

# **Two Birds-One Stone: Helping Pre-Service Teachers Connect Reading and Writing While Learning to Demonstrate Reflective Practice**

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The field of secondary reading was beginning to emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when W. S. Gray (1925) helped to popularize the assertion that “Every teacher should be, to a certain extent, a teacher of reading.” Later Bond and Bond (1941) authored the first methods text on developmental reading in the high school, asserting that every subject demands specialized reading skills which must be developed within that discipline. In the early 1970’s research in content reading emerged as a focus, and in 1973, eight states required course work in content area reading instruction for secondary teacher certification. Ten years later, thirty-one states had this requirement. Teachers who integrated content reading strategies into their classroom instruction reported greater confidence in their teaching (Pearce and Bader, 1986) and that their lessons were better organized for student success (Conley, 1986). Furthermore, the research of Alvermann and Swafford (1989) indicated improved learning on the part of students who were taught and used content reading strategies. In the 1990’s, national standards for performance were established in almost all subjects, and the subsequent push for higher test scores renewed an interest in teaching students strategies to read to learn in many secondary content classrooms.

The field of secondary reading has come a long way since the time of Gray and Bond and Bond’s groundbreaking work. However, the report of the International Reading Association Commission on Adolescent Literacy tells us that we still have a great deal of work to do. The Commission (1999) reminded us that attention has “. . . long been focused on the beginning of literacy, planting seedlings and making sure they take root, but without careful cultivation and nurturing seedlings may wither and their growth become stunted.” Pre-service secondary content teachers do come to our classes interested in learning ways to nurture the seedlings of their students’ abilities to read-to-learn; however, the importance of writing to this process is still a stretch for many. For example, those pursuing teaching endorsements in physical education, music, or art, even those seeking endorsements in science, math and history, have had trouble seeing the value of writing and its connection to reading. In fact, they often object to requirements that they model for and teach their students how to write to learn.

Our department, which admits approximately 200 students per year seeking certification as content area middle school and high school teachers, recognized the need to address this challenge at the same time that we were aligning our curriculum to the national performance standards established by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment

and Support Consortium INTASC for preparing pre-service teachers. Our attention was drawn to the ninth INTASC standard: “The professional educator is a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of his/her choices and actions on others (students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community) and who actively seeks out opportunities to grow professionally” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2004). Yes, it is important that our teacher candidates become reflective practitioners, practitioners who regularly take the time necessary to look back upon what was accomplished in class and base future teaching decisions on those outcomes. But how is this reflection best demonstrated? And how can we instill in our students the importance of such reflection?

As content literacy methods course instructors, we saw this as an opportunity to meet two challenges with one adjustment in curriculum. After all, one way to demonstrate reflective practice is through writing. We were already teaching our pre-service teachers about the writing process, its traits, and assessment, but the value of these skills and concepts had not yet become meaningful to our students. By devising a reflective writing assignment that would speak to the standards teacher candidates must meet, we hoped to help our students grasp the value of writing to learn.

On the pages that follow, we describe both our curriculum and the adjustments we made in order to embed a new writing task, one that would help our students make the reading/writing connection, and at the same time, provide them with instruction in self-reflective practice through writing. We then share samples of their writing to demonstrate the results garnered. Finally, we will discuss several relevant implications for future practice.

### A Writing Task Refocused

Some time ago our departmental faculty realized that there was a shortcoming in the materials forwarded to prospective cooperating teachers on behalf of our students. This folder typically included student transcripts, resumes, an application form, and an essay in which students were asked to explain their “philosophy of teaching.” The philosophy essays tended to be theoretical in nature, and the folder itself did little to introduce the combined knowledge, skill and dispositional strengths of our student teaching candidates to practitioners in the field.

We soon decided that “letters of introduction” (750- 1,000 words in length) would better serve this end. In these letters students would be encouraged to address a) their talents, interests and career goals; b) their desire to work with secondary youth; c) their pertinent experience; d) their willingness to try new ideas and strategies; e) their desire to become continuous learners, and; f) the reasons why they should be considered for an internship placement. In considering their audience, our students would be encouraged to think of “what *you* would want to know about a prospective student intern that was requesting placement in *your* classroom.” Finally, and perhaps most importantly, students would be reminded that their folders already contained resumes, applications and

transcripts. Instead of reiterating what could be found in these documents, their letters of introduction should contain analytic, descriptive, and reflective writing in the form of anecdotes illustrating personal change and growth related to teaching.

