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From Writer to Teacher: The Gradual Release of Responsibility in an Early Childhood Education Writing Course for Pre-Service Teachers

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Preservice teachers (PSTs) learn about teaching in many settings, including drawing upon their own previous experience as students (Lortie, 1975) and in their teaching education program, which could be considered one of “the foremost settings, for learning how to teach” (Smagorinsky et al., 2003, p. 1407). Yet, many teacher education programs lack a course in the teaching of writing preparation (Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Myers et al., 2016).

Growing attention has been paid to the amount and kinds of writing students are experiencing in schools with an urgent plea for more time and attention given to writing instruction (Nagin, 2003; National Commission on Writing, 2003). How are teacher educators teaching PSTs to educate 21st century writers?

The research literature on how to prepare PSTs to teach writing is small but growing (Bomer et al., 2019; Morgan & Pytash, 2014). Experiences in teacher education courses have the potential to impact their future pedagogy (Cremin, 2006; Gardner, 2014; Martin & Dismuke, 2015; McQuitty, 2012; Morgan, 2010; Whitney, 2008). Research has shown that direct writing experiences in methods classes can dispel negative attitudes about writing (Norman & Spencer, 2005), increase students’ confidence in writing (Street, 2003), help them understand process-oriented pedagogies and student choice (Hall, 2016), and develop specialized content knowledge for writing (Ballock et al., 2018; McQuitty & Bollock, 2020).

As faculty, we employ units of study in genre (Ray, 2006) as the organizing pedagogical experience in the Early Childhood Education (ECED) writing course all PSTs take. Units of study are used in K-12 classrooms for instruction in both writing process and genres. The goal for our PST's is that by the end of the course, they will be able to design a unit of study in genre for use with students in the grades K-5 band.

In this article, we briefly describe how we came to develop a course focused specifically on writing methods—the course in which this work is embedded. Second, we explain the nature of the work in units of study on genre, as well as a unit's components and sequence. After that, we look more closely at the three units we employ over the semester. We close by examining research findings from experiences within this course, as well as reflections offered by former PSTs enrolled in this class.

A Dedicated Writing Course

Ohio's Department of Education requires that K-12 PSTs complete twelve hours in literacy methods coursework, including a required three credit-hour phonics course. As teacher educators, we appreciate this dedicated focus on literacy as we know many states do not have similar literacy requirements.

In 2004, as part of our four course literacy block we offered three reading-focused courses in addition to the phonics course. Writing was addressed intermittently across these courses. In 2005, one of the three literacy courses was redesigned into a writing course. This was to ensure that writing was not merely “sandwiched in” within the literacy courses and received ample time and attention to teach such a complex act. All writing about reading would be addressed within the two reading courses; and writing in many forms and genres became the focus of the new course—allowing faculty to concentrate PSTs' learning on writing instruction. In 2020, early childhood licensing in Ohio extended from PreK-Grade 3 to Grade 5. At the heart of this course is to support PSTs' own writing experiences as a foundation for their teaching of young writers. We approximate that over 1,300 PSTs have completed this writing course since its inception.

Intentional Course Design

Genre-study is an inquiry-oriented approach, one in which teachers guide students through a particular process for examining and analyzing mentor texts in order to write their own original texts in the genre (Ray, 2006). The goal for the professional work in this class is for PSTs to experience, understand, and then make the necessary pedagogical decisions when designing and facilitating a unit of study.

Each unit of study follows a predictable structure as PSTs are engaged in the phases of genre study: Immersion, Close Study, and Writing Under the Influence. During the immersion phase, teachers and students consider many texts in the genre. They determine topics that are addressed in the genre; they consider the work it will take to produce writing in the genre; and they closely study the craft of writing in a smaller collection of mentor texts (Ray, 2006). PSTs also write their own texts in the genre, experiencing the influences of the study itself on their own writing process and published work.

The concept and ability of reading like a writer is foundational and undergirds the instructional moves and decisions in designing and facilitating a genre unit of study. We work to support PSTs in closely reading mentor texts, usually multiple times, to carefully examine the topics writers in the genre choose; speculating about the work writers do when crafting texts in the genre; and analyzing the craft of the writing. A description of the professional work the PSTs engage in throughout the semester is described in Table 1.

The instructional design of the writing course centers on three in-depth writing experiences across the semester. There are two reasons for this. First, Ohio's Learning Standards for English Language Arts (Ohio Department of Education, 2017) designate three main types of writing for instruction in K-12 education: Narrative, Opinion/Argument-Driven, and Informational. A consideration of these kinds of writing within its own genre study helps PSTs understand the standards for writing in each type. A second reason for three studies is that we have found that helping PSTs transition from participation in a unit as writers to designing a unit as teachers is spaced and supported effectively over three experiences.

