Good Teachers need to be Good Writers: Designing and Implementing a Professional Writing Course for Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

While pre-service teachers receive explicit instruction in methods for teaching writing to elementary and secondary students, they are less likely to receive explicit instruction about the writing skills necessary to be a successful, professional educator. The writing skills of many teacher candidates often do not align with expectations for professionals and most introductory courses in writing offered at universities do not address the specific needs of those planning to become teachers. In response to these realities, the authors of this article have designed and implemented a writing course that is grounded in Argumentative Theory and is specific to the needs of beginning teachers. This article discusses this course that is designed to help pre-service teacher's maximise their writing effectiveness immediately (for portfolios) and long term as they enter the teaching profession.

Introduction

While pre-service teachers receive explicit instruction in methods for teaching writing to elementary and secondary students (via Language Arts Methods courses and Content Area Literacy courses), they are less likely to receive explicit instruction about the writing skills necessary to be successful, professional educators. The writing skills of many teacher candidates often do not align with expectations for professionals and most introductory writing courses offered at universities do not address the specific needs of those planning to become teachers. In response to these realities, the authors of this article have designed and implemented a writing course that is specific to the needs of beginning teachers.

Writing for Teachers: An Overview

W290: Professional Writing for Teachers is taught by School of Education faculty but offered through the university's School of Humanities and Fine Arts. The

course addresses the study of writing in relation to the profession of education. Students evaluate their own writing strengths and weaknesses and complete a series of assignments designed both to improve their writing skills and to expose them to authentic writing tasks expected of teachers. The intention is that the pre-service teachers make direct connections between assignments and their practical applications.

Philosophically, the course is grounded in argumentative theory (Weston, 2003). Individual assignments necessitate that pre-service teachers consider argumentation as a specific form of communication (both oral and written) that takes place in the context of a critical discussion. Students determine what they intend to argue, ask questions to develop the argument, organise their major and minor premises, and craft their pieces through a continuous revision process that utilises the 6+1 Trait model (Culham, 2003). This means that writers target ideas, organisation, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation in order to improve their writing. They submit their work electronically and revision suggestions are made in trait language. Course assignments are assessed using the 6+1 Trait Condensed Scoring Guide (see Appendix A) developed by Education Northwest (2009).

Argumentative Theory and Best Practices in Writing Instruction

The literature supports the need for writing courses designed for postsecondary students. Weston (2003) explains the need for argumentation as a major component of such a course: "Too many students come out of critical thinking courses knowing only how to shoot down … selected fallacies. Too often hey can't explain what is actually wrong, or launch an argument of their own" (p. x). Nagin (2003) asserts that "… in today's increasingly diverse society, writing is a gateway for success in academia, the new workplace, and the global economy" (p. 2). He further describes an effective writing program that integrates writing applications and conventions:

> Historically, there has been tension between two distinct emphases in teaching composition: one that focuses on formal and external aspects of writing such as grammar, usage, sentence structure, and style; and another that focuses on meaning, ideas, expression, and writing processes. In most classrooms today, teachers draw from both approaches. (p. 16)

The 6+1 Trait Model includes both approaches to the teaching of writing and exemplifies best practices in writing instruction and assessment (Culham, 2003). Another effective classroom practice, writing as a process, has been highlighted by the National Writing Project (Nagin, 2003, p. 3). According to Carroll and Wilson (2008), "The movement from product to process … requires change and integration. Writing as a process means giving students time to prewrite, write, post write, proofread, and edit their papers. It means teaching writing, not just assigning it" (p. xi).

The components listed above, including an approach to writing based on argumentative theory, a strong focus on the best practices approach to writing instruction, and a reliance on the writing process, are all evident in the course assignments for W290: Professional Writing for Teachers. As a result of designing and implementing this course, the School of Education at one university has made the course a requirement for successful completion of the undergraduate degrees

that accompany licensure in both elementary and secondary education. The course is offered in conjunction with the University's English Department, thus making this policy interdisciplinary. The main goal of the course is to improve the writing skills necessary for success as a teacher; therefore the course itself encourages exemplary practice. Following is a brief description of the course content as well as specific assignments that show these ideals in practice.

W290: The Course and Assignments

W290: Professional Writing for Teachers is a fifteen-week course that addresses the study of writing in relation to the profession of education. Main topics include argumentative writing as it relates to two issues important to educators (poverty and multiculturalism), persuasive writing for professional portfolios, timed writes that reflect authentic work teachers do (e.g., letters to parents or administrators, permission slips, student letters of recommendation), peer revision conferences, and the style and mechanics of writing via the 6 + 1 Trait Model. Teachers are expected to do a variety of writing and the effective execution of that skill is an assessment of their professionalism. W290 is designed to help pre-service teachers maximise that professionalism immediately (in relation to admission to student teaching and graduation portfolios) and long term as they enter the education profession. Following are brief descriptions of the main components of the course.

