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Imagining the Possible: Reflections on Teaching a Writing Methods Course for Pre-Service Undergraduate Secondary English/Language Arts Teachers

Emily S. Meixner
The College of New Jersey, meixner@tcnj.edu

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Cover Page Footnote
A special thank you to secondary English education students Lauren Tragale and Zoe Talbot for allowing me to use images from their writer's notebooks and coursework in this essay

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Imagining the Possible: Reflections on Teaching a Writing Methods Course for Pre-Service Undergraduate Secondary English/Language Arts Teachers

Emily S. Meixner, *The College of New Jersey*

When prospective secondary English education students solicit information about the program sequence at the small, public, comprehensive, northeastern, suburban college where I work, one of its selling points, I always tell them, is that it includes a course dedicated to the teaching of writing. “English Education students take an *entire* class just on writing pedagogy,” I explain, often gesticulating with great enthusiasm.

“Oh really?” they say. “Huh.” And they (and their parents) nod ambiguously before moving on to ask about clinical experiences and job placement rates.

Given their reactions, I am pretty sure an *entire* class just on writing pedagogy is not the reason why they eventually decide to enroll, but I hope their awareness of it at least makes them pause and (re)consider what they are going to need to know and know how to do to become English teachers.

I have been teaching Teaching Writing, the course’s title, since I was hired at my college nearly two decades ago, and I remember being surprised at that time that such a class existed. In my experience in teacher education, the only writing-specific methods instruction I encountered in my professional training as an undergraduate as well as in my graduate studies was enfolded into the one English secondary methods course I was required to take to apply for certification. I wish I still had a copy of the book we read for that class: *Explorations in the Teaching of English (3rd ed.)* by Stephen Tchudi. I loved its green and pink cover.

My experience remains commonplace in many teacher education programs across the country. Students who want to become middle and high school English teachers enroll in methods classes, but very few of those classes are solely dedicated to the teaching of writing. Rather, instructors of those courses, if they are English-specific, are trying to juggle overfull curricula in which unit and lesson planning,

reading and literature instruction, young adult literature, and writing are all "addressed" at some point. As a result, Chris Lehman points out in "When Early-Career Educators Learn to Teach Writing," novice English teachers typically receive little to no formal training in the teaching of writing (2017). Writing instruction, if it happens at all, comes through collegial mentoring or in the act of writing and reflecting on writing with their own students (p. 42). And these moments happen only if mentors are available and willing, districts provide "purposeful, practical, and ongoing professional learning opportunities," and/or the teacher recognizes a gap in their own professional knowledge and seeks out experiences through organizations like the National Council of Teacher of English or the National Writing Project (p. 41). Writes Lehman, "instead scrutiny needs to be placed on how much and to what quality preservice educators are learning about the teaching of writing" (p. 41). To that end, I offer up my reflections on the writing methods course and students I teach.

My students typically enroll in this class in the fall or spring of their junior year, having already taken the secondary education's three-course introductory sequence in educational foundations, adolescent psychology, and special education. Teaching Writing is thus their first discipline-specific methods course and is followed by a course in content area reading and two additional methods courses: one general, and one English-specific. This second English methods course emphasizes reading and literature instruction and is paired with a semester-long clinical practicum.

Because Teaching Writing is the first discipline-specific methods course the secondary English students encounter, it is organized around five primary outcomes:

1. Building students' identities and confidence as teacher-writers.
2. Developing students' capacity to read and discuss what they read and write like writers.
3. Familiarizing students with basic grammatical structures and in-context grammar instruction as well as introducing them to the linguistic justice movement and the problem of anti-black linguistic racism.
4. Immersing students in writer's workshop methodology.
5. Introducing students to genre and standards-based unit planning and assessment.

