

## **Teaching Writing in Pre-service Teacher Education: Tips from the Classroom for Successful Hands On Learning**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes how a “hands-on” procedure in writing is employed in a senior level Language Arts and Social Studies methods class for pre-service teachers in a university in southwest Texas. The emphasis of the article is on the Language Arts portion of the course. Pre-service teachers struggle to learn the art of teaching writing to their students. Often the problem stems from a lack of confidence in their personal writing abilities. To teach writing, pre-service teachers need to see themselves as writers. This article addresses how a professor introduces pre-service teachers to writing workshop and process writing by inviting participation in hands on projects while creating artifacts for their future classrooms. This project is based on Constructivism (Dewey, 1938) and functions through a belief that interaction with text (Rosenblatt, 1994) in a kinesthetic and social style produces internalization and self confidence in the pre-service teacher.

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One day, during my first semester of teaching language arts to fourth graders, I overheard a student lament, “Oh, yuck, language again. How many minutes until we get to go to science and math? We have fun in there. There are all kinds of things to play with in Ms. B’s class!” The students and I needed to become excited about writing to ensure that success. I knew the power of passion and connections could change the clock-watchers who wanted to escape the traditional boundaries of worksheet skill-and-drill and passivity to active learning experiences, but as a new teacher, I was somewhat hesitant to step out of the traditional teacher-centered curriculum that I had observed in my short tenure as a classroom teacher. Since I taught a combined program of native speakers and English Language Learners (ELL), the challenge was complicated by language barriers.

### **Teacher Instinct Imperative**

Teacher instinct told me that it was imperative to discover a curriculum that appealed both to the students and to me. Somewhat downhearted, I approached my administrator after school and related what I had overheard. I will never forget her comments. She noted that the student’s comment reflected a common problem in the language arts curriculum that was understandable, since language arts were not conducive to manipulatives. She encouraged me to

research programs and approaches to make my curriculum playful and engaging. Her supportive encouragement was formative to my teaching philosophy in the public school classroom. I realized that I must complete the English as a Second Language certification. I convinced my administrator to allow me to try the strategies on all of the children in my class because my professor said it was “just good teaching!” I worked out a plan that gave extra support for ELL students. My administrator agreed to let me try it as long as the state exam scores did not suffer.

As a result, during my tenure as a fourth grade teacher my mainstream classroom was populated with one third English Language Learners (ELL) who had just exited the Bilingual program or were students whose parent(s) had denied them the Bilingual services and two thirds monolingual students. It was my passion that ELL children have a year to adjust to the mainstream classroom by having a year of sheltering services. Fourth grade, in the state of Texas, is an especially difficult year for students to exit from their often small Bilingual classes into classrooms with 22 students. If their classes are taught by teachers with little or no experience with the challenges of teaching ELL or sheltered strategies the challenge increases. Another goal involves the state exam because, in the state of Texas, fourth graders experience, for the first time in their school careers, a writing test that includes mechanics, grammar and a written essay.

### **Continuing University Studies**

While I continued my studies at the university, as a part-time student and full time classroom teacher, I embraced the ESL coursework as the solution for overcoming boredom in the Language Arts curriculum. If we were going to write, it had to be meaningful and most of all comfortable. I tested the strategies that I learned in the methods classes by using my classroom as hands on lab. I found that what my professors were saying about ESL, as good teaching for every student, was a true and exciting approach to teaching children to write. I decided to quit concentrating on grammar and punctuation until the content of their feelings was captured on paper, and I promised them they would only have to write one draft after the revisions. I asked parents to provide each child with yellow legal pad that we could use to cut and past our revisions into a first draft. Before long, the children who were complaining of having to write a short paragraph were writing “sloppy copies” of several pages. I trusted Krashen’s (1982) natural approach to learning and used authentic prompts and materials to bring play and culture into our fourth grade classroom.