The Argumentative Essay

The argumentative essay is developed in stages to enable the writer to craft a strong piece successfully. First, the pre-service teacher is introduced to different types of arguments and encouraged to incorporate these into his or her essay. The W290 instructors use Anthony Weston's text, *A Rulebook for Arguments*, as the basis for describing arguments from authority, arguments by example, and cause and effect arguments. Writers also study models of good argumentative writing in *40 Model Essays* by Jane Aaron. After much discussion and collaboration on the focus of the essays, the writers begin to ask guiding questions that drive the research process and the pre-writing stage.

Once the major premise is unpacked, the writer crafts a strong thesis statement that guides the first draft of the essay. During the drafting process, the 2-3-1 Format (Fletcher, 2004) serves as an organisational framework. With this format, the writer develops the second strongest argument first, minor arguments, and finally the strongest argument. Depending on the instructor, the pre-service teacher develops an argumentative essay that focuses either on economic diversity or the defence of multicultural materials one might use in the classroom.

Portfolio Pieces

Part of the Unit Assessment System used within the School of Education is that pre-service students successfully complete two portfolios, one before student teaching and one after student teaching. While the portfolio guidelines allow for much flexibility and individuality, there are certain components that must be included and certain formats that are expected to be followed. After much concern on the part of School of Education faculty as to when and where these components should be taught, it was decided that much of the content would become a part of the W290 curriculum. As such, several of the assignments throughout the course are directly related to the portfolio and can even result in actual pieces being portfolio ready.

Both an introduction and conclusion are components of all portfolios completed by pre-service teachers. As such, there are specific assignments in W290 that are designed to replicate these two portfolio requirements. Additionally, pre-service teachers are asked to consider the ten Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) principles (see Appendix B) and the three School of Education themes (reflective scholar, instructional leader, and global citizen) when discussing portfolio artefacts they select. These assignments are designed to replicate the portfolio process and give pre-service teachers the hands-on experience necessary for successful completion of the portfolio. The 6+1 Trait Model is stressed as pre-service teachers prepare these assignments as are the tenets of argumentative reasoning as the writer works toward proving that he or she is qualified to progress to the next stage of the Unit Assessment System.

Writing as a Process

Pre-service teachers are introduced to the three steps of writing: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. For some writers, this is the first exposure to writing as a process. One of the authors frequently quotes Calkins and Mermelstein (2003): "When you're done, you've just begun" (p. 13). Pre-service teachers collaborate on writing and give feedback in revision and editing conferences during Writer's Workshop. *Revision Conferencing Cards* developed by Smekens Education Solutions (2006) occasionally guide the conversations in one of the classrooms. During peer conferences, writers become aware of reader expectations that include all of the traits that influence the craft of good writing. Readers question their peer writers in trait language that clarifies the writer's intended idea development. Sample questions that guide peer revision conferences include the following: Who is your audience? Does your lead hook the reader? Does your thesis statement drive your essay? Are your words concise and accurate? Do you have varied sentence beginnings? Does your conclusion satisfy the reader?

Timed Writes

Throughout the course, pre-service teachers are asked to complete four timed write assignments. For each assignment the pre-service teachers are given a specific writing prompt that relates to an authentic educational situation and they are given thirty minutes to produce a final product. These assignments were created to balance the writing assignments that pre-service teachers could rewrite and redraft. In an effort to stress that writing is a process, the authors discovered that they neglected the reality of teaching that some writing is done quickly and must be "audience ready" in a brief period of time. When responding to these prompts, pre-service teachers are allowed to use the types of resources that would be readily available to them in their own classrooms including dictionaries and, for particular assignments, word processors.

Topics for the prompts include letters written to parents and administrators, field trip permission forms, and student letters of recommendation. For a complete description of the timed writes, see Appendix C. In preparation for these assignments pre-service teachers consider audience (which changes for each timed write) and argumentative theory. For example, for the letter to an administrator, the pre-service teacher is asked to assume the role of an experienced teacher who is part of a committee interviewing teachers for a newly vacated position. As part of the letter, the pre-service teacher is asked to persuade the principal (audience) as to why one candidate should be hired over another. The pre-service teacher is expected to demonstrate the proper use of argumentative theory to make the case for hiring a particular candidate while at the same time using the proper style and tone for addressing an administrator.