These outcomes are summarized for students in the following description included on the syllabus:

"This course is intended to better prepare you to engage your future students in successful and purposeful writing experiences as you enter secondary classrooms as English teachers. As we examine a variety of student-centered methods for teaching writing, you will be required to keep a writer's notebook, familiarize yourself with and compose in a variety of genres, develop genre-based writing lessons and a writing unit overview, assemble a portfolio in which you showcase and reflect upon your written work, articulate your own instructional vision, and develop corresponding (i.e. pedagogically and politically consistent) practices. Additionally, and in order to "imagine the possible" for your students, you will be asked to revisit your own history as a writer and explore how your unique experiences continue to inform and shape your developing practice."

What this looks like on the ground evolves every semester as my professional knowledge and understanding of my students' needs develop, but what follows is a portrait of where we are currently and my thinking about how to work toward each of the five outcomes.

(1) To build students' identities and confidence as teacher-writers.

The majority of students who decide to major in secondary English education see themselves as readers. Some of them aren't currently reading beyond the scope of their college courses, but most of them have sizable to-read lists they are longing to get to in the little free time they have. Fewer students claim writer identities with as much certainty. They write papers, but they don't necessarily equate writing literary analyses with being "writers." What it means to them to "be a writer" varies widely, and they often associate being a writer with being creative, feeling compelled to write, enjoying writing, or having been published.

Similarly, their feelings about themselves as writers vary. Some students are confident and autonomous, particularly about writing academic essays; however, many students' writer-identities are deeply rooted in their academic experiences as students (K-12 and college) and the feedback – verbal, written, and grades – they have received from teachers and professors. Their identities are also tied to their experiences (or lack of experiences) writing in a variety of genres: poetry, prose fiction, prose non-fiction, and/or other visual or multimodal forms.

While they have thought about teaching writing as part of their work as English teachers, it is often in the abstract and few have imagined themselves writing in public, writing with their future students and even for them. Very few have thought about their role as a writing mentor and how their teaching might require them to not only assign and grade a variety of writing tasks, but also model them, writing "beside" students (Kittle, 2008).

As a result, the first few weeks of class prioritize identity work, developing a writing habitus, and taking risks/engaging in writing play. Students reflect on their experiences as writers and introduce themselves through writing. They practice engaging with mentor texts as write *abouts* (making observations about a text and reflecting on what is happening to us as readers as we encounter it), *froms* (using something in the text as a launching pad for our own writing) and *likes* (trying on craft moves used by the author, but populating them with our own content). We begin developing writers' notebooks with the help of authors such as Ralph Fletcher (2003) and Penny Kittle (2008), examining Kittle's gorgeous examples as well as those former students and I have created. We follow the advice of Nancie Atwell (2015) and Georgia Heard (2016) and create writing territories and/or heart-maps in our writer's notebooks. We practice expanding on our territories to identify self-generated writing topics. We select texts and prompts from Linda Rief's *The Quickwrite Handbook* to try out (2018). We condense our lives into 30 words. We write and we practice sharing our writing using the "Bless, Press, and Address" protocol developed by the National Writing Project.

Here are just a few examples of the kinds of writing students and I generate in the first few weeks of class (see figs. 1-3). A profound thank you to students Lauren Tragale and Zoe Talbot for allowing me to spotlight their work.

Figure 1: Zoe's Territories + Expansion

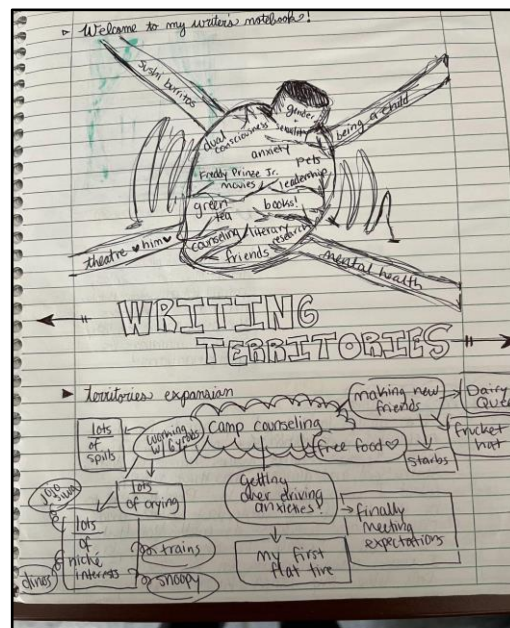


Figure 2: Lauren's "My Life in 30 Words"