### **Daily Lives and Treasured Memories**

Each year my fourth graders wrote about their daily lives and treasured memories. Students wrote newspapers, Readers Theater plays, essays, poetry, and letters to the editor, and responses to authors of their favorite books. They sharpened their imaginations by sharing ideas and keeping long lists in their journals of what they might write about in every subject area of the day. The students worked in large groups, small groups, partners, and independently depending on the assignment. It was an honor to be allowed to work in the hallway or in the classroom library. Every writing workshop lesson began with something that I wrote the night before and the students helped me revise. Our writing became our textbooks and our language books were often used for researching how to fix my writing sample. This modeling became the topic for the day’s mini lesson.

### **Test Scores Remain Solid**

Our state test scores remained solid although more than one principal admitted to being stressed until our class scores were posted. They were worried that the ELL students and the strugglers might not succeed in the workshop model but noted that student confidence grew in both reading and writing. Administration held fast to their promise that as long as the scores remained high I could continue my method of teaching.

### **Dream of Earning Doctorate**

At the end of my tenth year of teaching in the public classroom, I was invited to apply for a grant coordinator's position at the local university. The position would allow me begin my dream of earning a doctorate at another university while I worked on the three Hispanic Serving Institution grants. By then I had earned my Masters Degree and in addition to the grant work, I taught some of the undergraduate ESL courses as well as Children's Literature. My schedule allowed me to work toward my doctorate while the faculty of my home university mentored and encouraged my efforts.

It was during the end of my doctoral studies, that I was asked to create two courses for pre-service teachers who planned to teach grades four through eight or Middle school. One course was to focus on reading and the other on Language Arts and Social Studies. I could draw from my classroom experience of what worked for the fourth grade children and share it with pre-service university students who would be teaching the same age as those whom I had taught in the public school system.

### **Purpose of the Article**

This article describes how a "hands-on" procedure in writing is employed in a senior level Language Arts and Social Studies methods class for pre-service teachers in a university in southwest Texas. The emphasis of the article is on the Language Arts portion of the course.

### **Language Arts/Reading or Language Arts and Social Studies Programs**

As stated, the emphasis of this article is on the Language Arts portion of the course. This class is required for all candidates who are seeking certification in the Language Arts/Reading or Language Arts and Social Studies programs focused on teaching fourth through eighth grades. Generalists and Middle school candidates as well as many of the students who are seeking are seeking the additional ESL certification enroll in this course. The academic approach follows guidelines that include both small and large group instruction, short mini-lessons and nightly lab experiences similar to Atwell's (1998) writers' workshop for children in elementary school. The philosophy in the course is based on the belief that participation in an interactive writer's workshop supported by mini lessons helps the pre-service teacher internalize process writing and effective language arts strategies to implement in their future classrooms. Based in social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), the workshop style of instruction appeals to adolescent pedagogy (Wiles & Bondi, 2002) and requires students to become active learners rather than spectators.

### **Teachers Faced with Many Challenges Daily**

In today's classrooms, teachers are faced with added responsibilities on a daily basis. The standardized test movement, accompanied with the required documentation and accountability, tends to rob teachers of time to accomplish reading and writing exercises during the school day. The result is passive learning for students and frantic teaching from educators. Many writing assignments are delegated to homework, resulting in less time spent on teaching the craft of writing during the time that a teacher's expert advice is available. In the university setting, professors are faced with the challenge of preparing pre-service teachers for today's classroom tensions while interweaving the curriculum with the excitement of teaching that brings prospective teachers to the university. Contained within the body of the article are tips that were successful in promoting interactive learning in an upper elementary classroom that the teacher later applied to upper elementary and middle school teacher candidates. It is hoped that the reader, classroom teacher or university teacher of pre-service teachers will experiment with some of these ideas to help conquer the challenge of teaching writing in the diverse classroom.

### **A Brief Review of the Literature**

A review of the literature indicates that educators are echoing beliefs of the earlier researchers. Dewey (1938) taught educators that we constantly revise and add to our learning in a dynamic construct of knowledge. We call upon our prior knowledge and past experiences because they are a part of us as we transact with the text (Rosenblatt, 1994). Vygotsky (1978) told us that we need to allow students to experience learning where the experts share what they know with the developing learners.