Impact on Portfolios

The writing class affords student writers the opportunity to practice the pieces required for the School of Education portfolios. They write introductions, connections and reflections related to School of Education themes, and conclusions. One class piloted a more student-friendly format to make connections to the INTASC principles. The positive responses to the pilot enabled faculty to make informed changes based on student feedback.

Both instructors have scored student portfolios for several semesters, and have noted improvements in the quality of student writing. Portfolio introductions, connections, and conclusions reflect the structure and style of the various writing assignments for W290. It can be argued that students are applying their new understandings about the qualities of writing and suggested guidelines learned in W290 to their portfolios.

Improved Unit Assessment

All program graduates are required to create two separate portfolios. One is done before being admitted to student teaching and another is done after student teaching and is a graduation requirement. As such, both portfolios are key components of the School of Education's Unit Assessment plan. Because of the focus on portfolio writing, an intention of W290 is to have a positive impact on Unit Assessments. Other components of W290 directly related to the Unit Assessment plan include timed writes and the argumentative writing assignments. These are, in part, aligned with the School of Education writing sample and the writing portion of the Praxis I which all teacher candidates must pass before taking methods courses.

Final Thoughts and Looking into the Future

As the only two instructors of W290 since the course's inception, the authors of this article have seen improvements in student writing across the program. The use of argumentative theory, the integration of the 6+1 Trait Model, and the implementation of best practices for writing instruction have improved writing while allowing pre-service teachers to become more confident in their abilities as writers. One of the instructors administers her own self-concept inventory as a pre and post assessment of student attitudes toward writing. Over four semesters, pre-service teachers have indicated positive changes toward idea development, organisation, and voice. After careful examination of portfolios and practice pieces, students express more confidence as they approach expectations for portfolio writing. The other instructor requires students to set goals as writers at the beginning of the semester and then returns to those goals in the final weeks. Consistently, the pre-service teachers reflect on initial trepidations regarding writing and the subsequent increase in self-efficacy.

One of the instructors plans to add a serving learning component to the writing class in order to increase the students' experiences and understandings of economic diversity. The superintendent from a neighbouring school district has agreed to provide focus groups of teachers, parents, and students to be interviewed by pre-service teachers. As they become immersed in the economic issues of the school district, student writers gain first-hand experiences necessary to achieve more authenticity in their writing. The culminating project includes position papers

written to significant stakeholders addressing the impact of economic issues on education.

Both instructors are currently researching ways to assess writing skills using a variety of communication modes such as electronic mail and blogs. As ways for professional educators to interact with students, parents, and colleagues expand, so must the assignments and strategies used in W290.

The university has a campus wide goal stating that its graduates should "be able to express themselves clearly, completely, and accurately. Effective communication entails the successful sharing through a wide variety of techniques, including reading writing, speaking and technology" (Indiana University East, 2004). The professional writing course W290 was born out of a commitment to this goal and the re-thinking of the course as both technologies and the roles of teachers change is inevitable. For the instructors of the course, however, one truth remains steadfast: good teachers need to be good writers.

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Appendix A: 6 + 1 Trait Condensed Scoring Guide Developed by Education Northwest

