay to struggle with how to express my grief. They taught me that the way we express ourselves is one of the greatest things we can do, and I now view this expression as a form of compassion and care for others. This theatre experience was a turning point for me, both personally and professionally.

Some argue that creativity must be a form of art, whereas others define it as any form of personal expression. My own understanding of creativity comes from the need to express myself. I use my creative acts to show the world who I am and how I view the world around me. In the classroom--whether backstage planning in theatre, playing an instrument, writing poetry, or drafting a design using technology--opportunities to create fuel students' interests in learning. As a future teacher completing degrees in English and theatre education, I will cultivate this interest. One example is to begin class with blog assignments that foster storytelling. Students could choose to perform their stories in a theatre production or website launch. I want them to understand that they have a place where they can express themselves and not be judged or ridiculed for it.

Creative experiences have shown me that no matter what happens in life, you always have a way to tell your own story, by your own means. However, this approach to education is not always supported. At my university, for instance, our theatre program was eliminated during my junior year. This decision affected the surrounding community, as well, since local historical sites relied on decades-long relationships with our program. My institution's decision forced many theatre students to find and declare a new major. Unfortunately, this is not an educational anomaly. Many high school arts programs--art, band, choir, theatre, and so forth--are forced to rely more on self-funding than state financial support. In Kentucky, a region with a history of celebrating arts and community, a consistent pattern of eliminating funding for arts-related programs is concerning (Eblen, 2018). Decisions like these send the message to our students that creative expression is not valued in curriculum.

Developing creative assignments seems time-consuming, particularly when there is limited financial support and only 180 days to teach discipline-specific content and standardized test preparation, but these opportunities can be embedded into most instruction. In fact, if we consider that experiential learning promotes relationships, motivation, voice, and relevancy, then creative thinking may be the key to unlocking all our investments in educating Kentucky's students.

While “Investing in Students, Investing in Community” was not printed in the journal, students (now graduates) reflected on the experience of preparing the manuscript and negotiating the submissions process at the 2019 Pedagogicon Conference. These graduates, now in the latter stages of transitioning from pre-service teachers to classroom teachers, related their fall methods course project to their early professional experiences. They explained that they chose an investment because it addressed a struggle or impact in school, even though their initial perceptions of how to best address this investment have evolved since the course. And when asked about their motivation to persevere with the project, Sarah King responded that “the project itself was a form of my investment. Each member approached the project with their own distinct background and created their investment based on their own experiences.” When methods students convey apprehension about teaching because of their “lack of experience,” I remind them that they already possess unique insights as observers and participants approaches to teaching for the past 16 years.

Transparent teaching draws upon students’ prior knowledge and experience to visibly link instruction to future goals. Fleischer (2018) argues that, in order to address public perceptions, teachers must “shift how we imagine our role[s] . . . and bravely reach out to . . . share what we know is true about teaching . . . thoughtfully, strategically, and consistently” (p. 211). Future ELA educators are at the intersections of deranging disciplinary content so that its relevance is transparent to students and deranging the sociopolitical narratives that often challenge their contributions to Kentucky’s communities. Our investments in higher education must offer opportunities like student-faculty collaborations so our students come to view themselves as professional colleagues, capable of shifting these narratives through their articulations of investment.

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