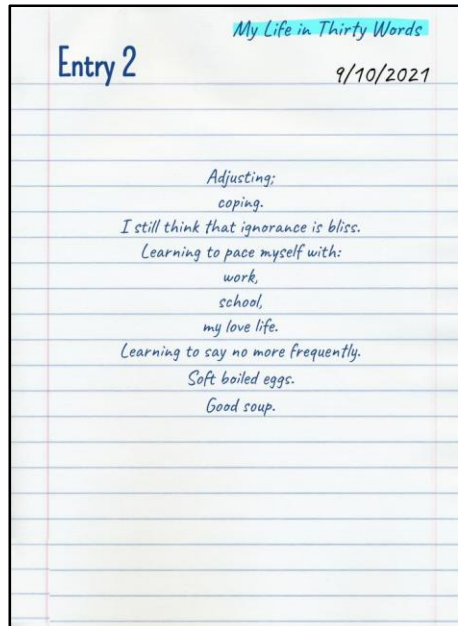


Figure 3: My Self- Introduction Example

Emily: A Recipe

*On the occasion that you might need a teacher or some teaching ideas.

1 c. of easy laughter
1T. of hearty midwestern reserve
½ c. of pointless worrying, usually late at night when there's nothing to be done
1 c. of long walks and deep breaths
A sprinkle of creativity
A spark of an idea (or two)
¼ c. of patience. *Note: The recipe often requires more, depending on the time of day or the company in which it's eaten
No less than 3 good books, half finished.
1 large splash of iced coffee with vanilla oatmilk creamer

Blend in a small bowl with joy, a playlist of pop music, at least one show tune (belted out in the kitchen or the car), and a couple of enthusiastic dance moves (may require stretching before and after).

Cook in a small house with a spouse and a teenage son, or let simmer in a cool office at the local college campus.

May be served cold or hot. Best served warm in the fall with a cardigan sweater and a side of M&Ms.

*Not to be confused with the apparently many, many Emily's in TCNJ's class of '25.

All of this activity generates increased interest in and enthusiasm for writing. It enables students to try out a variety of genres, and it provides them opportunities to write in ways many of them say they haven't written since elementary or middle school. This kind of writing play, then, becomes the foundation on which the rest of the semester and students' confidence and sense of themselves as teacher-writers is built. It begins to help them see that their writing identities aren't rooted in grades or feedback or genre knowledge, but rather that their "writing identities have been generated by [their] life experiences"(Kittle & Gallagher, 2022, p. 114).

(2) To develop students' capacity to read and discuss what they read and write like writers.

As the students reacquaint themselves with what's possible in their own writing, they are also introduced to the idea of "mentor texts" (Atwell, 2015; Gallagher, 2014; Kittle, 2008; Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015, 2021; Rief 2018). The mentor texts we use come from a variety of diverse sources and authors: poems, novels, and other multimodal texts that I bring to class, examples from Rief's *The Quickwrite Handbook* (2018), articles from news and online publications that I send students to, and texts they've encountered and loved in their own lives.

Our conversations about these texts often begin with preferences, with students identifying what they like in a particular text or what really works for them as a reader. These discussions then move into general craft observations. Although some of my students are comfortable talking in terms of a text's craft, others are not, so to provide support and build shared language, I give them this craft chart (see fig. 4) inspired by one that Katie Cubano, a former student and current instructional coach, was given by her cooperating teacher Kimberly Cordella and used with her middle and high school students.