There is a call for time to reflect and practice reading and writing during the school day (Atwell, 2015; Beers, 2003; Hoyt, 2009; Robb, 2010). Students need time to reflect in journals so they can make connections to their own lives (Tovani, 2000). In a study of 138 middle school students, researchers found that blending academic journaling with discussions, resulted in positive classroom behavior and a greater interest in writing. Educators must establish a warm and safe classroom community where student are not afraid to take risks (Blasingame & Bushman, 2005). In a more recent study on reflective practices, Uzum, Petron, and Berg (2014) studied 28 pre-service teachers during a service learning project that was based in an analytical framework where reflection was a component. Findings indicated that reflective practice during sheltered instruction of ELL students was instrumental in successful preparation for the diverse classroom.

Writing teachers are advised to teach to student strengths (Beers, 2003). Middle school students are curious and perceptive, which lends itself to reflective writing and building connections to the real world. This method of teaching builds strength that cross the curriculum (Hickman, Quick, Haynie, & Flakes, 2000). One method of overcoming passivity in the middle school classroom is to equip pre-service teachers to engage their students in the excitement of writing (Tsujiimoto, 2001). Students have to see themselves as readers and writers by engaging in the process of hands-on experiences (Smith, 1978; Wilhelm, 1997). "Those who teach a craft, ought to do the craft" (Romano, 2007, p. 171). However, this possibility requires more training in the art of teaching writing than is often available in present teacher preparation programs. "Some middle school literacy teachers have little or no preparation in English language arts"

(Finders & Hynds, 2007, p. 3). Pre-service teachers often come from K-12 backgrounds where interaction with diverse populations was limited, causing a mismatch of classroom culture and backgrounds of their future students. There is need for more field experience with diverse populations through tutorials and volunteer teaching, especially in the area of ESL education (Uzum et al., 2014).

One component of teaching writing includes building success for adult ELL students focusing on oral vocabulary development. A collective case study by Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, and Green (2014) that emphasized explicit, work-specific vocabulary instruction included findings that effective teaching needs to connect to the participants' daily language and background experience. Rosenbaltt's Theory of Transactional (1994) guided the study of four ELL waste retrieval workers whose language proficiency skills ranged from beginner to advanced levels. Participants followed a six step process of instruction including teacher led description and example of terms, participant restatement, participant creative representation of the term, hands on activities connected to the theme to add to prior knowledge, discussions with peers, and interaction in games for application. Results indicated a targeted approach of work-specific vocabulary increased both the English proficiency and confidence in English language skills.

Another related study by Egbert, Herman, and Lee (2015) supports Darling-Hammond's (2008) findings of the need to build understanding through exposure to in-depth knowledge combined with everyday life experience. Researchers used the flipped assignment approach, where 106 pre-service teachers built prior knowledge through homework assignments before they applied active learning to course activities the following week in the field. The purpose of the required ten week two semester education course was to help meet the language and content needs of ELL students in mainstream classrooms. The purpose of the study was to increase interaction between pre-service teachers and ELL students and their families. Each participant was expected to spend one hour each week in the field working interacting with ELL students, their families and the community. Findings were supportive of off loading content of instruction to outside the classroom if content is rich in resources and focused on supportive goals. "The design principles that we explored can help us to develop and to understand, without the rather ambiguous 'flipped' label, an even more resource-rich, student-centered approach to teacher education classrooms in general" (Egbert et al., p. 19).

Atwell (2015) approaches the writing process as an avenue to teach writing through hands on practice. The writing activities begin with brainstorming and building knowledge of essay content and continue through peer and teacher conferencing, revising and editing activities that culminate in final copies that are shared with an audience. The process is supported with mini lessons focused on conventions of writing, grammar, punctuation and other topics. Students take notes on how to improve their work and the teacher monitors progress through individual student conferences where goals are set for reading and writing assignments. The philosophy is to build self confidence in literacy through active learning.

