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The Collaborative Evolution of the Writing Teacher Educator and the Methods Course

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The challenges and rewards of the writing methods course—as a unique site of competing binaries and commitments in teacher education—are documented in this journal and well known to writing teacher educators. Yet, little of the field’s research focuses on those teaching the methods course and how they prepare to teach it in their particular contexts. At some colleges and universities, one person teaches the methods class, while at other universities, many people teach the class in rotation. Some are trained directly or indirectly to teach the course, while others fall into teaching the course because of specialization in writing studies. While teaching the writing methods course is often an isolated endeavor—with one person responsible for the course in a given semester, a more collaborative approach to the course has the potential to offer teaching support and pedagogical innovation, especially in response to local needs. In this article, we describe a collaborative approach to preparing graduate students for teaching the methods class at our university. We will document the approach to preparation, our connections to the methods course itself, the tensions in the methods course that we identified in working together, and the important choices about and modifications we made to the course based on the tensions we identified. Our collaborative approach to preparing and planning for the methods class gave us a deep understanding of our context and unique challenges as we evolved the course.

The Methods Course at Arizona State University

The methods course at Arizona State University (ASU) is distinctive because it is multilayered. We have a traditional undergraduate Methods of Teaching Writing course (ENG 480) that primarily serves preservice teachers in traditional teacher preparation programs in the Teachers College and the English Department. We also have a 500-level Methods of Teaching Writing course (ENG 507). This graduate-level course enrolls post-baccalaureate pre-service teachers, in-service teachers enrolled in the M.A. in English Education, and Ph.D. students interested in writing and enrolled in the Ph.D. in the English Education program or

other related programs (i.e., Writing, Rhetoric, and Literacies). The undergraduate course is often staffed by advanced Ph.D. students based on staffing needs, while the graduate course is staffed by tenure-stream faculty.

In preparation to teach the undergraduate methods course, Ph.D. students enroll in a three-credit-hour internship course. In this internship, the Ph.D. student works under the supervision of a tenure-stream faculty member to prepare to teach the methods course by preparing a syllabus, choosing readings and topics, creating assignment/project descriptions, and designing assessment materials. The faculty member and Ph.D. meet regularly to review model syllabi, discuss the curriculum goals, negotiate points of tension, and brainstorm in response to questions. On the whole, this is a recursive and collaborative process. The authors of this article all recently participated in the internship process. Nicole and Ginette are Ph.D. students, and Christina is an Associate Professor of English Education. In the past year, both Nicole and Ginette enrolled in the internship to prepare to teach the undergraduate Methods of Teaching Writing course. Our work together spurred us to consider our own evolutions as teacher educators and the ways that impact the content of the writing methods course.

Positioning Ourselves in Relation to the Methods Course

As we worked collaboratively, we acknowledged that understanding our relationship to the methods course is an integral part of how we approached the course, what we value, and how we perceive the needs of the students.

Ginette: As part of my teacher preparation program in the 1990s in New Jersey, I never took a writing methods course. I spent a lot of time in practicums where I was mentored by teachers who used scripted curricula, and that was my only experience with teaching writing. After seventeen years in the classroom, I entered the Master's program at ASU and enrolled in the graduate-level methods course (ENG 507). In the Methods course, I saw my teaching as disconnected from the theories in the field, and I was revitalized as a teacher. The following year, I enrolled in the Ph.D. English Education program and once again took the methods course. This time around, I used the course to help solidify my perspective and collaborate on projects with other teachers in my cohort who were also challenging the pedagogical traditions of teaching writing in the classroom setting.

Nicole: My journey with the writing methods course at ASU began when I took ENG 480: Methods of Teaching Writing in the spring of 2011 as an undergraduate, pre-service teacher. After one year of teaching high school English, I found myself back in the graduate-level version of the course, ENG 507, while working towards obtaining my M.A. in English Education. Then, five years later, I found myself back in ENG 507 for a second time as a Ph.D. student. My journey with the course has taken me from the eager student with no teaching experience

through teaching in a lock-step, standardized testing-focused curriculum and now on to preparing to teach the course.

Christina: I earned my teaching credential in a state with a post-baccalaureate teacher licensure program, so I never had a course on methods of teaching writing, specifically, until I pursued my M.A. in Composition and Rhetoric. As an advanced Ph.D. student, I taught both the practicum for new TAs in the English Department and the writing methods course for undergraduate students. At ASU, I have taught both the undergraduate and graduate level Methods of Teaching Writing course at least once per academic year. Additionally, I have supervised several students in the internship course to prepare to teach writing methods.

Common Points of Tension

Working collaboratively to design methods course syllabi gave us space to identify and discuss in depth some common points of tension that we have observed in our teaching contexts and the methods course. This approach allowed us to consider these tensions from multiple perspectives and experiences and collaboratively reflect on what they mean for the methods class at ASU.