Students were told that their anecdotes should show what happened, who was involved, why things were done the way they were, and most importantly, what was learned. We would emphasize that through this “reflective” aspect of their writing, students would be creating meaning, primarily for themselves, but also for their prospective mentors. By reading their letters, prospective cooperating teachers would be able to see how the students came to understand and use their experiences and thus how they would be able to grow personally and professionally.

This assignment would become part of our “writing to learn” unit of our content literacy courses. Students would write these essays in several drafts. Each would then have opportunities to give and receive input to and from peers using the Six-Trait Assessment Rubric (Culham, 2003), the analytic assessment model used in nearly all k-12 classrooms in our region. Training in the use of the Six-Trait Rubric would also be provided to our two graduate assistants so they, too, might provide tutorial assistance to literacy methods students, and assist instructors in the time-intensive task of analytic scoring.

### The Reading/Writing Connection

While most pre-service content teachers understand the importance of reading in their specific content areas, they do not always see the connection between reading and writing. Integrating the new task of writing a letter of introduction required us to help our students understand how reading and writing were reciprocal processes that resulted in improved construction of meaning. Our best efforts to explain how proficiency in one affected the other fell most often on disinterested ears. We would encourage students to consider some of the connections between reading and writing: Writers compose, putting their thoughts into written words that carry meaning. Readers compose too—as they construct meaning from what they read. Writers plan by gathering information according to purpose. Good readers also plan their reading by considering what they know about the topic, and setting a purpose for reading. Writers revise their writing through a multiple writing process. Readers revise and deepen meanings as they take in more information across a text. By emphasizing the reading/writing connection, we endeavored to help our pre-service teachers understand that when we read like a writer, we anticipate what the author has to say. Conversely, when we write for a reader, we gain perspectives on our subject, our audience, and ourselves.

But this discussion only takes us so far, and students often remain unconvinced. At this point, therefore, we now demonstrate how both reading and writing can be improved through responsive assessments. Our focus here will be on writing.

## Using Assessments to Improve Writing

When teaching our students about writing assessment, we stress that communication is essential for effective assessment, and developing a common language around writing assessment has always been a cornerstone of our writing-to-learn unit. In it we introduce the two main types of assessment that are used to analyze writing, the holistic and the analytic. We explain that *holistic* assessment involves feedback based on a general or whole impression. Often, when writing is scored holistically, anchor papers are used. These are exemplars of strong, acceptable, and weak writing, and student writing is compared to them. Since the whole is greater than the sum of its parts in this approach, all aspects of a piece of writing—its content, organization, voice, mechanics, etc., are considered together. The focus is on how the writing addresses its objective, as a whole.

We then point out to our students that as useful as holistic assessment is, it has its pitfalls. First of all, expecting a middle school or high school student to provide a peer with holistic feedback can be an unrealistic expectation. Without addressing specific aspects of students' written work, a peer's assessment may be viewed as arbitrary or capricious. Additionally, without specific feedback, writers can be at a loss as to what specific improvements are needed. Inevitably we get heads nodding and stories as one student or another explains how they earned an "A+" from English teacher and then a "B-" the very next semester, from another. Teachers in all content areas purport to know good writing when they see it. However, when asked to pinpoint what makes a piece of writing "good," the waters tend to become murky.

We also explain that in order to address these pitfalls, analytic assessment tools that examine multiple traits of writing have been developed. Papers assessed in this fashion provide feedback on each trait separately, thereby recognizing relative strengths and weaknesses within the paper. We then explain how analytic assessment is frequently used in the revision and editing stages of process writing. We point out that Diederich (1974) developed one of the first analytic scoring systems for high school and college students. He divided writing performance into two main categories: general merit (ideas, organization, wording and style) and mechanics (usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and neatness). Other analytic tools have been developed since. One of these is the Six-Trait Assessment Tool (Culham, 2003), originally developed for 4<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students peer editing.