Academic discussions over how to approach error correction whether using process writing, which Atwell (2015) teaches, can take several writing sessions to complete an assignment or product writing (for example essay writing on a state exam) can be timed to complete rather quickly. With either writing method, error correction can cause stress to even the most proficient student. For ELL students, error correction can be a sensitive situation due to the need to lower the risk factor and increase motivation to write. Guenette (2012) studied the effects of error correction using Corrective Feedback (CF) with 18 pre-service high school

teachers in a TESL program. Each pre-service teacher served as a tutor to two or three high school ELL students. For one semester the pre-service tutors communicated by e-mail with their students. Tutors were charged to give CF to improve accuracy in writing, vocabulary and grammar, and mechanics. Findings were that pre-service teachers spent extensive time documenting their feed back through research making sure that the error correction was documented in resource texts. CF needed a follow-up analysis to show that corrections were understood and heeded. Each student needed individual attention from the teacher which was time consuming. Proficient writers benefitted most from CF, but less proficient ELL students needed Direct Feedback where corrections were marked and explained more directly.

### **My Background Experience**

I entered university instruction during the fall of 2000, bringing with me a decade of reading and writing workshop philosophies that defined my teaching style. As my experience with teaching at the university level increased, I discovered that many of the language arts pre-service students were hesitant to discuss how they planned to teach writing to their future students. After some discussion, I realized some university students were afraid to teach writing because they judged themselves as poor writers. They had been exposed to product writing rather than to the concept of process writing, and most recalled red marks coloring the work they submitted. To compensate for this lack of self confidence, I decided to introduce my middle school language arts pre-service teachers to the workshop model through direct participation in the writing process. I knew that they needed the hands-on practice to enable them to put the theory of teaching writing into practice (Romano, 2007). What better place to practice the writing process than in the university classroom? Because a constructivist approach (Dewey, 1938) is a very transferable method of teaching writing, I decided that what was good for fourth grade was also great for pre-service middle school teachers. The pre-service teachers embraced the concept of the writing workshop model and classroom discussions became animated as their confidence in teaching writing grew stronger.

### **How the Class Works**

To allow for the time to devote thorough practice in a lab environment, students meet for one two and one half hour evening sessions weekly. This design seems to fit the spirit of the class better than a twice weekly plan because pre-service teachers can immediately put into practice strategies incorporated in the lesson. The first thirty minutes are devoted to lecture and discussion. Half of the course is focused on social studies which allows students to embed what they learn in language arts into social studies and vice versa. In addition to face time in the university classroom, the class has a twelve hour field experience requirement. Pre-service teachers are reminded, on a regular basis, that the writing activities in the course are applicable to their future classrooms, and that by experiencing the writing process and language arts strategies firsthand, their chances for internalizing the lessons increase.

Since the pre-service teachers, enrolled in this class, will teach middle school; it is important to lay a foundation based in sound pedagogy based in an awareness of how adolescent behavior affects their approach to teaching writing. Keeping this in mind, the university students hear what research has to say about adolescents' needs for interaction (Atwell, 2015) and why

middle school students need to move around rather than sitting quietly for hours in chairs that only face the front of the room (Rosenblatt, 1994; Wiles & Bondi, 2002). They learn that adolescents need to question, give opinions, and have emotional support for fragile self-esteem issues (Wiles & Bondi, 2002). This background knowledge, combined with the hands-on practice applied in the workshop model, allows the pre-service teachers to develop sensitivity for their student population because it concentrates on learner-centered teaching rather than teacher-centered instruction (Robb, 2010). In addition, the reader/writer workshop model, as suggested by Atwell (1998; 2015) and Robb (2010), provides a comfortable classroom climate that transfers to the middle school classroom. For the university instructor, it incorporates a comprehensive match of theory into practice as instructor monitors how the pre-service teachers apply what they have learned to the memoir essay that they write for their culminating project.

This model of instruction stresses teaching through the avenue of mini lessons that are explicit and interactive (Atwell, 2015, Hoyt, 2009, Robb, 2010; Tovani, 2000). It includes conversational teacher modeling using thinking out loud as a method for problem. It encourages teaching with strategies targeted to meet the learning needs of students in their specific classroom. It also encourages small group interaction where students work together to solve problems in their writing while they expand their critical thinking skills. This approach is reminiscent of Vygotsky's (1978) approach of peer interaction and support.