Lack of Autonomy: When Nicole first started teaching, she left the methods class with exciting and engaging techniques to implement into her future classroom, but she hit a roadblock when she learned her new district had a lockstep curriculum. In this curricular model, each teacher in the district teaches the same lesson on the same day in every class at that grade level. Many districts in our metro area use a district-level lock-step curriculum. Even when this is not mandated, there is often an expectation that professional learning communities (PLCs) will follow a curriculum in lock-step form. Nicole's experience mirrors that of pre-service teachers enrolled simultaneously in the course and internships in local schools. These teachers start the semester imagining teaching as autonomous and creative and find themselves disheartened by lockstep curricula.

A compounding factor to lack of autonomy is the pressure of high-stakes testing, which includes a writing test in our state. Teachers feel that their students' scores reflect their teaching, especially since merit pay and school are tied to test scores. These demands can be overwhelming for a first-year teacher and remain overwhelming even for veteran teachers. It would be easy for a professor in the methods course to simply downplay the pressures of standardized testing and lockstep curricula if they have not been in the classroom for years. It is understandable that a new teacher concerned about test scores might default to formulaic writing form-first writing (Rowlands, 2016) as a "quick fix" for fixing writing test scores (Wiley, 2000). Even teachers who learn not to teach formulas as

part of writing instruction often find themselves doing so when professional pressure sets in (Smagornisky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002).

Moving Beyond the Essay: As a current middle-school ELA teacher, Ginette feels compelled to prepare students to write in high school the same way that high school teachers feel the pressure to prepare students for college writing. Throughout her teaching career, she utilized programs such as 6 Traits, then 6 + 1, Jane Schaffer, and more recently, the T.E.A.C.H model (Topic sentence, evidence, analysis, conclusion, high five). This preparation pedagogy centers the five-paragraph essay with an increased focus on argument and persuasion. In our experiences teaching (and taking) the methods course, we encounter pre-service and in-service teachers' comfort with the essay and what Rowlands calls form-first writing, in which the form or formula for writing is more critical than content. Many pre-service teachers coming to the methods course were taught a form-first approach to writing centered on the five-paragraph essay model. It's unsurprising, then, that these teachers would want to teach this way. After all, when teachers use this model of writing instruction, it minimizes the messiness of teaching writing, students perform successfully enough on standardized tests, and they feel like their students are prepared for college.

Boundary Crossing: In years of working with pre-service and in-service teachers, one of the primary challenges that Christina often encounters is teachers' need for answers. Teaching is such a vulnerable act, and teachers want to have and display expertise. In some ways, this desire for answers results in the formulaic approaches that Ginette and Nicole wrote about. Formulas can be comforting for new teachers because they give *an answer* or one singular approach to writing. This need for answers manifests itself in the "getting them ready" approach to teaching writing. This is understandable; there is tremendous pressure to prepare middle school students for high school writing and high school students for college writing. "Getting them ready" can be challenging, though, because it often neglects where students currently are as writers and is based on promises that may or may not be true depending on the high school or college the student attends. Christina often has teachers ask her to speak to high school students about what they need to be prepared for high school writing. At a university the size of ASU, with hundreds of people teaching first-year writing alone, it is difficult to tell students what assignments or teacher expectations they might encounter. The most prepared writer is often the flexible writer who has a method for approaching new writing genres.

In discussing this need for answers among pre-service and in-service teachers in the methods class, we thought about the concepts of boundary guarding and boundary-crossing that come out of genre studies. According to Reiff and Bawarshi, Boundary guarders are "students who seemed to guard more tightly and

engage in low-road transfer of their prior genre knowledge, even in the face of new and disparate tasks” (325). Conversely, boundary crossers are “students who engaged in high-road transfer as they repurposed and reimagined their prior genre knowledge for use in new contexts” (325). When students in the methods course are fixated on *the* correct approach to teaching writing, they often act as boundary guarders who hold tightly to formulas or forms. What we hope for students in the methods class is that they will cross boundaries and approach the knowledge in the methods class with openness and consider how they can use their prior knowledge and new knowledge to be flexible writing teachers who develop flexible writers in their classes.

Curricular Fusion: A Collaborative Approach

Our conversations about these points of tension throughout the internships led to what we are calling a curricular fusion. In curricular fusion, we account for and acknowledge the constraints on teachers inherent in these tensions and make changes to our methods course syllabi that balance best practices in writing teacher education with the realities of teaching in Arizona classrooms.

Broad Curricular Change: To help teachers develop into flexible boundary-crossing writing teachers after the methods class, we have taken a genre-based approach to the course. While genre theory is certainly not new and genre was always part of the curriculum in the methods course, the move to a primary genre focus values the flexibility in approaches to teaching writing that often seem out of reach for students.