### The Six Trait Assessment Tool for Writing

Teachers need a "common language" to discuss what good writing looks like, and how to recognize it in a variety of forms. By developing a language centered around what good writing looked like, teachers can define for themselves "the hidden criteria that lies under the surface of most writing process classrooms" (NWREL, 2002, p. 4). Fortunately, teachers in Washington State and in much of the Pacific Northwest speak a common language when it comes to talking about writing: the 6+1 Trait Model of assessing writing.

In the early 1980s, a group of teachers in Beaverton, Oregon and Missoula, Montana decided that they wanted to reconstruct their standardized writing assessment tools. These teachers wanted a framework from which they could not only assess student writing, but teach it as well—to use assessment to guide instruction. The framework that they developed “[is] an assessment tool that works in concert with the curriculum to guide instruction so all students can successfully meet their writing goals” (Culham, 2003, p. 19). After reading and sorting through hundreds of student essays, six themes, or traits, emerged: *ideas* (details, development, focus), *organization* (internal structure), *voice* (tone, style, purpose, and audience), *word choice* (precise language and phrasing), *sentence fluency* (correctness, rhythm and cadence), and *conventions* (mechanical correctness). Recently, a seventh trait, *presentation*, has been added as an optional stylistic feature to be considered. Presentation can include such items as handwriting, formatting, layout, and the like.

We like to explain to our students that not all teachers use the same 6+1 Trait Model when assessing student writing. Some use more traits, and some compress the list into four or five categories. However, most teachers involved with the creation of this assessment instrument agree that the above attributes are the foundation of what constitutes good writing, taking grade level, the assigned task, and specific content area into consideration. When teaching writing using the 6+1 Traits, often one or more of the traits is given a higher value. For example, a science teacher may value the traits of organization and conventions, while a social studies or English teacher may value the traits of voice and ideas. Such flexibility is part of what makes this rubric useful to all content area teachers—specific traits can be highlighted for different audiences and purposes.

After introducing the 6+1 Trait Model, secondary education pre-service teachers get a “crash course” in using it to assess and talk about student writing. First, they are introduced to each trait and samples of its use. They then practice using the rubric by scoring a series of essays written by other secondary students. It is at this point that we ask them to write a piece of their own, the letter of introduction to be read by potential cooperating teachers. Suddenly, the skills and concepts of writing instruction and assessment take on new meaning. Now they will be reading one another’s work, not just to fulfill an assignment or assist one another in reaching a grade in the class. Now they are writing to assure their placement with a mentor teacher. The reading and writing connection now takes on deeper meaning.

Through two and one half weeks of composing and peer editing, students become comfortable conversing in the specific language of this model. However, the process of incorporating reflection into the letters of introduction is a significant challenge. Many struggled to complete this task. Some complained that never in their content area training were they required to do this kind of writing. Indeed, most content-area standards do not address this skill. Realizing that many of our students don’t have the writing skills required to complete this assignment, we three authors set out to create a curriculum that would explicitly guide their learning.

## Adjustments to Our Curriculum: The Importance of Voice, Word Choice, and Organization

At the heart of the letter to a potential cooperating teacher, students had to describe, analyze, and reflect on some personal experience that led them to insight and growth. Most often, however, we received a formal and detached sounding account of what had occurred. We needed a means to help them understand that the tone, (voice) of their letters must also engage the reader and play a role in the demonstration of reflective thought. The successful demonstration of voice is achieved through carefully chosen words (word choice) and a composition that flows from one idea to the next in an engaging and easy-to-follow way (organization).

Hence, we modified our curriculum to place an emphasis on the traits of voice, word choice, and organization. These traits, more than the others, get at the heart of descriptive, analytical and reflective writing—writing that shows what was done, who was doing it, how it was done, why it was done, and most importantly, what was learned in the process. Of course, this last aspect needed extra emphasis, because it goes to the heart of reflection. To think about and critique one's own performance is critical to becoming a reflective writer, and one hopes, a reflective practitioner.

Our modified curriculum has four components: a) general suggestions; b) tips and effective examples of use of voice; c) tips and effective examples of use of word choice; d) tips and effective examples of use of organization and, e) sample letters to put it all together. Here, in condensed form, are samples from that curriculum:

### *A) General Suggestions:*

Having brainstormed ideas to put into their letters, pre-service teachers are encouraged to incorporate ideas from the following seven suggestions:

*Show instead of tell:* Instead of listing a series of experiences or accomplishments, recount a situation that shows you in a situation using the skills and knowledge that you want to communicate in the letter. Show the reader what the situation looked like, what it smelled like, what it sounded like. By showing instead of telling, you can communicate your dispositions towards honesty, fairness, and caring. If you choose to merely tell, your writing could instead communicate a disposition of emotional and intellectual detachment.

