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A Teacher Educator's Action Research: Facilitating Preservice Teachers Becoming Writers and Writing Teachers

by *Merry Boggs*

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Behind the Scene

I wait for another teacher education meeting to begin. Squirming in my seat, I review the agenda that was placed in my mailbox earlier in the week. The first agenda item is the writing proficiency of our undergraduate students. Again, the same question emerges:

"What are we going to do about the students who have completed all the requirements for entry into teacher education and still cannot write?"

I have lost track of the number of times this question has been asked.

My reflections of that meeting evoked memories of graduate schoolwork remembering times when I needed extra time for proofreading and editing. Juggling life as a wife, mother, and worker, I did not have the luxury of spending hours editing and proofreading my papers. I had to work within professors' time limits while fulfilling family and work expectations. Perhaps, preservice teachers face similar constraints on their time.

It has been suggested that the College of Education raise the minimum writing score needed on the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) to be accepted into our teacher education program. There has been much discussion here regarding the pros and cons of this proposal.

Raising test score requirements will not improve writing skills of college students--it will only serve as a gatekeeper, excluding students who cannot write on demand from becoming teachers. My goal as a teacher educator is to find ways to facilitate preservice teachers becoming writers and teachers of writers---not to exclude them from the program.

Dr. Glenn Blalock, a writing professor well versed in process writing, agreed that raising the bar on a writing test would not ensure our students improved writing skills, but asserted that providing meaningful writing activities might.

I decided that I could create writers' groups with my preservice teachers and focus on authentic teacher writing assignments. By authentic, I mean writing as a teacher. Process writing comes from the actual process that professional writers do to arrive at a final product. Therefore, preservice teachers can learn about teaching writing through experiencing the same process a

writer goes through. My instructional goal entailed creating a preservice teacher authentic writing assignment.

I have organized this article by presenting: the research design, writing portfolios, the writers' group process, the writing process, and the final writing projects; I conclude with a consideration of the implications for the future of teaching of writing. Specifically, I have analyzed students' interaction within the writing process and students' self-reported learning regarding their writing. Throughout the sections, I have also intertwined my own self-reflections .

"Teachers must see themselves as readers, writers, and learners" (Rogers and Danielson, 1996, p.2). When teachers feel ownership of their own literacy learning, students are also more apt to do so. As postsecondary writing teachers, our goal is to engage our students in meaningful writing activities because students learn to write by writing (Anson, Graham, Jolliffe, Shapiro, and Smith, 1993). In contrast, standardized writing measures do not create effective writing teachers. Bullock (1991) emphasized this apparent contradiction that writing teachers face. Teachers must demonstrate to various organizations, including public schools, governing bodies, and the public, that their students are competent writers by teaching them to write to a standard predetermined. However, meeting a standard established by non-writers does not ensure the writing development of students, regardless of their age. From his work with effective writers, Graves (1994) noted that only a few of them identified a schoolteacher as the reason for their writing success. Nevertheless, as Bullock stated, collaboration between teachers and students is the key to facilitating students' writing growth. Furthermore, collaboration should include both the process of writing and the evaluation of the writing product; only then does the writer begin to understand the process. Many educators share this sentiment (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995; Graves, 1994; Routman, 2000; Shafer, 2000). Writing defined as a process means that the written text evolves through stages, such as brainstorming, prewriting, writing, editing, proofreading, and publishing. However, each writer executes these writing stages individually. Additionally, writing emerges from an individual's experiences with thinking, learning, and interest -- not necessarily through a teacher's list of topics (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1994; Routman, 2000).