One of my favorite texts to use to practice talking about craft with students is David Haskell's *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature* (2013). Small excerpts taken from virtually anywhere in the book become rich fodder for examination; a personal favorite is "February 28th–Salamander." Or I will use a scene from a contemporary YA novel like Kacen Callender's *Felix Ever After*. Usually, I will organize students into pairs or groups for craft studies, asking each group to dive deeply into one craft category and then to share out or jigsaw their findings with their peers. If students are reporting back to the entire class, I will take notes, annotating the text on the document camera. Once the students have used this chart on several different texts, I ask them to annotate an excerpt of their own choosing in their writer's notebooks (see fig. 5).

Figure 4: Katie's Modified Craft Chart

What does it mean to "notice craft"?

What am I noticing?	What about _____ am I noticing?
Word Choice & Language	Specific nouns Strong verbs Use of adjectives and adverbs (are they necessary, especially adverbs) Precise Adjectives Content specific vocabulary Word sound combinations Repeated words
Sentence Structure	Sentence Variety Fragments Listing Repetition
Punctuation	Punctuation effect Punctuation options
Figurative Language	Comparisons (Metaphors, Similes) Allusions Personification Sounds (Onomatopoeia) Hyperbole or Understatement Imagery Irony
Formatting	Visual Impact
Organizational Structure (and Content)	Idea Flow/Idea Relationships Transitions (Internal, Between paragraphs) Form & Function Paragraphing
Point of View	Singular Multiple POV effect (narrative, dialogue, details, emphasis, what's not said)

Figure 5: Lauren's Annotation for Craft

Annotated Mentor Text

Entry #12

9/24/2021

Mentor Text from Reif's Quickwrite, page 37, "Apparently" by Stacie D.

Apparently
By Stacie D.

Apparently, my birth mom didn't hold me
Apparently, she didn't even know who my dad was
She didn't give me a name
Apparently, she never even saw me

My adoptive mom tells me
It is hard to give up a child
It is motherly instinct
Apparently, my birth mom didn't have any
For me

I have pictures
The orphanage workers
Put my hair in a waterfall
The clothes they had for me didn't fit
So they put layers of clothes on me
I looked like a living marshmallow!
Apparently, I was malnourished
When I came to the United States all I knew
Was boiled eggs

Apparently, my birth mom drank when I was inside of her
My adoptive mom says
I have FASD, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
I feel like my birth mom didn't care about me
Because
She didn't hold me
She didn't know my dad
She didn't give me a name
She never even saw me

Apparently

TRY THIS (as specifically and as quickly as you can for 2–3 minutes)

- Write out anything this poem brings to mind for you.
- Borrow any line, letting the line lead your thinking in any direction.
- Take the word *apparently*, and write out all that comes to mind when you start with just that word.

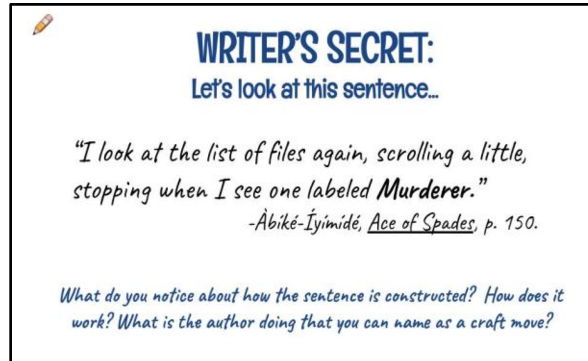
(3) To familiarize students with basic grammatical structures and in-context grammar instruction as well as the linguistic justice movement and the problem of anti-black linguistic racism

Alongside our developing exploration of craft are on-going conversations about grammar and the politics of grammar instruction, including the privileging of white mainstream English and the reality of anti-black linguistic racism. For many of my students, grammar ("knowing" grammar as well as teaching it) is a source of significant anxiety and tension. They have often felt the negative impact of grammar policing in their own academic writing experiences, and while they state emphatically that they don't want to replicate this kind of punitive surveillance in their teaching, they are not sure they have other options. My students are also vocal about their lack of confidence identifying grammatical structures, terms, and rules.