### **Tips for Learning to Write**

#### **Tips for Recognizing Themselves as Writers**

To overcome some preconceived notions of their inability to write, as well as to promote classroom bonding for the rest of the semester, on the first night of class pre-service teachers complete an interest inventory adapted from Atwell (1998). The questions are thought provoking and allow students to challenge their own perceptions regarding writing as a tool and for entertainment. They are asked to target areas for improvement and to consider their major written accomplishments from the previous year. This activity is important for the pre-service teachers because self-reflection aides them in recognizing themselves as writers. In other words, to teach their students how to write, it is necessary for pre-service teachers to see themselves as readers and writers (Smith, 1978; Wilhelm, 1997). Although the idea is classic, it is applicable, especially for ELL teacher candidates or others who do not recognize writing beyond the assigned term papers that often contain complicated feedback.

In addition, these future teachers recall writing experiences that were mainly focused on the end product and the goal of getting a good grade, rather than viewing writing as an enjoyable pastime. As a result, they admit to not having made a personal connection to writing. Tovani (2000) states that active learning does not occur if students do not make personal connections to their assignments. Active learning can be one of the greatest challenges of teaching writing to students who have acquired a resistance to meaningless writing assignments. As a result, prompts must connect to personal interest.

#### **Tips for Embedding Scaffolding**

Scaffolding of information is an important element to build the background knowledge

and self-esteem that is so vital for the ELL writer. It can be viewed as a type of sheltering experience for all students who struggle with writing. Scaffolding is supplied by the teacher and when it is coupled with a kinesthetic approach it leads to higher level thinking, and as a result it plays a key role in how students perform on complex tasks (Lutz, Guthrie, & Davis, 2006). To enhance active learning while supplying a scaffolded approach, I suggest that the pre-service teachers participate in various writing assignments and games designed on building personal connections to writing assignments during the semester. Examples include:

- Brainstorming activities like listing topics of interest for two minutes followed by ranking the first three topics and then sharing these three topics with a partner. This allows students to break through writer's block while building a risk free social exchange. Encouraging the students to include topics that their partner mentions in their personal list is called "Free Stealing" and brings humor into the activity.
- Providing writing common life experience prompts that buffers the stress of writer's block. One introductory method for getting in the writing mood is to have each candidate choose a prompt from a basket of prompts. They read it, reflect, and then at the instructor's signal, turn to the person on the right and share a personal memory that connects to the prompt. If the prompt does not fit the person, the person can choose another or make up their own prompt.

Such written and oral activities enable the pre-service student to begin seeing themselves as writers with real life experiences that they can use later when their students as they build a community of learners. Any oral activity that encourages interaction without risk will help to break down that feeling of being an outsider. Partnerships often work best for the beginning of the semester especially for the shy student that may enter a silent period the first few weeks. Also, remember that the smaller the group size, the higher the rate of interaction.

### **Building Artifacts to Use in the Classroom**

Adapting a suggestion from Robb (2010) and Atwell (2015), the pre-service teachers in this course also participate in building a scrapbook based on how they see themselves as writers. This project causes them to reflect and perhaps see themselves from a different perspective than they have considered in the past. One requirement for this assignment is that answers have to be suitable for display in their future classroom. The scrapbook serves as an artifact that they can become useful in student teaching. The teachers are encouraged to keep their audience in mind as they reflect on their answers. Although they are encouraged to create personal topics, the following ten topics are adapted from Atwell and Robb. Suggestions are provided as needed:

How do you describe yourself as a writer? How many pieces of writing do you complete each year? What the genres represent you as a writer? List three of your favorite words and explain why your choices. Who is your favorite author and why did you choose this writer? What is your favorite quotation? Describe the strategies that you use when you write. Where do you do most of your writing? How do you feel about social media? Do you consider participating in social media as writing? Explain.



The scrapbook contains several assignments designed to informally introduce them to their future student when it will be housed in their classroom libraries so that their students can browse and learn about the talents and challenges that their teacher has experienced.