Ideas: The heart of the message, the content of the piece, the main theme, with details that enrich and develop the theme	**Organisation**: The internal structure, the thread of central meaning, the logical and sometimes intriguing pattern of the ideas.	**Voice:** The unique perspective of the writer evident in the piece through the use of compelling ideas, engaging language, and revealing details.
5 This paper is clear and focused. It holds the reader's attention. Relevant anecdotes and details enrich the central theme. A. The topic is narrow and manageable. B. Relevant, telling details go beyond the obvious. C. Reasonably accurate details. D. Writing from knowledge and experience; ideas are fresh and original. E. Readers' questions are anticipated and answered. F. Insightful.	*5 The organisational structure of this paper enhances and showcases the central idea or theme of the paper; includes a satisfying introduction and conclusion.* A. An inviting introduction that draws the reader in; a satisfying conclusion leaves the reader with a sense of closure and resolution. B. Thoughtful transitions C. Sequencing is logical and effective. D. Pacing is well controlled. E. The title, if desired, is original. F. Flows smoothly; reader hardly has to think about it.	*5 The writer of this paper speaks directly to the reader in a manner that is individual, compelling, engaging, and shows respect for the audience.* A. Uses topic, details, and language to strongly connect with the audience. B. Purpose is reflected by content and arrangement of ideas. C. The writer takes a risk with revealing details D. Expository or persuasive reflects understanding and commitment to topic. E. Narrative writing is honest, personal, and engaging.
3 The writer is beginning to define the topic, even though development is still basic or general. A. The topic is fairly broad. B. Support is attempted. C. Ideas are relatively clear. D. Writer has difficulty going from general observations to specifics. E. The reader is left with questions. F. The writer generally stays on topic.	*3 The organisational structure is strong enough to move the reader through the text without too much confusion.* A. The paper has a recognizable introduction and conclusion. B. Transitions often work well. C. Sequencing shows some logic, yet structure takes attention away from the content. D. Pacing is fairly well controlled. E. A title, if desired, is present. F. Organisation sometimes supports the main point.	*3 The writer seems sincere, but not fully engaged or involved. The result is pleasant or even personable, but not compelling.* A. Attempt to connect with audience is earnest, but impersonal. B. Attempts to include content and structure to reflect purpose. C. Occasionally reveals personal details, but avoids the risk. D. Expository or persuasive writing lacks consistent engagement with topic. E. Narrative writing reflects limited perspective.
1 The paper has no clear sense of purpose or central theme. The reader must make inferences based on sketchy or missing details. A. The writer is still in search of a topic. B. Information is limited or unclear or the length is not adequate for development. C. The idea is a simple restatement or simple answer to the question. D. The writer has not begun to define the topic. E. Everything seems as important as everything else. F. The text may be repetitious, disconnected, and contains too many random thoughts.	*1 The writing lacks a clear sense of direction.* A. No real lead. B. Connections between ideas are confusing. C. Sequencing needs work.. D. Pacing feels awkward. E. No title is present (if requested). F. Problems with organisation make it hard for the reader to get a grip on the main point or story line.	*1 The writer seems uninvolved with the topic and the audience.* A. Fails to connect with the audience. B. Purpose is unclear. C. Writing is risk free, with no sense of the writer. D. Expository or persuasive writing is mechanical, showing no engagement with the topic. E. Narrative writing lacks development of a point of view.
Key Question: *Did the writer stay focused and share original and fresh information or perspective about the topic?*	**Key Question:** *Does the organisational structure enhance the ideas and make it easier to understand?*	**Key Question:** *Would you keep reading this piece if it were longer?*

Word Choice: The use of rich, colorful, precise language that moves and enlightens the reader.	**Sentence Fluency:** The rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, the way in which the writing plays to the ear, not just to the eye.	**Conventions:** The mechanical correctness of the piece; spelling, grammar and usage, paragraphing, use of capitals, and punctuation.
5 Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting, and natural way. A. Words are specific and accurate. B. Striking words and phrases. C. Natural, effective and appropriate language. D. Lively verbs, specific nouns and modifiers. E. Language enhances and clarifies meaning. F. Precision is obvious.	*5 The writing has an easy flow, rhythm and cadence. Sentences are well built.* A. Sentences enhance the meaning. B. Sentences vary in length as well as structure. C. Purposeful and varied sentence beginnings. D. Creative and appropriate connectives. E. The writing has cadence.	*5 The writer demonstrates a good grasp of standard writing conventions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, grammar, usage, paragraphing)* A. Spelling is generally correct. B. Punctuation is accurate. C. Capitalisation skills are present. D. Grammar and usage are correct. E. Paragraphing tends to be sound. F. The writer may manipulate conventions for stylistic effect; and it works.
3 The language is functional, even if it lacks much energy. A. Words are adequate and correct in a general sense. B. Familiar words and phrases communicate. C. Attempts at colorful language. D. Passive verbs, everyday nouns, mundane modifiers E. Functional, with one or two fine moments. F. Occasionally, the words show refinement and precision.	*3 The teat hums along with a steady beat, but tends to be more pleasant or businesslike than musical.* A. Sentences get the job done in a routine fashion. B. Sentences are usually constructed correctly. C. Sentence beginnings are not ALL alike; some variety is attempted. D. The reader sometimes has to hunt for clues. E. Parts of the text invite expressive oral reading; others may be stiff, awkward, choppy, or gangly.	*3 The writer shows reasonable control over a limited range of standard writing conventions.* A. Spelling is usually correct or reasonably phonetic on common words. B. Punctuation is usually correct. C. Most words are capitalised correctly. D. Problems with grammar and usage are not serious. E. Paragraphing is attempted. F. Moderate (a little of this, a little of that) editing.
1 The writer struggles with a limited vocabulary. A. Words are nonspecific or distracting. B. Many of the words do not work. C. Language is used incorrectly. D. Limited vocabulary, misuse of parts of speech. E. Words are unimaginative and lifeless. F. Jargon or clichés, persistent redundancy.	*1 The reader has to practice quite a bit to give this paper a fair interpretive reading.* A. Sentences are choppy, incomplete, rambling, or awkward. Phrasing does not sound natural. B. No "sentence sense" present. C. Sentences begin the same way. D. Endless connectives. E. Does not invite expressive oral reading.	*1 Errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, usage and grammar and/or paragraphing repeatedly distract the reader and make text difficult to read.* A. Spelling errors are frequent. B. Punctuation is missing or incorrect. C. Capitalisation is random. D. Errors in grammar or usage are very noticeable. E. Paragraphing is missing. F. The reader must read once to decode, then again for meaning.
Key Question: *Do the words and phrases create vivid pictures and linger in your mind?*	**Key Question:** *Can you FEEL the words and phrases flow together as you read it aloud?*	**Key Question:** *How much editing would have to be done to be ready to share with an outside source?* • *A whole lot? Score in the 1-2 range.* • *A moderate amount? Score in the 3 range* • *Very little? Score in the 4-5 range*
		*** Grades 7 and Up Only: The writing is sufficiently complex to allow the writer to show skill in using a wide range of conventions.*