*Write from experiences.* Your reflection can show a disposition towards honesty if you write from your own authentic experience. Robert Frost (2004) wrote, “If there are no tears in the writer there will be no tears in the reader.” If you are writing about things that you have not thought, felt or believed before you wrote them, the writing will ring false.

*What were you thinking and what were you feeling?* Give the reader insight into your internal dialogue during the situation you are recounting. This can help to illustrate the reasons why you did what you did as well as what you were feeling at the time. What you were thinking and feeling is as important as what you were doing. Show the reader how the cognitive and affective domains intersect in order to communicate dispositions that are combinations of both.

*Reflect upon the situation.* Show the reader why the incident you included is important to who you are as a teacher. How did you feel? What did you learn? How did you change? Why? Why did you act the way you did? Showing that you can analyze your behavior after the fact shows that you are open to learning from experience. The process of reflection also communicates that you are interested in thoughtfully considering your experiences and using them to improve your teaching. The desire to improve your practice of teaching is an important and valuable disposition.

*Be intentional in your vocabulary.* Choose words that accurately describe your situation. The clearer and more engaging the language you use, the less the work the reader must do. Use the kind of words you would use if you were recounting this incident as a story.

*Choose one or two key values.* The length of this letter makes it impossible to address more than a couple of key ideas. Selecting and staging the key ideas can increase their impact and focus the overall point of the reader. Begin by asking yourself, “what do I want the reader to take away from this?” The answer should be the key insight around which the letter is organized.

*Be yourself.* Often in letters of introduction, we try to show how we fit the characteristics we think are desired of us. This is an opportunity to show who you are and why you want to teach. Your presence in this program testifies to your qualifications. This is your chance to select one or two of your many accomplishments and bring them to life in the mind of your reader. Who are you? What drives you?

#### *B) Voice:*

From their “crash course” in scoring student papers using the 6+1 Trait Model, our students learn that *voice* identifies the unique identity and perspective of the writer. They know that voice, “is the heart and soul, the magic, the wit, along with the feeling and the conviction of the individual writer coming through the word” (NWREL, 2002) and that voice is the aspect of writing that gives identity and context to the content. When scoring for voice, they learn to determine if the writer maintains a consistently engaging tone. They learn that when a piece of writing reflects who the writer is as a person, it has a strong voice.

In order to help our students transfer this concept to their own letters of introduction, we provide examples of successful voice that can be studied and adapted. When reading excerpts like the one that follows, they are encouraged to read them

silently first, and then out loud in order to get an idea of the cadence and patterns that lend clarity and individuality to each writer's voice.

Three young teenage boys walked into the small, dusty classroom near St. James Cathedral in Seattle and shyly offered their names, Huynh, Tuan, and Truong. They knew a little English so I breathed a sigh of relief knowing it would not be necessary to start from scratch on my first tutoring assignment.

Student Letter of Introduction, Winter 2004

When reading this example, our students are encouraged to consider how the writer opens with lots of detail, making clear for the reader what was happening, and how the writer felt about it. Phrases like, “walked into the small, dusty classroom” and “so I breathed a sigh of relief” evoke a sense of place and emotion. We point out that this brief paragraph also communicates a wealth of experiential information. Without a list, or bulleted points, the writer describes his experience tutoring and working with students learning English as a second language. Furthermore, by honestly describing the fears and tensions he was feeling, the writer reveals some of his personality.

Students are then asked to compare the episode near St. James Cathedral to the one that follows:

Prior to teaching in Japan, I was involved with two different theatre groups and traveled throughout Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Colorado performing social issue plays aimed at young people. As part of Taproot Theatre Company's Road Company, I performed in schools, detention facilities, and rehabilitation centers.

Student Letter of Introduction, Fall 2002

Our students are encouraged to consider how both examples describe experiences but with very different voices. The second example is very neutral in tone. It is difficult to identify any unique expression of the personality of the second writer.