This assignment becomes a favorite, and provides an opportunity for modeling two valuable feedback strategies. After sharing the completed scrapbooks in table groups, the scrapbooks are collected and reviewed by the instructor. The instructor converses with the students by placing positive feedback comments on sticky notes on the scrapbook pages. During the next class meeting, the pre-service teachers turn their attention to the sticky notes and active learning is visible as their eyes light up when they read the positive comments and notes.

There are additional purposes for assigning the scrapbook activity. As the pre-service teachers construct the scrapbook, they explore their internal philosophies as future teachers. In addition, as the instructor reads the scrapbooks, students become real people rather than a name in a grade book. Later as the pre-service teachers share their folders in class with their table mates, the pre-service teachers begin to bond as a learning community.

### **Conferencing and Sharing Information**

Another bonding experience occurs when the instructor allows time for students to share their writing interest inventory in small groups. Gauthier, Schorzman, and Hutchison (2003) stated that academic journaling and small group sharing enhanced metacognitive thinking in college students. Sharing is vital for building self confidence and it also aides in letting the student discover self knowledge (Rosenblatt, 1994). The activity of writing and sharing becomes a staple course component that reaps multiple results. For example, as they share throughout the semester, pre-service teachers become sensitive listeners while networking with their peers. They relax and become comfortable with each other, a key factor for taking the risks necessary in a writing process class.

### **Introducing Private Journal Writing**

Taking advantage of the newly found comfort zone, the instructor incorporates nightly journaling time as the norm for entering the room. The ELL university students, as well as their peers, relax because class rules include personal sharing as a personal decision. The emphasis for this ongoing activity is concentrated on developing comfort zones in writing so that what happens in the university class will transfer to the future pre-service teacher's classroom. This exercise is not bound by grammar rules because its purpose is to allow feelings to freely emerge from the heart to paper. For aesthetics, soft instrumental music plays in the background and lights are dimmed to relax the students and accentuate an atmosphere where everyone is welcomed and appreciated. It is a sacred time of capturing personal thoughts from that are only shared by author permission. The boundary of not having to share if uncomfortable lowers the risk for the ELL candidate who has been used to concentrating on mistakes rather than content. The pre-service teachers are alerted ahead of time, by the instructor, to identify if the entry is considered public or private. They are assured that if the instructor sees an entry marked private, it will not be read.

## Additional Forms of Journal Writing

During each class session, the instructor introduces a mini-lesson on a teaching strategy that is suited for both ELL and mainstream teaching. One strategy that continues to build content and writing ability is introducing the various forms of public journaling for classroom use such as:

**Conversational.** The focus is on audience and communication with a peer or the teacher. The entries are usually less formal if the students converse with a peer and often a safe place to ask questions if conversing with the teacher. Replies back to the student should be meaningful and thought provoking rather than “Good job.”

**Subject.** The teacher has the student take notes on mini lessons or lectures. Formats such as Cornell notes, double, or triple column notes can help the student to organize thoughts while taking notes or it can be free form.

**Reading response.** The teacher assigns a passage or chapter to read, and the students respond in their journals using the same types of responses as are used in the subject journal. Often there is an assigned question, test to text or text world connection required.

**Addressing current social studies issues.** Current events or social issues lend themselves to rich journal entries. The teacher often leads a discussion and asks for student input or presents an article with controversial issues. The responses reflect content and opinion of the students.

The instructor explains that journal writing is first draft quality that can be graded or not graded. I find that not grading the journals is more productive in promoting output, but this is a personal preference. Whether or not grading occurs, journal entries produce considerable diagnostic feedback to the teacher. Through journal entries, teachers can assess whether comprehension is occurring, if spelling and punctuation skills are being employed, and if students are making connections to their studies (Atwell, 2015). The case for not offering a letter grade allows the students to experience a free exploration of their thoughts. As pre-service teachers practice responses, they develop a hunger for writing. They often expand a journal entry into their process writing piece, an authentic response that is very acceptable and reflects what happens in the adolescent’s writing classroom.

