



Teacher candidates' perceptions of their learning and engagement in a writing methods course



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Candidates' perceived depth of learning in a writing methods course.
- Learning occurred across multiple social settings.
- Small group settings particularly engaged candidate learning.
- Overlapping learning roles as writers and teachers influenced learning.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine teacher candidates' perceptions of learning and learning opportunities in a semester-long course writing methods course. Results from this study indicate candidates felt they had developed understandings of writing, teacher practices, and themselves as writers. They also indicate that three factors fostered candidates' engagement in learning experiences: (1) learning across multiple activity settings, (2) interactions with peers, and (3) overlapping experiential learning roles as both teachers and writers. These factors provide a useful framework for planning and implementing learning activity in practice-focused teacher education. Other implications for teacher education programs, teacher educators, and researchers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

I think that everything I learned in this class I will apply in my own classroom, and hopefully now I will be able to help my future students not only become great writers, but enjoy writing as well!

As responsible teacher educators, we each desire to provide learning experiences that impact the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that our teacher candidates eventually utilize in future practice. We wrestle with matters of content and the pedagogy, striving to engage candidates in meaningful and relevant learning opportunities—hoping to prompt responses similar to those expressed by a candidate above. Indeed, reflecting on and engaging with issues of practice and candidate learning has prompted

formalized inquiries by teacher educators through teacher research (e.g. [Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1993](#)) and self-study of teaching and teacher education practices (e.g. [Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2007](#)). In this current study, our work as teacher educators and researchers has assuredly intertwined, as we moved beyond anecdotal evidence to a systematic examination of our candidates' perceptions of their learning and engagement in activity in a semester-long methods course focused on writing.

Although, investigations of one's own contexts aim for personal understandings and improvement of practice ([LaBoskey, 2007](#)), our motivations for undertaking this inquiry lie in the broader teacher education context. Unfortunately, the opinions expressed in the quote above understandings may not be typical of elementary teacher candidates in the United States and elsewhere. Despite knowledge of the complexities of writing processes, the unique challenges of teaching writing in elementary classrooms, and the need to engage teacher candidates in subject-specific coursework ([Darling-Hammond, 2005](#); [Grossman, 1990](#)), many teachers are not prepared well to teach writing in their teacher education programs

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(Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Pardo, 2006). In a survey of 174 primary teachers in the United States (Cutler & Graham, 2008), 44% of teachers reported that their preparation to teach writing was adequate, and over one quarter of them (28%) rated their preparation as poor or inadequate. Few states require a separate writing methods course for certification (National Commission on Writing, 2003; National Writing Project, 2006), and writing instruction is often squeezed into already-dense literacy methods courses focused on reading (Morgan, 2008).

Not surprisingly then, many teachers feel that they lack the knowledge, skills, and strategies they need to facilitate children's emerging competencies as writers (Troia & Graham, 2003). A gap has emerged between what teachers have been taught to teach and what students need to learn (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2010). Adoption of the Common Core State Standards by 45 states has placed renewed emphasis on writing outcomes in K-12 classrooms—with ambitious expectations. Knowing how teacher education programs and literacy teacher educators can engage prospective teachers in learning opportunities that foster development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions critical to writing instruction is vital.

Therefore, although course activity was carefully planned to foster development of subject matter and focus on instructional practice (Ball & Forenzi, 2009), we wanted to know how candidates were experiencing and engaging with this activity. Fostering candidates' abilities to connect teacher preparation activity with eventual teacher practice is predicated on engagement with and sense-making of the learning activity. This systematic investigation moved beyond the typical student feedback procedures of a preparation course, allowing us to deepen understandings of course activity and of candidate engagement in this activity. Guiding questions for this inquiry included:

1. What are candidates' perceptions about their learning in a writing methods course?
2. What are candidates' perceptions of the learning opportunities available this course?
3. How do candidates' understandings link to visions for future practice?

2. Contexts for the inquiry

The underlying assumptions that we brought to this inquiry are situated in theoretical perspectives of learning activity and empirical investigations of teacher education practices in methods courses.

2.1. Theoretical perspectives of learning

The assumptions undergirding this study are situated in the intersections of social constructivist perspectives of learning and teaching (Gallimore & Tharpe, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978, 1999; Wells, 1999; Werstsch, 1985a, 1985b), activity systems theory (Engeström, 1999; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999), and the critical role of engagement in learning opportunities (Mosenthal, 1999). From this vantage, learning and teaching are complexly intertwined social and cognitive processes in which teachers and students' mutual engagement in learning opportunities fosters development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Learning opportunities occur in particular activity settings (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993) delineated by their social contexts. For example, reading a book on one's own is a different activity setting than discussing the book with others in a small group setting. In one case the reader must engage in making

meaning on her own, while in the other meaning is co-constructed through participation in small group discussion. The social context thus mediates engagement in learning.

Although teacher and student roles may differ in activity settings, each is actively involved in construction of learning outcomes (Cambourne, 2001, Chapman, 1997). How each engages in the activity can influence learning outcomes. So, continuing with the prior example, reading a book to construct meaning on one's own may result in different interactions with text than when the reader has prompting questions from an instructor that can guide and focus interactions with the text. The teacher has (pro)actively influenced conditions surrounding the learner's engagement in activity—what might be called the objective conditions of the activity setting (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1999). However, the learner's actions, attitudes, beliefs, and reflections interact with these objective conditions to influence the nature of engagement with learning and subsequent meaning making (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1999). For instance, a student may ignore prompting questions or skim the reading without thoughtful interactions with content. In order for learning activity to be productive for students, they must be engaged in ways that foster connections between doing and thinking.

2.2. Investigations into teacher education practices in methods courses

As the work we do as teacher educators is bound up with what beginning teachers must be prepared to do (Darling-Hammond, 2005), understandings of practice-focused methods teaching (Ball & Forenzi, 2009; Grossman et al., 2009; Lampert, 2010) are fundamental to this study. Methods courses, focused on content-specific understandings and instructional practices, serve critical roles at the entry point of teacher development. Divides between theory and practice and university and K-12 classrooms must be intentionally bridged (Ball, 2000; Little, 2002), so that beginning teachers develop the tools necessary for effective beginning instruction.

Methods courses are complex (Grossman et al., 2009). They can serve to deepen subject matter knowledge, understandings about children's development in that subject, and to foster positive dispositions towards subject matter—each important to effective elementary teaching and learning. Methods courses can foster links between understandings particular to subject matter and those gained in courses focused more generally on learning, learners, and classroom contexts to help candidates map understandings onto particular subjects. For instance, Martin (2004) found links between a classroom management course and literacy methods coursework in effective beginning literacy practices.

Methods courses also provide important opportunities for teacher candidates to learn about and practice teaching tasks specific to subject areas. Candidates engage with representations (Grossman et al., 2009) of teaching through such activities as instructor modeling, viewing videotapes, and use of cases. They can approximate teacher practices (Grossman et al., 2009) by gaining experiences with various instructional approaches and assessment tools.

Learning opportunities in methods courses are influenced by course content and pedagogy. Because of the nature of our work-teaching teachers—the lines between content and pedagogy are often blurred. Methods courses are sites in which subject matter and pedagogy are intertwined (Ball, 2000; Grossman, 2005). Thompson (2006) suggests that pedagogy can be thought of an aspect of course content, as well as processes.

Standards set by policy makers and professional groups, such as the National Council for Teachers of English, along with textbooks

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