We design these experiences to transpire in a gradual release of responsibility model in which “any academic task can be conceptualized as requiring differing proportions of teacher and student responsibility for successful completion” (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983, p. 337). The goal across the three units is to gradually hand over the responsibility to PSTs from participation as writers to their position as teachers responsible for the design of a unit of study in genre. (See Table 2.)

First Unit: Preservice Teachers as Writers

As instructors, we assume the responsibility for designing and facilitating the first unit of study and the PSTs experience this memoir unit primarily in the role of writer. Because we want PSTs to teach from a position of knowing, we have found it vital that they experience a writing unit *first as writers* in order to come to know what this work looks and feels like from the “inside out.”

To begin, PSTs are immersed in reading, analyzing, and discussing memoir texts. For example, we read pieces such as *Shortcut* (Crews, 1996) *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (Rylant, 1993) and *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* (Quintero, 2019). We read and discuss selections from Fletcher's *Marshfield Dreams* (2012), and Scieszka's *Guys Write for Guys Read* (2008). We want PSTs to create a vision for what is possible within this genre, and invite them to be inspired by authors and topics, and influenced by the craft moves those authors make. As writers, the PSTs move through the writing process with their own pieces of memoir. They have opportunities to share their pre-writing and drafts with one another for feedback as they revise, edit, and ultimately publish their work.

We teach them with mini-lessons as they draft, craft, and publish their own pieces of memoir. In this memoir unit, one mini-lesson addresses creating reflective endings and the other focuses on “showing” your reader rather than “telling” them. At this stage these mini-lessons serve two purposes. One is to teach the PSTs how to construct these crafting techniques in their own drafts, and the other is to model the structure they will use later when they write their own mini-lessons. Additionally, we utilize rubrics to assess PSTs process and final product in their work with memoir. These rubrics model the types of rubrics the PSTs will utilize in the second unit and create in the third.

Throughout this first unit, we think-aloud about our instructional decision-making, and field PSTs' questions about designing genre units of study. However, the PSTs' role is largely an emic one; they are learning this way of teaching implicitly by participating inside the experience, and by fully taking on the role of writers of memoir.

Second Unit: Preservice Teachers as Writers AND Teachers

The goal in the second unit of study is for the PSTs to have an opportunity for guided practice in the decision-making for the instructional design of a unit of study in genre. The responsibility is shared between teacher and PSTs, with increased responsibility shifting to the PSTs over time.

In the second unit, we focus on Commentary, opinion-driven writing in essay form. In this round, we share many *potential* mentor texts, and help PSTs discuss, identify, and justify their selection of mentor texts they would use with future students. PSTs then grapple with the same questions they did in study one, but this time they take the lead in considering and charting the topics, work, and craft of this new genre.

Together, we complete a Unit Plan Template (Marchetti & O'Dell, 2021). PSTs list the selected mentor texts with identified craft elements for each text, a list of “musts” and “mights” in the genre, and a list of potential and essential mini-

lessons. We then co-construct two mini-lessons on crafting beginnings in commentary and possible organizational structures. We also provide PSTs with students' writing samples in commentary and use a rubric to assess the samples. This is the same type of standards-based rubric we evaluated their writing in memoir on in unit one, and on which they will base their own rubric design in the third unit.

As PSTs take on some of the responsibility for planning, they also draft, craft, and share their own original pieces of Commentary, just as they did with memoir; however, they are also part of the instructional planning and decision-making. As instructors, we continue to think-aloud, guide, and support PSTs regarding instructional decision-making in order to teach the PSTs based on our experiences with this work; however, the PSTs' voices and perspective grow more important as they grapple with this work themselves. They move back and forth between the roles of writer and teacher as decision-maker and unit-designer.

Third Unit: Preservice Teachers as Writing Unit Designers

Ultimately, the goal throughout the semester is to have the PSTs take on nearly all of the responsibility for designing a unit of study. The third and final unit of the course is in informational writing. PSTs choose one of three possibilities: "How-to" books, such as cookbooks, crafting books, books about pet care or playing a sport; "All-about" books, texts that teach the reader about a particular topic; or Feature Articles, such as those found in magazines, newspapers, and online.

After perusing numerous titles in each of the three options, PSTs choose one genre together with a small group of colleagues they'll work with on this final piece of professional work. We have found that inviting PSTs to work in a socially collaborative way in groups of two or three has been a helpful scaffold as they take on the responsibility for unit decision-making and design.