My efforts to address these concerns and insecurities have varied methodologically over the years, but I am currently attempting a three-pronged approach that extends through much of the first half of the course. Prong One is to frame grammar instruction as *empowering inquiry* (Anderson, 2005; Shanahan, 2021). Many of my students have encountered sentence editing practices in the form of Daily Oral Language or something similar. We talk together about why that approach doesn't stick and I am always encouraged when my students comment that seeing poorly written, out-of-context sentences on a regular basis is problematic. They also talk about how during this kind of editing work they felt pressured to find the "one right answer," how they were uncertain of rules they were expected to know, and how they recognized that different varieties of English, particularly black English were depicted as wrong.

As an alternative, I have drawn on Jeff Anderson's recommendations in *Mechanically Inclined* (2005) and *Patterns of Power* (2021) to combine and model a study of exciting mentor sentences with more explicit instruction on specific grammatical concepts (Prong Two) that enrich student writing at the sentence level, something I started attending to more deliberately after reading Martin Brandt's *Between the Commas* (2019). Here's an example (see fig. 6) of what the students encounter in class.

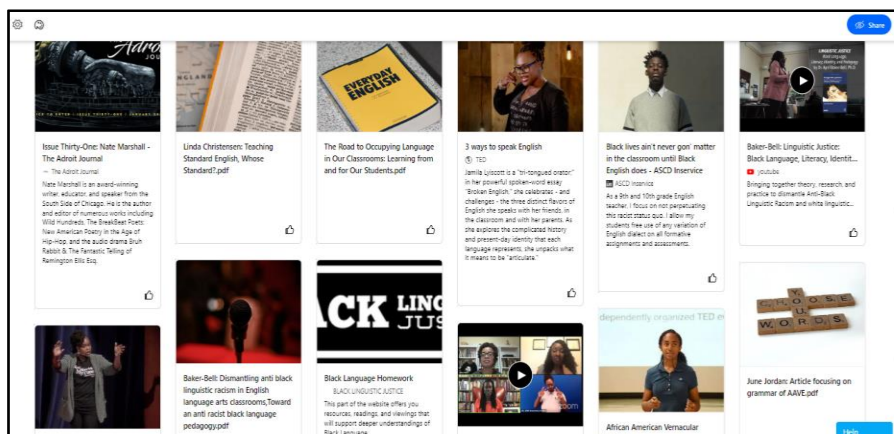
Figure 6: An example Writer's Secret Sentence



These sentences also provide students an opportunity to return again to their craft charts and consider word choice, punctuation, and figurative language. This particular example became an opportunity for us to appreciate the author's use repetition and parallel structure, and the power of a good participle (or, as Brandt calls it, an "ing-bomb).

Layered into this instruction are readings, conversations, and written reflections on linguistic privilege, linguistic justice, and anti-black linguistic racism (Prong Three). Discussions of language and power have been central to the course since its inception, but in the past several years, particularly after reading April Baker-Bell's (2020) work and identifying misconceptions and gaps in my own thinking, I have been more intentional about these conversations and the resources I curate for students to examine and discuss (see fig. 7).

Figure 7: Our Developing Wakelet Collection of Linguistic Justice Resources



Investing the course with these resources along with a selection of Writer's Secret sentences that model varieties of English and the integration of home and native languages has been critical to my students' thinking about what's both acceptable and possible in their future students' writing. These resources raise necessary questions, but they also offer meaningful answers and provide tangible instructional strategies as my students begin imagining and then developing their own unit and accompanying lesson plans.