Writing Instruction

Providing effective writing instruction for students K-16 requires a change in teaching strategy. The majority of today's writing instruction evolved from a behaviorist approach in which the teacher was the giver of knowledge and students were the passive receivers of teacher knowledge (Shafer, 2000). Even today this position remains popular because of the demand for high performance on state-mandated tests, thus resulting in the domination of the five-paragraph essay for school writing. At the same time, the behaviorist approach has tended to restrict the teaching of writing, so students do not experience writing as a dynamic, collaborative, and reflective process. Furthermore, as Shafer (2000) noted: "Teaching composition using an early twentieth century skills approach also removes students from the act of critical thinking because many of the decisions are made by the teacher and the model being imposed" (p. 30). To change this direction, teacher educators could incorporate a generative approach to teaching writing in their university courses, both as a strategy and as a means to encourage pre-service teachers' participation in writing (Thomas, 2000). Doran, Rosen, and Wilson (1997) pointed out that

secondary and adult students require meaningful academic exercises to further develop their literacy learning. As a way of reintroducing the importance of interactive writing, I developed writers' groups. In this project, writers' groups were defined as students working together to complete writing assignments.

I have organized the remainder of this article in a number of sections: research design, writing portfolios, the writers' groups process, the writing process, and the final writing projects. I then concluded with a consideration of the implications for the future of the teaching of writing. Specifically, I have analyzed students' interaction within the writing process and students' self-reported learning regarding the writing they carried out through this process. Throughout the sections, I have intertwined my own self-reflections with my discussion of this research report.

Research Design

In this study, action research presented a venue for practical inquiry into teaching writing. The practitioner researched current practices with the goals of (1) improved practice, (2) improved professional writing practices, and (3) improvement of the writing practices of the organization where she worked. "To be action research, there must be praxis rather than practice. Praxis is informed, committed action giving rise to knowledge rather than just to successful action" (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1993). However, few teacher educator action research projects have addressed teacher educators who are systematically and reflectively studying their own practice (Ross & Bondy, 1996). Instead, many action research projects focus on teacher educators facilitating the action research of their own students, whether preservice or inservice teachers. According to Short (1993), reflective teacher educators "who do research in their own classrooms both offer the profession a different perspective on the learning environments of preservice and inservice teachers and a way to transform these environments" (p.159).

Researcher Perspective

As the teacher researcher, my teaching background included a wide variety of experiences: elementary teacher, assistant principal, principal, media specialist, and university professor. Additionally, I have taught in both small and large school districts located in Texas, Florida, and Egypt. Currently, I teach undergraduate and graduate reading and teacher education courses at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, a predominately Hispanic serving institute located in south Texas.

Participants

Writers group members were 13 women enrolled in a 15-week field-based component of our teacher education program. The field-based block took place on a local elementary school campus where the preservice teachers completed both university coursework and classroom assignments. Most of the students in the program spent their high school years in Texas---writing and mastering the five-paragraph format. They had very few opportunities to experience any writing process in their coursework. During their secondary coursework, four students had singular experiences with process writing. These four opportunities were one high school English class and three different university courses.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection included my journal notes, agendas from writing groups, questions from participants, observations, and informal conversation. Data was collected and recorded daily in a notebook.

Data analysis occurred in several phases throughout this research project. Initial analysis focused on my reflections and immediate student feedback via daily agendas where students listed questions and comments. These comments shaped the further development of the writers' groups. After the termination of the writers' groups, students completed an open-ended evaluation of the group and the assignments. After the completion of writing portfolios, a second phase of analysis began that included examination of the writing portfolios, student written observations, and comments.

The Writing Portfolio

As I planned the writers' groups, I developed a plan for a writing portfolio for which students were invited to take initiative and make choices in their own writing. Therefore, I carefully organized the assignments. I wanted students to have opportunities for choices, yet I also wanted to nudge them into the writing process. After teaching undergraduates in the previous semester's field-based block, I knew that I needed to be careful when developing and planning the writing portfolio. I wanted to invite teachers to become writers, even if momentarily, instead of adult learners who were more concerned about grades than learning. At times, these undergraduates singularly focused on accomplishing their goal of becoming a college graduate with the result that learning became secondary. The focus was on completing assignments specifically for the professor.