## Participating in the Writing Process

During each class meeting, the instructor models mini-lessons on the writing process. There are different approaches to the writing process with different required steps and different labels for the steps. For this course the steps are: brainstorming, first draft, conferencing, revisions, final draft, editing, and publishing. Lessons are designed for student participation and each lesson produces a useful artifact for field experiences, student teaching, and in their future classrooms. To ensure active learning, everyone takes an original essay through writing process. Most choose to write a memoir because it is a personal experience, replete with background knowledge and reflection. As the university students progress through the process, they build a

portfolio that is housed in a pocket folder with sections for each step of the writing process. By the end of the semester, the sections are filled with examples of the steps from brainstorming to editing. Quick activities, like decorating the writing folder so that it reflects the writer's personality as well as practicing strategies that connect to each step of the project carry the pre-service teacher to the aesthetic side of teaching writing. This approach invites active learning engagement and builds a sense of playfulness.

The instructor models each step of the writing process on the document camera (Romano, 2007) as the class journeys through the remainder of the semester. Teacher candidates are encouraged to problem solve in front of their students as part of the modeling component because this approach allows the student to see a teacher's thoughts in a way that no worksheet can provide (Robb, 2010). As the pre-service teacher observes and participates in the writing process, it is not surprising for both the instructor and the university student to see personal growth in writing ability, longer writing samples, and the emergence of a writing voice.

To prepare for the writing process, the class practices brainstorming for topics based on the activities from the first night of class. By now each pre-service teacher is adept at brainstorming and sees the purpose of making long lists of possibilities for writing topics. Nothing is discarded because every sentence is valuable. However, the distracting efforts are stored in the notebook to be rescued later. Strategies such as constructing graphic organizers such as semantic maps, story stars, Venn diagrams, writing webs help the pre-service teacher explore details that can be included in their essays. For the ELL students, the stress of writing paragraphs is lightened when they see how easily they can expand and capture their thoughts in graphic form and before transcribing those thoughts into a writing assignment. One strategy that is very helpful at this point is to have the pre-service teachers take notes from a lecture in picture form (logographics) and afterwards orally share their notes with a partner. By modeling this exercise to pre-service teachers, they learn to explore thoughts that struggling students or students with limited English may express in picture form when writing ability or vocabulary is lacking.

While writing the first draft, the pre-service teachers are encouraged to "get it down on paper," but to attend to their best efforts at spelling, sentence construction, and punctuation. However, it does not mean that more attention is placed on mechanics than on content. The teachers are encouraged to reread what they write and to correct spelling, punctuation and word usage at the end of each writing session. The term "first draft" does not mean sloppy thinking; it only means that we will be cutting it up and revising it. In this manner, it is hoped that the pre-service teachers carry demonstration lessons to their classrooms.

During revision and conferencing, the essays become their personal textbooks for lessons on corrections and changes, giving the first draft a purpose for learning. The pre-service teachers perform cut-and-paste procedures using yellow legal tablets as a background for paste-up sections of the essay body rather than computers, because pre-service teachers must be prepared to have an alternative approach to technology revision in classrooms where computers are not readily available. Because it is still fun to cut and paste, what could be tedious becomes a game.

Students are reminded to write on only one side of their notebook paper, skipping lines so that there is room to cut and paste using the yellow tablet for the background. The class enjoys this kinesthetic method of manipulating language as will their future students. As the students read their essays to partners during conferencing sessions, their partners help them decide where revisions are needed, either in the content (Tell me more about....) or in sentence construction.

Candidates seem to enjoy participating in several conferencing sessions, either in partners or in small groups. There are revision, elaborating, proofreading and audience conferences to name a few. Before conferencing with the instructor, the writer must have a specific area of concern targeted. This rule assists the pre-service teacher in workshop management issues. The writer reads through the piece twice and the listener gets an idea for the written piece. The listener summarizes what he has heard and where he would like to hear more details. Writers make changes only if they feel the suggestions are valid. What works for them as teachers will work for their future students.