(4) To immerse students in writer's workshop methodology

The number of students who have participated in a writing workshop at the secondary level varies widely every semester. When I break out the writer's notebooks on the first day of class, many students recall using them or something similar at some point in their education, usually in elementary or middle school, or they trace them back to a high school creative writing elective. When we talk about studying mentor texts or writing with their teacher or mini-lessons dedicated to investigating writer's craft, they mostly scrunch up their faces and look pained, but they're also curious and open-minded. Therefore, throughout the semester, I strive to model writing workshop protocols whenever I can. The writer's notebook is a constant presence, and I carve out time each week for us to read together, talk about a shared text, write together, share our writing with each other, and metaprocess our writing decisions publicly in small groups or as a class. Of course I want my students to experience these processes as students, but even more importantly I want them to be able to envision these workshop practices *as teachers.* Sometimes they do, other times they don't or can't because their identities as students are more visceral and immediate, but the goal remains.

Because of the nature of the class (one 3-hour seminar a week), the workshop aspects I struggle most to replicate are the sequenced mini-lessons and the facilitated writing time with conferences. Although we watch and debrief videos of writing conferences (thank you, Penny Kittle), the closest approximations we have been able to achieve in class are peer feedback collaborations.

In terms of the mini-lessons, students develop and teach these to each other at the end of the semester (see fig. 8).

Figure 8: My example mini-lesson agenda

Today's Agenda:

Lesson Question: How and why do authors use repetition in their picture books?

Mini-Lesson: Incorporating repetition in our picture books

Workshop Task: Revising with repetition in mind.

What you'll need today…

- Your WNB (turn to the page with your picture book craft chart)
- A highlighter
- Something else (pen or pencil) to write with

Although their mini-lesson sharing can't adequately capture the day-to-day movement and momentum of a secondary workshop, they offer some insight, and my students have an opportunity to assume the mantle of a writing teacher, identifying mentor texts, modeling writing, and envisioning workshop tasks. They also learn general and genre-specific craft techniques from each other which they put into their teaching files or incorporate into their own writing.

(5) To introduce students to lesson and genre and standards-based unit planning and assessment.

Much of the last half of the course is dedicated to genre-based unit and lesson design (Lattimer, 2002; Kittle & Gallagher, 2022). I want my students to leave the course having experienced the process of building a 2-3 week writing unit on a genre of interest to them. To assist, I provide genre options with which they are familiar (narrative poetry, flash-fiction, and news stories) as well as other genre and multimodal possibilities with which they are not (for example, sports writing, contemporary essays, graphic short stories, and photo essays).

Because this is the first time many of my students have engaged in curriculum building, we begin by looking at our state's writing standards and analyzing how they are organized. Students quickly discern that the three modes of writing in the standards – narrative, informational, and argumentative writing – are presented as if they are discrete entities. We also discuss what the standards identify as essential writing skills at various grade levels and what they don't include, specifically dispositions toward writing we would like to cultivate. Then, I walk the class through the process of developing a genre-specific unit using book reviews as our genre exemplar.

As we immerse ourselves in mentor texts taken from *The New York Times*, *School Library Journal*, the *Nerdy Book Club* blog, the *Reviewing While White* blog, and a variety of other academic and popular sources, we note how book reviews are often simultaneously narrative, informative, and argumentative, and how the degree to which they privilege one mode over another is audience dependent. Next, we develop a checklist of essential characteristics and content for which we want to hold our imaginary secondary students accountable that align with at least some of the writing standards we need to assess. We also create a list of what we call "negotiables": moves we notice authors making that we like and want to highlight for students, just in case they want to try them on for size.