Appendix B: The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Principles

1. Knowledge of Subject: The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the discipline(s) he or she teaches and can create learning experiences that make these aspects of subject matter meaningful for students.

2. Learning and Human Development: The teacher understands how students learn and develop, and can provide learning opportunities that support their intellectual, social and personal development.

3. Adapting Instruction to Diversity in Learning: The teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and creates instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners.

4. Variety of Instructional Strategies: The teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage students' development of critical thinking, problem solving and performance skills.

5. Motivation and Classroom Management: The teacher uses an understanding of individual and group motivation and behaviour to create a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation.

6. Communication Skills: The teacher uses knowledge of effective verbal and nonverbal communication techniques to foster creativity, collaboration, and supportive interaction in the classroom.

7. Instructional Planning: The teacher plans instruction based upon knowledge of subject matter, students, the community, and curriculum goals.

8. Assessment: The teacher understands and uses formal and informal assessment strategies to evaluate and ensure the continuous intellectual, social, and physical development of the learner.

9. Commitment (Reflection and Responsibility): The teacher is a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of his/her choices and actions on others (students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community) and actively seeks out opportunities to grow professionally.

10. Relationships and Partnerships: The teacher fosters relationships with school colleagues, parents, and agencies in the larger community to support students' learning and well-being.

Appendix C: Timed Write Topics

1. **Letter to the Principal**

   - **Candidate One: Mr./Ms. Smith**: Ten years teaching experience but not in the exact content/grade level needed; good references from teachers and administrators; quiet but friendly

   - **Candidate Two: Mr./Ms. Jones**: Beginning teacher with no licensed teaching experience; excellent grades on transcripts; good references from professors and cooperating teachers; out-going personality

   Description: This assignment was designed to encourage argumentative writing (defend your choice of candidate using argumentative techniques) and to have teacher candidates write addressing a particular audience (administrators). The scenario that goes along with this had them serving on a search and screen committee for a new teacher in their school. The principal then asked them to write a letter recommending on candidate or the other.

2. **Letter to Accompany a Progress Report**

   - **Product:** Letter to parents/guardians that accompanies a progress report
   - **Progress Report**:
     - **Behaviour:** Student is very social which sometimes gets in the way of work being completed
     - **Quality of Work:** Group work is typically good but individual work suffers; missing several assignments
     - **Overall Grade**: D

   Description: Again, argumentative writing (explaining why this student received this particular grade) but this time the audience is parents/guardians instead of an administrator. The pre-service teacher did NOT write the progress report, only the letter.

3. **Letter accompanying a permission slip (do not write the permission slip)**

   - **Audience:** Parents/guardians
   - **Reason:** Video in class
     - **Elementary**: Science video containing age appropriate material related to sexual education
     - **Secondary**: Permission for 9th grade class to watch a film rated PG-13

   Description: Again, an argumentative letter (why this video should be allowed in class) with the audience being parents/guardians.

4. **Product: Letter of Recommendation**

   - A former student has asked you to write a letter of recommendation; he/she is now a 9th grader and wants to work as a camp counsellor at a camp for 3rd and 4th graders. You are asked to comment on this person's leadership skills. This person did well academically but was very shy and quiet in class. The letter is being sent to the director of the camp.

   Description: This particular assignment was done as an e-mail so the teacher candidates could demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively using technology.