During these class sessions, the mini lessons are focused on incorporating strategies for vocabulary development, spelling, grammar, conventions of writing. Topics such as giving timely feedback, correcting essays without diminishing the spirit of the writer, holding students accountable for previous lessons, and writing teacher comments in the margins become mini lessons as the semester progresses. They experience communicating with proof-writing symbols.

When the drafts are considered ready for the final copy, the candidates bring laptops to class or use a university computer lab for the rest of the project. An air of excitement envelops the room as the pre-service teachers busily complete the last draft. To give the feel of editing, the pre-service teachers participate in a roundtable-style editing exercise that we refer to as “Clocking,” because we rotate the papers in a clockwise circle. A quick trip to the computer lab allows for revisions before handing in the paper to the course instructor. The culminating activity is publication, or in this case author sharing to the large group or to table groups. I hear comments like, “I want to hear everyone’s essay,” and “Now I see how it all goes together!” It is proof to the pre-service teachers they have lived the lessons they are responsible for teaching. Who says that teaching writing can’t be fun?

The portfolio that each student has built through the writing process becomes important to the pre-service teachers as they connect not only to the writing piece, but also to the authentic possibilities for use in the classroom. They contain examples to model and strategies to promote interaction motivate the pre-service students to excel. The ELL pre-service teachers see purpose in the project and often share additional strategies from their coursework for the monolingual students to include in the portfolio. The monolingual pre-service teachers develop a deeper understanding for the ELL students and teachers as they discuss positive ways to teach writing to all students and the possibility of sheltering as opposed to watering down the curriculum.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although I do not have the opportunity to teach the class each semester, I do supervise the lecturers who are assigned as instructors. I monitor the syllabus and the class evaluations remain positive. It appears the hands on approach and design of the course remains successful. Students reflect in their field packets that they are allowed to teach strategies and lessons that relate to the curriculum in the course. The state test scores for the Four to Eight grade level certification remain high in language arts and reading. The department chair has commented positively about the high level of preparation that pre-service teachers in this particular certification experience. Each semester, the certification officer announces the percentage of passing rates in a faculty meeting. We typically score in the mid to high 90<sup>th</sup> percentile.

What I find most exciting is the fact that by the end of the semester, the classroom is filled with confident and talented pre-service teachers who are equipped to teach writing to

adolescents that is interactive with hands on authentic activities. I do not hear the comments of dread and hesitation to learn about teaching writing as the semester ends because they seem to subside throughout the semester. Pre-service teachers have commented that the course has not only helped to prepare them to teach, but also has helped them improve their own writing. Another benefit the pre-service teachers receive from the class is support for each other. The ELL and monolingual teachers build a respect for each other and an understanding of the challenges that they both and they are more self confident to step outside of the textbooks to shelter the ELL students and the strugglers with strategies that meet their needs because they understand each both the theory and application of embedding writing into language arts.

These pre-service teachers understand why adolescents need this type of active and interactive learning in their writing lessons. They have internalized the philosophy of constructivism (Dewey, 1938) and are ready to take on the challenge of those students who do not enjoy writing. If not carefully planned and taught, writing can become a most boring part of the school day for both teachers and students, but it doesn't have to be taught that way. If the teacher can capture the excitement of make personal connections to writing assignments and communicate it to their students, the excitement and self-confidence will transfer. It is as if they are visualizing their future students and I imagine them saying, "Let's write! I will show you how it can be fun."

Rosenblatt (1994) stated, that we travel along a continuum of experience as we learn, traveling from the efferent to the aesthetic side. As I look at my community of pre-service teachers, I know that many of the ELL university students were corrected on the conventions of writing to the point that they are afraid to even attempt to teach writing an essay. Exercises from a book that expects students to fill in the blank or correct sentences has its place, but there is certain passion that emerges when a student completes a meaningful research paper or creative essay that surpasses the textbook exercise. I hope that this university experience has provided a change in mindset from dread to enjoyment. I also hope it has supplied confidence of self expression and personalization that pre-service teachers need in order to make teaching writing an enjoyable experience. I can think of no better legacy to leave for all students than a lifelong thirst for writing.

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