Voice provides identity and context to the content—it reflects who the writer is as a person. Strong voice is revealed through the use of carefully chosen words, words that specifically and uniquely tell the story that the writer is trying to communicate. Hence the next section of the curriculum focuses upon word choice.

### *C) Word Choice:*

In scoring student papers for word choice, our students were asked to consider differing pairs of descriptions such as:

The beautiful colors of this morning's sunrise were awesome.  
The deep indigo and vibrant orange of this morning's sunrise were awe-inspiring.



Both of the descriptions communicate basically the same information. The second description, however, uses words that are specifically chosen to communicate certain perceptions and feelings. Being intentional about word choice leaves no doubt as to the intent of the writer. Judicious use of a thesaurus as well as jargon, slang and dialogue become important in the effective use of this trait.

In our curriculum we endeavor to transfer this knowledge to the task at hand by encouraging the use of powerful verbs and rich adjectives to bolster the clarity of voice. To make this point we encourage our students to read from yet another letter written by a peer, and while doing so, note the word choice:

After three years, I handed over the wheel of the middle school program (this student had taught drama after-school) over to others so that I could spend more time with my sons and their activities. This turned out to be a rather bumpy road as my youngest struggled academically and was finally diagnosed with learning disabilities when he entered middle school. As his mother and his advocate I witnessed a normally sunny little boy, tearfully deal with his frustrations at being labeled by educators. Concerned and also frustrated by the situation, I feared that he might become another “statistic.” I researched and found an alternative school for him to complete his education. In an atmosphere where the teachers’ instructional strategies and approaches were able to promote my son’s interests, (while still addressing required subject matter), I saw the resulting changes in his report cards and, more importantly, in his personality. I’ll admit, even I was a bit skeptical when he brought home his very first A’s and B’s and rushed to phone his teacher to find out if there was some sort of mix up, but through this very personal experience I became aware of the negative effects of labeling and the importance of acknowledging different learning styles. While a difficult time for my son and our family, this understanding will only help me when teaching students and to always be mindful of their individualities.

Student Letter of Introduction, Winter 2004

In analyzing passages like the one above, our students can discern how the words that they choose can provide their readers with an idea of who they (voice) are as well as how they might be disposed to engage in active problem solving, reflection to meet the individual needs of prospective students. Nonetheless, for many of our students, judicious use of voice and word choice can be undermined by poor organizational skills.

*D) Organization:*

When scoring student writing for organization, our students are trained to look to see if the structure that the writer uses to sequence events or details is logical and effective. They look to see if the writing has a flow that smoothly guides the reader through the content. They look for thoughtful transitions to show how ideas between paragraphs or sections are connected and to see if the writing has a clear beginning and ending. However, the genre of reflective writing called for in the ninth INTASC standard has one additional component. Anecdotes should illustrate what happened, who was involved, why things were done the way they were, and most importantly, *what was learned*. Once again, we used several excerpts from student writings to illustrate this type of organization. For example:

*What happened:*

A few summers ago, I lived in a cabin. This was no romantic log cabin: this was a camp counselor's cabin...

*Who was involved:*

Without a doubt, there was a group of boys that I will never forget—I will always remember them as the “Lord of the Flies” boys...they all had similar Beatles haircuts, sensible yet stylish clothes, listened to angry music, and went around in a little “West Side Story” gang of sorts. When I first met them, they would have nothing to do with me. I was, to them, an authority figure, not to be trusted.

*Why things were done the way they were:*

When these boys realized that we had read many of the same books in common, and also both loved math, something lit up in their eyes. Perhaps it was the realization that I could be an adult that they could relate to, and trust.

*What was learned:*

Those boys brought home an important lesson in my life: School isn't just about learning equations in math or analyzing a certain portion of text in English. While learning these essential skills should not be marginalized, I've never forgotten the times in my academic career when a teacher would somehow find a way to bring a classroom filled with diverse students to a place where they could all cooperate and trust one another...it is so important to make each student feel included.

*E) Putting it All Together-Sample Letters:*

To analyze is to break into component parts. One of the pitfalls of teaching writing by using analytic assessment can be the difficulty students can have grasping the idea of reflective writing as a whole. For this reason, we provide our students with full samples of introductory letters. The two letters that follow show instances of learning in the lives of the authors, and both show why the events included in the letters are important to the authors' decisions to become teachers.