At this point in the gradual release of responsibility, PSTs are responsible for gathering many potential texts for study in the informational genre they chose. They grapple with and answer the questions regarding the topics, work, and craft of the genre. They select 3-5 mentor texts for close study, justify their choices, and engage deeply in closely noticing the craft moves the writers made in each. They determine many potential mini-lesson topics, then select four to five that are most essential to writing in the genre. They write one mini-lesson collaboratively for feedback and then write the remaining essential lessons. The PSTs write their own piece in the genre and develop rubrics for future use with students.

Our scaffolding of PSTs' professional work in writing their own units has, by this time, changed significantly since unit one. We now guide with feedback as

PSTs make the decisions. We offer suggestions for them to consider, and answer questions as they arise. We help course-correct if we see PSTs about to make a glaring mistake in an instructional decision, and we clarify when they demonstrate any confusion about some aspect of their work. By the end of the semester, PSTs have fully taken on the role of teacher of young writers as they design a unit of study. The responsibility for this work has been released.

Final Thoughts

We care deeply about ensuring PSTs are well prepared to teach the future writers in their classrooms. We have been fortunate to contribute to the body of research on preparing PSTs to teaching writing from our work in this course, with much of this work centering on their unit of study experiences as a vehicle for their learning.

Providing PSTs with these experiences has led to a growing understanding of this pedagogical work on numerous fronts. We have found that PSTs identified reading like a writer to be an empowering process to their growth and confidence as writers (Morgan, 2010, 2016). Their understanding about the power of topic choice was made real to them when they had the opportunity to write about their personal topics of choice (Morgan et al., 2011). In addition, we reported that the unit of study format served as a vehicle to deconstruct and develop new genre awareness and genre-specific knowledge through the use of mentor texts (Batchelor et al., 2014). We found PSTs grew in their understanding and appreciation of poetry within a unit of study (Batchelor et al., 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2012). PSTs identified that living the writing process in class offered them insight and experience to what they can offer future students. In doing so, they develop a vision for what they can do—and they do in fact draw upon their method course experiences in student teaching (Morgan et al., 2011).

This work adds to the literature reported by other scholars, as such methods classes have been found to increase PSTs' knowledge base and beliefs about writing (Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Martin & Dismuke, 2018). In addition, such experiences provide PSTs with opportunities to deconstruct and critically reflect upon what they learned in their own K-12 writing experiences (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011) and can lessen their apprehension about writing (Martin & Dismuke, 2018). Most importantly, PSTs find themselves drawing upon their method class experiences when in the classroom full time (Grossman et al., 2000; Martin & Dismuke, 2018).

In closing, we share three comments from students about their course learning experiences:

I thought the most valuable piece of learning we did this semester was actually writing the pieces that we were studying. They were simple and easy to complete but gave us insights on how to teach writing better and how to be a better writer ourselves.

Unit of Study- I think this was extremely beneficial to our teaching because not only were we learning about the content of a unit study, we were also going through them in class as well for each of us to complete. We were able to see and experience the structure of a unit of study. Creating our own unit of study goes hand in hand with our own experience because we are able to find and create the information and materials ourselves, which we will need to do in our own classrooms.

I learned so much from planning a Unit of Study, which first and foremost supported my growing ability to collaborate with other professionals in an efficient, fair, and productive way that best considers both our goals for the students as well as the students' interests and needs. I also gained so much confidence in my ability to plan an entire unit that I can take with me to my future classroom, a task that used to seem super daunting but now feels totally do-able and, dare I say, fun! It now makes so much sense to me how I can effortlessly include both reading and writing standards in my classroom in an enjoyable, meaningful, and authentic way for our entire classroom community. I also learned how to incorporate time, choice, and feedback in concrete ways throughout our unit, especially through our creation of rubrics that can be used to further support our students' growth in specific, positive, and necessary ways. The readers and writers in my future classroom will learn and grow so much because I have learned how to logically organize and sequence a unit of study that supports them in a developmentally appropriate and engaging way.