Contents of the Writing Portfolio

The results of careful planning were a two part writing portfolio. The first part of the writing portfolio contained six pre-determined assignments: a beginning of the school year introductory letter to parents, a classroom newsletter home, two different report card messages (students determined the scenarios), notes to parents regarding students' behavior or academic successes or problems, and a letter to the principal requesting additional money for supplies. The second section asked students to choose four writing assignments. I listed several open-ended ideas such as rubric, test, grant application, and workshop presentation, so my students would have to further develop each idea. For each writing assignment, I required all the rough drafts be included. I did this in order to track the development of the final copy through the rough drafts. Because new learning requires more structure, I wanted to ensure students completed all writing stages. Then came the tough part: how to grade? I knew from past experiences that "what is graded is completed," but I wanted my students to work on the process as much as the product. So the grade had to reflect both these: process and product. Therefore, I developed two rubrics: one for the process and one for the product. Also, I developed a self-assessment of the writing process for each student to use to evaluate their own work; this also required students to demonstrate the process.

Self-Reflection Regarding Writing Portfolios

Writing research usually supports an open and flexible approach to writers' groups and writing process (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986) especially in regard to how students follow the process and work within the framework of the groups. However, this group of students was inexperienced with these approaches: therefore, I chose to implement these techniques stringently. I required my students to follow the writing process too rigidly by requiring all steps: brainstorming, prewriting, writing, editing, proofreading, and publishing.

The Writers' Group Process

As I reflected on my purpose for establishing writers' groups, I based my groups on the supposition that ownership in literacy learning meant providing teacher defined authentic writing topics. Hence, I learned from this research project that I limited students and myself through my narrow definition of authenticity and ownership. I wanted to provide a learning opportunity that facilitated student control of their learning. Since my students also seemed to have limited experiences with the writing process, I wanted these college seniors to experience the writing process because for most it was their first time. Therefore, I chose to build the environment to facilitate this learning situation, and I took on the role of set director.

Constructing the Scenery

First, I constructed the "scenery" for the writers' groups through the details of the writing assignment requirements, guidelines, timeline, grading rubrics, and procedures. Initially, I saw myself as the stage director behind the scenes preparing this wonderful production, Writers' Groups. Furthermore, I singularly prepared the set for the writers' groups. With further reading into set managing (thanks to thoughtful editing), I realized that constructing the scenery for any production is not a singular event. Perhaps, I, too, made the mistake in preparing writers' groups of thinking that my role as teacher educator meant preparing writers' groups without my students. From my understanding of theatre production, many individuals come together under the auspices of the stage director. Thus, successful scenery only comes together because of the collaborative work of many individuals. As a teacher educator trying to construct authentic learning opportunities for my students, I have much to learn.

Then, my overt work was done. Next, I set out to support my students as writers by gently pushing them into making decisions in their writers' groups.

Minilessons

I turned my attention to developing minilessons because of their significance in the writing process. According to Atwell (1998), minilessons are a critical tool for teaching about writing. The writers' groups were embedded in a 12-hour block of literacy, math, science, and social studies teaching methods. During the teaching methods course time, students studied the writing process and writing across the curriculum. Writing across the curriculum is a belief that writing should be practiced throughout all curricular areas. This coursework became indirect minilessons that supported our writers' groups. The first formal minilessons that I developed focused on the

prewriting process. The second minilesson examined the role of the writing group in the classroom.

I was on the right track with the first minilessons. Then, after two minilessons, I stopped because I was not fostering the student responses that I expected. Instead, my students turned to me for the answers and to discover my expectations. Upon critical reflection on my choices of minilessons, I realized that I did not allow the minilessons to develop in conjunction with the writing process. I seemed to confuse ownership and authentic writing. The writing process does not exclude or excuse the teacher from teaching. The teacher needs to learn to participate with multiple identities such as encourager, teacher, supporter, and writer. Moreover, timing and appropriateness are the key to successful minilessons.