A genre-based approach gives teachers a set of questions to approach writing, thereby acknowledging the need for answers. In a genre-based approach, writers ask: 1) What is this genre? 2) What are the elements of this genre? 3) Who is the audience for this genre? 4) What is the purpose of this genre? 5) Why might I choose this genre for this writing context? These questions invite pre-service teachers to think critically about how writing works in their students’ world. Can a student achieve a writing standard in a genre other than the essay? Might another genre be even more effective?

We all have some common approaches to genre in our methods courses. All of us teach theories of genre fairly early in the course and invite students in the methods course to experiment with different genres throughout the course. Christina organizes her course readings by genre and teaches a mini-lesson on each week's new genre. When students do their practice teaching, Christina invites them to teach a new genre to the class. Nicole focuses her genre teaching on Andrew-Vaughn and Fleischer’s “Unfamiliar Genre Project,” inviting each student in the methods course to do an unfamiliar genre project of their own. Ginette culminates her class with a genre-based unit plan. The genre-based approach encourages pre-

service and in-service teachers to develop flexibility in their teaching while acknowledging the need for expertise and the pressure to prepare their own students to become boundary-crossing writers.

Helping Teachers Move Beyond the Essay: In moving beyond the essay, multi-modal projects can become a longstanding approach to helping teachers and students use a fresh approach to writing in the classroom. However, we recognize that *assignment-relevant* writing using the computer is the same as form-first writing appeared on paper. We do not simply want students to use computers as word processors (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Therefore, we modified our methods courses to include purposeful multimodal assignments and genres. Daily, we use digital tools such as Google Slides, PowerPoint, Jamboard, etc. We also help pre-service teachers translate text-based genres into multimodal genres. For example, we all teach infographics. The parts of an infographic are reminiscent of a five-paragraph essay; therefore, this is a great tool for seeing how what they know to teach can be transferred into a multi-modal deliverable that students are more inclined to partake in.

Another example of a multi-modal project incorporating the components of an essay using argumentative writing is the proposal. While proposals have some of the same elements as an essay— ideas, research, evidence, and a persuasive narrative that connects the reader to its audience—the audience focus of a digital proposal encourages teachers in the methods class to think about how writing beyond the essay can be powerful. Ginette brings many multimodal genres together into a larger digital project: developing a proposal, designing a website, and weekly blogging. These genres are relevant trends that students and teachers benefit from writing fluently in. With many schools moving towards incorporating technology and providing a 1:1 ratio of computers to students, the methods class must equip teachers to move beyond the essay use computers as more than just word processors.

Transparency About Autonomy: In preparing students for the many variables they may encounter when entering their classrooms, we focused on providing experiences and ideas for maintaining autonomy.

Since PLCs are a popular collaborative method utilized by a majority of school districts, many first-year teachers will find themselves assigned to one unknowingly and will attend weekly meetings with the other members assigned to their PLC. Upon interacting with these PLCs, first-year teachers may also find that the lockstep curriculum is praised and prioritized during these meetings, and veteran teachers (while trying to be helpful) may praise their practices over what the first-year teacher brings with them from the methods course. In response to this, Nicole provides opportunities for her students to interact in a PLC collaborative approach within the methods course that allows them to work with their peers to

practice the negotiation skills necessary to feel comfortable in sharing their insights and ideas in this type of environment.

Another practice we all share in the methods course is teaching how to approach the required standards and curriculum while also taking on a creative approach to addressing them by being transparent with our own experiences with the tensions. For example, we model and have students practice how to adapt the curriculum to best fit the needs of their students. They learn how to integrate the theories-based best practices they learned in the methods course while maintaining the curricular expectations. Students are encouraged to do this by utilizing different genres to adapt existing projects and papers (for example, taking a standard research essay and adapting it into a podcast episode). By sharing our own experiences in the classroom and the modifications we have made using the genre approach, we hope to encourage the methods course students to do the same.

Collaborative Connections

We have represented here our process of working collaboratively to plan the methods class at ASU. The model we use at ASU for preparing teachers to teach the methods class is unique in many ways. First, we have both an undergraduate and graduate-level writing methods course. This provides teachers and potential teachers, our graduate students, with multiple contact points and experiences with the methods class. As Nicole and Ginette noted, their multiple contact points shaped how they prepared to teach the course. For Christina, teaching the same course to undergraduates, graduate students, pre-service, and in-service teachers provides a unique way to think about the needs of writing teachers at many points in their careers.

Second, we all benefit from a collaborative approach to the course. Ginette and Nicole both learned from Christina as students. But, Christina also learned from Ginette and Nicole's current school experiences and their work together during the internship. Together we participated in a recursive process of reading, discussing, and planning that teachers of the methods course may not always have access to. This collaborative model for course planning gave Ph.D. students Ginette and Nicole close mentoring in preparing to teach the course and gave Christina access to questions and innovative ideas based on practice that she may not have otherwise. Finally, through this collaborative evolution of the methods course, we learned how to better meet the needs of students in the methods course as they develop into effective and flexible writing teachers in our local contexts.

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