In the case of the first example, the pre-service teacher who had worked with Huynh, Tuan, and Truong, we point out that the author uses a number of anecdotes to show the journey that led to the decision to teach. By way of contrast, in the second example, the author spends the entire letter on one pivotal experience. Both letters speak in a strong voice, choose words carefully, and are organized to clearly communicate values they have learned through reflection on their experiences.

*Example One:*

Dear Colleague,

Three young teenage boys walked into the small, dusty classroom near St. James Cathedral in Seattle and shyly offered their names, Huynh, Tuan, and Truong. They knew a little English so I breathed a sign of relief knowing it would not be necessary to start from scratch on my first tutoring assignment. What was the best way to begin? I had learned from my advisor that they had just arrived in the U.S. from a refugee camp in Singapore. Searching around together, it became clear they had undergone much suffering in their escape from Vietnam and the succeeding journey. This gave us a platform from which to build a lesson plan. We worked on the vocabulary to put the story together; boats, pirates, quiet, thirsty, storm, crying. I taught them sentence structure and use of tense with the elements of the story. Gradually they were able to describe their journey in the new language, write it down, and having achieved that, their minds were stimulated to move on to more achievements. Working with these wonderful boys and attaining a sense of accomplishment, planted the idea that one day I could become an English teacher.

I also have three sons of my own and they have presented challenges of an entirely different kind. One of them, when he was fourteen, became entirely unmanageable. He ran with a rough crowd, stayed out all night and used drugs. In working with a counselor, we were fortunate enough to get our family functioning better. I learned worlds about working with young people in staying with my son, naming expectations, following through, and finding ways of improving communication. Working through this challenging problem with my son gave me an important experience to help me to teach in our diverse and demanding school environment.

I became more convinced to become a teacher while finishing my B.A. at Antioch University four years ago. The opportunity became available to take a course in teaching English with other students in the Education cohort. I built an original curriculum with the theme “Words that Destroy, Words that Heal.” My first practice class was about a black blues singer from the Mississippi Delta named Son House. Most students responded positively to the lesson. How shocked I was when one of the students, an African American female, said that a white person cannot be qualified to teach about black people and their experiences! This made for an interesting discussion and even more important, provided a valuable experience for me in being confronted in the teaching role and dealing with it openly, but firmly.

I now have the opportunity to make a change in my career. After 25 years in the computing business I plan to become a secondary school Language Arts teacher. Why such a transformation? In working with young people in different contexts and facing challenges, I feel a sense of mission to convince them that they need to learn to read well, write well, listen well, and speak well to be successful. A lifelong love of drama, novels, and poetry fuels my desire to teach literature

Currently I am a student in the Masters program at Western Washington University in the Woodring College of Education. Now that I am in a formal course of study and getting closer to understanding what is required of the classroom teacher, my anticipation increases. I look forward to the adventure ahead in an actual classroom. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Student Letter of Introduction, Winter 2004

*Example Two:*

Dear Colleague:

Fourth grade was a traumatic year for me. I managed to set a record for missed assignments and had a difficult time adjusting to my teacher’s idea that I must be responsible for my own work.

Fifth grade improved. I was beginning to understand that life in Mr. O’s world was relatively simple. If students completed their work, things were pretty fun. We launched rockets, attended the theatre, and used computers

far more advanced than those in other classrooms. While all of these things stick with me, one moment stands out with stunning clarity.

We were to give oral reports on the presidents of the United States. After our oral report was complete, we were to conduct a press conference playing the role of our assigned president. My report on John F. Kennedy went pretty well and I was feeling fairly confident as I began my press conference.

It is important to note that we had a preternaturally politically aware group of students. One of the students, a fellow fifth grader, asked me (Kennedy) who the minority-whip was while I served in the Congress. I had no idea what a minority whip was, let alone who held this position, so I did what I figured any good politician would do, I dodged the question. I said that with the pressing business of the presidency on my mind I had forgotten this minor piece of information, but that one of my aids would provide this fact later.