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Table 1: Pedagogical Practices and Decisions within the Writing Methods Course

Pedagogy in Teaching Writers Using Units of Study in Genre	Definition and Description
Reading Like a Writer (Ray, 1999)	Reading mentor texts closely to notice the craft moves a writer made in a text. Part of close study is theorizing why a writer may have made that move.
Phases of Genre Study (Ray, 2006)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gather Mentor Texts: Teacher selects a large and varied collection of mentor texts for the following two phases of a study. 2. Immersion: Teacher and students share and read many of the numerous texts in the collection. General “noticings” are listed, often on anchor charts. Answers to the questions (in row below) regarding the topics and work of this genre are addressed. 3. Close Study: Reading a smaller collection of mentor texts (often 3-5) very closely, and analyzing the craft moves the writer made in each text (question 3 in row below). 4. Write: Students and teacher each write a piece in the genre that shows the influence of the study. These pieces move through the writing process to publication (pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, publishing).
Questions writers ask during a unit of study (Ray, 2006)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What TOPICs do writers address with this genre? 2. How do writers WORK at creating this genre? 3. How do writers CRAFT this genre to make it interesting, understandable, accessible?
Mentor Text Selection (Ray, 2006)	<p>In collecting and selecting mentor texts for use in a unit of study, teachers consider the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Text Reality: Is the text a “real-world” text? In other words, is it found in libraries, bookstores, and other places outside of school? 2. High Interest: Will the text be of interest to the age/grade of students? 3. Representative: Is this text representative of what is typical in the genre? 4. Craft: Does this text take an obvious, active stance in regard to writing craft?
Determine “Musts” and “Mights” (Marchetti & O’Dell, 2021)	Determining what a writer in a particular genre “must” do and what a writer “might” do in the genre.
Minilesson Determination (Marchetti & O’Dell, 2021) and Design (Calkins, 1994)	<p>Determine the most critical mini-lessons to teach students regarding aspects of writing process and writing craft in the genre.</p> <p>Design writing mini-lessons using this structure:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Name: what students will learn and why this is important to know as a writer 2. Teach: the topic of the mini-lesson through demonstration and modeling, often with mentor texts 3. Engage: students in the work of the mini-lesson topic or writing technique 4. Link: the topic to students’ ongoing work in independent writing
Rubric(s)	Designing and utilizing rubrics to assess writing process and influence of the study, and evaluate published pieces of writing.

Table 2: Overview of the Three Unit of Study Experiences

Units of Study	Narrative	Opinion-Driven	Informational
Genre	Memoir	Commentary	“How-to,” “All-about,” <i>or</i> Feature Articles
Time Frame	5 weeks	4 weeks	6 weeks
Instructor Responsibilities	<p>Select genre & mentor texts</p> <p>Lead PSTs through immersion and close-study</p> <p>Determine, design, teach mini-lessons</p> <p>Support PSTs as they move through writing process</p> <p>Design and utilize rubrics to assess PSTs published writing</p> <p>Periodically think aloud about each phase of the study, offering insight, explanations, and work-samples of instructional decision-making</p>	<p>Share array of potential mentor texts and elicit PST’s input on text selection. Discuss reasons for selection.</p> <p>Think aloud, and support PSTs as they discuss mentor texts and chart answers to the questions regarding topics, work, and craft in the genre during immersion and close study</p> <p>Think aloud and support students as they move through the writing process and determine mini-lessons for the unit</p> <p>Lead filling out the Unit Plan Template</p> <p>Model writing a mini-lesson. Co-write mini-lesson with PSTs</p>	<p>Support PSTs as they move through each of the component in their responsibilities (see below), offering feedback as they make instructional decisions and write instructional plans for each component of the unit of study in genre</p>
PSTs Responsibilities	<p>Engage as writers in immersion, close study, mini-lessons, writing process for own writing</p> <p>Ask questions as they arise to understand teacher’s instructional decision-making and design of unit components</p>	<p>Read and analyze potential mentor texts and offer input for selection</p> <p>Read and discuss mentor texts and chart answers to the questions of topics, work, and craft during immersion and close study</p>	<p>Consider then choose one informational genre</p> <p>Gather 15+ potential mentor texts</p> <p>Answer the questions regarding: TOPICS, WORK, CRAFT in the genre</p> <p>Select 3-5 mentor texts for “close study” of craft</p>

	<p>Write a piece that shows the influence of the study</p>	<p>Move through the writing process in the genre with own piece</p> <p>Contribute ideas to the Unit Plan Template</p> <p>Discuss and determine potential mini-lessons</p> <p>Co-write a mini-lesson with instructor</p> <p>Evaluate student writing on rubrics</p> <p>Write a piece that shows the influence of the study</p>	<p>Complete “Planning a Unit of Study” page and “Must & Might” chart</p> <p>Determine 4-5 “essential” mini-lessons</p> <p>Submit 1 mini-lesson for feedback</p> <p>Write remaining mini-lessons</p> <p>Develop rubric(s) for process and product</p> <p>Write a piece that shows the influence of the study</p>
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