Once we have completed this preliminary work, my students write their own book reviews (on the same book: one short/250 words, one long/1000 words) to understand the genre and their own writing processes more completely. We talk about how to align individual lessons with the checklist of essential characteristics we developed; how to identify specific lesson topics, questions, and workshop tasks; and how to sequence these tasks so that students are accumulating writing throughout the unit. They examine a model unit calendar on teaching book reviews I created, and then they replicate the entire process themselves, selecting mentor texts in their chosen genre, writing a genre example, and developing a calendar of sequenced lessons on content and craft, two of which they turn into lessons, one of which they teach to their classmates. Here's an excerpt from Zoe's unit calendar on teaching graphic memoirs (see fig. 9) as well as a page from the genre example they wrote as one of their unit mentor texts (see fig. 10).

Figure 9: The second week of Zoe's unit calendar on teaching graphic memoirs.

Day 6 Further Evaluation **QOTD:** Do you want your memoir to be linear or not? Do you want it to address who you are in the present throughout the narrative? **Mini-lesson:** The power of "knowing what happens"/narration "after the fact" **Tasks:** Consider how your narrative in	Day 7 Storytelling **QOTD:** What specific stories within your narrative would you like to tell? How would we WRITE this in a memoir? **Mini-lesson:** Writing anecdotes **Tasks:** Explore stories within your timeline, and begin writing some stories	Day 8 Organization **QOTD:** Do your events/panels build off one another to make a coherent whole? How does narrative structure complicate the story? **Mini-lesson:** Sequence and structure **Tasks:** Evaluate your overall sequences thus far, and how they make a coherent whole	Day 9 Storytelling **QOTD:** What specific stories within your narrative would you like to tell? How would we DRAW this in a graphic memoir? **Mini-lesson:** Illustrations paired with narratives **Tasks:** Draw illustrations that could be paired with your anecdotes	Day 10 Artistry **QOTD:** How do you turn your writing into a graphic? What style would best fit your narrative? Color/B&W? Clean lines or messy sketches? How does that change or complicate the narrative? **Mini-lesson:** Stylistic decisions **Tasks:** Using yesterday's drawings, try a few different styles of those panels; see what fits your narrative and its tone.

Figure 10: A page from Zoe's own graphic memoir

As my students work through this process, they continue to workshop unit and lesson ideas until they are finally ready to teach one lesson from their unit to a small group of their peers. The evenings during which they teach are some of the most exciting and joyous nights of the semester.

Final Thoughts

At the end of the semester, students often comment in their evaluations that they appreciate the course's practical value and feel "equipped and empowered to teach writing." I laughed last semester when one student commented that felt like they "got tricked into doing a bunch of work" that they actually enjoyed.

As I evaluate the final portfolios students compile to complete the course, most do convey increased writing confidence and demonstrate their capacity to read as writers. They exhibit developmental proficiency in writing mini-lessons and unit design. They leave Teaching Writing thinking about writing, knowing a little more grammar, conscious of linguistic injustice, and better prepared for their ensuing

methods courses and upcoming clinical experiences. The course serves its programmatic purpose; it works.

And yet, I know it's still not nearly enough. In subsequent semesters I watch my students struggle to integrate what they have learned in Teaching Writing in clinical placements where genre-diverse writing instruction often takes a backseat to literary analysis. When they do zoom in on writing, I watch them confront grammar worksheets and worry about introducing mentor texts with queer or "political" content and/or those written in Black English. I watch them as they try to figure out how to continue to develop as writers when they have little time or school support as novice teachers to do so. And I watch them begin to recognize the importance of ongoing professional development to answer writing questions that arise out of necessity and increased experience.

I also stew over all the topics we *haven't* talked about, topics I have opted to exclude from the course: more time examining actual student writing, more time considering rubrics and evaluating writing assessment options, more time investigating authentic publication possibilities, more time considering anti-racist workshop practices (Chavez, 2021), and more time exploring multimodal texts. These and many, many other topics could (and would) add valuable learning outcomes.

As a result, even though my students experience an *entire* class learning about writing and writing pedagogy, it never feels like enough. It's not enough. In this moment, however, this is where we are, and I continue to reimagine and refine how best to use the time we are fortunate to have.

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