At this point Mr. O stopped my press conference. I took a deep breath, preparing to be reproached for my misdirection. Instead, Mr. O complimented me. He told me, and the class, that I had done exactly what a president would have done and that this was the essence of the assignment. I learned two things from that lesson that I have carried with me throughout my educational and work experiences.

First, words are powerful. The ability to communicate ideas to a group of people and to incite thought is a wonderful and important thing. Second, there are few people more important than master teachers.

Every instance I have had to teach, lead, or mentor students over the course of my career I have thought of this experience. Be it as a Forest Ranger discussing salmon stream restoration with a group of sixth graders or leading college students into the wilderness, I have tried to use experiences to create a context for learning. Throughout these opportunities I have discovered a profound joy in helping others learn. It is my hope to continue helping others learn as I pursue a career in education.

Thank You,

Student Letter of Introduction, Winter 2004

By highlighting the traits of voice, word choice, and organization, and providing our students with many examples, students can clearly see what effective analytical, descriptive and reflective writing looked like. The above examples give form to some previously vague concepts, and solidify what was expected for this very important assignment. These examples, coupled with extensive time for peer editing and critique,

clearly illustrate for our students the importance of being a good, reflective writer, no matter the content area.

### Discussion

The field of secondary level literacy methods courses has come a long way since Gray popularized the idea that every teacher should be a teacher of reading. More and more pre-service content-area teachers come to our classes interested in learning ways to nurture their students' abilities to read to learn. However, the connection between reading and writing still eludes many who haven't yet realized the value of modeling and teaching their students how to write to learn. While in the process of aligning our department's curriculum with national performance standards our attention was drawn to the ninth INTASC standard which prescribes that professional educators should be reflective practitioners. As content literacy methods instructors, we saw this as an opportunity to meet two challenges with one adjustment in curriculum. By devising an authentic reflective writing assignment that spoke to the ninth standard we could, at the same time, help our students make the reading and writing connection and better understand the value of writing to learn.

Upon completion of this new writing assignment, it is not unusual for our students to reflect and share their perceptions of its value. Their comments are often unsolicited, but many appear on our confidential formal class evaluations at the end of the quarter. In these comments students speak of the significance of being given an assignment that is both "high stakes" and "authentic." One student wrote, "I was happy to have the opportunity to show a potential cooperating teacher who I am and how my experiences will affect my teaching style." Another wrote, "I now understand what you meant when you said that writing is thinking and that we don't understand what we know until we see our own words explaining the meaning of our own experiences."

Pre-service teachers from content areas where writing is rarely required, and/or those who have not had opportunities to receive peer-input on their writing, express gratitude for the support they are given by other students in the class, the graduate assistants, and the instructor. Many of these same students share the appreciation of the multiple deadline "layered" method of the writing process. Often students remark that had they been left to their own devices, they would have put off the assignment until the last moment, resulting in letters that would not be nearly as effective. In the words of one student, "I really appreciated all of the support we received throughout this process. I don't consider myself a very strong writer, so I was glad to have the curriculum as well as my peers' input as a guide."

This curriculum helped our students understand the specific composition skills required to become better analytic, descriptive, and reflective writers. By being deliberate in our guidelines, we clearly articulated for our students the steps they could take to craft writing that reflects their lived experiences. For example, one student wrote, "It was neat to be able to reflect upon my own history, and how I've always been moving towards becoming a teacher, even if I wasn't always aware of it."

Indeed, the task of reflective writing is new to many pre-service content-area teachers and, very honestly, until we embarked on this new curriculum we hadn't considered how important our role could be in teaching it. The significance of the type of curriculum we developed may have additional significance for school of education graduates, who are seeking "second stage" or advanced certificates. Over 40 states require teachers to meet additional requirements beyond those required for their first certificate (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 2004, p. D-1) and many states now encourage their teachers to seek National Board Professional Teacher Certification (NBPTC). Many second stage certificate processes and the NBPTC process require portfolios which are evaluated based upon the teacher's ability to read and interpret the written language of standards, and to compose descriptive, analytic and reflective writing about how their teaching meets them (Burroughs, 2001). Hence, in order to be successful, teachers must make connections between what they read about teaching, how they teach, and how they write about their teaching. As content literacy specialists, this has always been our intention, and this curriculum is our first step in helping pre-service teachers articulate their understandings of reflective practice.

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