Ownership in the Writers' Group Process

My original concept of the writing process was to give students authentic writing topics, thinking that they would take ownership of their own writing. I mistakenly stepped back and let the students, via their writing groups, appear to take the lead. This took more work on my part than expected. I had to become silent, so the students could learn to become active learners! In order to fulfill my need to be actively working, I wrote field notes from listening to group members' talk while they worked. I found that, as I sat quietly, my students' participation increased. I learned that students could resolve their own dilemmas. For example, when one of the groups kept sitting three in a row leaving one member out of the direct line of communication, I wanted to interfere and tell the group to change their seating arrangements. Instead, I held my thoughts and waited for two days. On the third day, they changed their seating arrangement on their own. The following conversation occurred:

Susan said, "Donna, why don't you move here, so we can talk easier?" The other member said, "Yea, come on."

Donna did move and sit across from the other group members. (Now allowing for communication now included all.)

Being allowed to work together on a common project, these students gradually took steps to create their own cooperative learning environments where each was a valued member. Through this project, I learned that, in order to create the environment for learning, stepping back could be an effective instructional strategy for promoting active student participation.

Self-Reflection regarding Writers' Group Process

However, my goal was to allow students to participate in the writing process. I asked myself, "What actions did I take as a writing teacher?" With continued self-reflection, I realized that I became focused on facilitating active student participation, and as a result lost sight of allowing my students to collaboratively create writers' groups with me. I took the lead, whether indirectly or directly, and did not share in the writing process with my students. I even found myself questioning my commitment to the writing process. With a critical perspective, I re-read my researcher notes. I felt that perhaps increasing students' control of their own learning was my

hidden goal. This same situation re-appeared in regard to minilessons. Perhaps, I did not listen to the students and the minilessons that I developed were not relevant, or perhaps I did not give them enough time to emerge.

The Writing Process

The four groups shared a similar progression during the writers' groups, yet uniquely interacted with the writing scenery. Overall, each writer's group followed the same three-stage process: (1) choosing the scenery; (2) constructing the scenery; and (3) reflecting on the results. The groups created their own rules for members interacting with each other.

Choosing the Scenery

During the choosing the scenery stage, students discussed what their writers' group should look like, but also shared in friendly conversations. Self-regulating guidelines were attained from agendas. Agendas included comments like:

"Swap and discuss notes to parents, use minilesson #1 for guidance, and work on notes to parents."

"Share ideas for new samples."

"Goal is to have one rough draft for each person to begin the proofreading and editing process."

"Bring second drafts of notes."

"Work on polishing 1-3."

Conversations randomly switched back and forth between on-task and off-task topics. At times I felt that, if an outsider came into the classroom, that she would feel that, with all the laughter and talking, students were not working. In fact, secretly, I was nervous because I wondered if I was wasting time on this activity.

Constructing the Scenery

It was students who took the first step of bringing rough drafts to share who initiated the second phase. They encouraged other students to bring in their own rough drafts. During this phase, I recorded several conversations,

Student A: Re-read again, I am not sure I understand.

Student B: [Re-reads]

Student A: How about "dropped considerable" instead of ... ?

Another conversation:

Student (to group members, laughing) "I can't read my own handwriting." (The whole group joins in the laughter.)

Another conversation:

Student A: Don't correct in front of me.

Student B: Don't be so sensitive. (laughter) I will write you notes on your paper.

Reflecting on the Scenery

The last phase I called the reflecting on the scenery because everyone was deeply engaged in editing and proofreading; my class was finally quiet. One group had assigned each member a specific colored marker to make editing marks on writing samples. During this phase, intense reading was a major activity and the room was silent. Students quietly read and marked various writing samples. Perhaps the greatest lesson that occurred for me was when I watched my students begin to emerge as writers, like colorful butterflies from gray cocoons. I learned how important time was for the process to bear fruit. That process included both serious reflection and time to laugh, but in the end the work was accomplished.

Final Writing Products

The writing portfolios were amazing. As I reviewed individual portfolios, I found only a few minor errors throughout the writing samples. Most indicated fully developed thought. Only one writing portfolio lacked completeness, including editing and proofreading. This individual was initially reluctant to actively participate as a writer during the writers' group but her fellow group members gradually enticed her into the process. Overall, the writing portfolios were the first step for these participants in the creation of their teaching portfolios.

Writers' Groups: What Have the Students Learned?

After students completed their writing portfolios, I asked them to write an anonymous evaluation of the writers' groups. From this survey I realized that students had had a motivating experience with writing. I will use the students' words to describe their writing experience:

"I wish I had belonged to one in grade school because it takes you from step one till the finished product."

"I learned that writing is often difficult. It is a process that can be changed and improved repeatedly. I enjoyed the feedback from my group because it allowed me to actually test the writing on the readers."

"Sometimes it took a listening ear to really understand how to approach a letter. The group was helpful and the feedback was necessary for me."

"The main thing that I learned is that it (writing) is not a quick process. To get the best results, you must take your time. It was great having peer readers."

"I had not put this much thought into it (writing) before this."

"I learned how to give feedback to edit/proofread each other's work."

"Writing is not as easy as it may seem. You have to think a lot about what you will write and make a lot of rough drafts about what you are writing about before you hand it to a parent or principal."

A motivating writing experience is a step in the right direction; however, as a teacher educator my goals should be to move my students towards developing personal reasons for their writing.

Writers' Groups: The Future

Time for Dynamic Writing Instruction

Teachers are faced with many difficult instructional decisions, including decisions with respect to preparing students for state-mandated tests, the "back-to-the basics" skills movement, integrating technology into the instructional day, and the ever-increasing diversity of students. In none of these areas is there a concern for the writing process, authentic assessment, time for reading, or authentic literacy tasks. As a teacher educator, I also face some instructional decisions similar to those that public school teachers face. I continually ask myself, "How do I develop authentic learning opportunities for my students?"

While professionals will tell you that writing is often a solitary, even lonely event, teaching writing is a dynamic, interactive process and calls for cooperative group settings with supportive feedback and instructional intervention by the teacher. For my own teaching practice, I learned that the next step is to focus on a more open and flexible writing process and the by-product will be increased student control of their learning. I also need to write with my students.

Preservice Teachers Thoughts Regarding the Writing Process

Although the preservice teachers who participated in my first attempt at implementing writers' groups were favorable, as shown by the following comments, I still have more to learn about facilitating the writing process with my students.

I learned that I should always obtain other peoples' opinions about my writing because I thought my work or writings sounded better by adding other people's ideas.

I learned that I would like to be a better writer and that I write best about what I have experienced.

Thanks for the challenge.

I thought it was great! I've never seen this in any of my other classes, I'm glad we did it!

I learned that I write better when, if I'm stuck on something. Seeing how someone else started their paper and getting an idea for the beginning of my paper.

I CAN do it!!

In addition, in the future I plan to share writing with my students by holding individual and group writing conferences, developing minilessons with my students, and writing with my students.

Teacher Support for Writers' Workshop

In the end, the burden of improving the teaching and learning of writing rests with all teachers, whether elementary, junior high, high school, or university. Instead of blaming the lowest common denominator, parents or elementary teachers, for students' writing problems, all teachers need to work together to bring about the needed changes in writing instruction. Thomas (2000) stated that acceptance of the writing workshop approach to teaching must be fostered among all teachers. In contrast to writers' groups, writers' workshop puts the students in charge of their writing. The teacher supports the development of the student as a writer. Thomas suggested two steps that might help foster change in the teaching of writing. First, teacher education programs should include writers' workshop training for all level teachers. Second, it is necessary to "overcome the cultural myths concerning writing" (Thomas, 2000, 41). Lastly, teacher educators need to be committed to integrating writers' workshops into their courses. As for me, I learned that one motivating writing experience is a step in the right direction, but this professor has learned that she has gaps to fill between her beliefs and her practice.

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