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Past Students Guide Their Present Students to Change the Future

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Past Students Guide Their Present Students to Change the Future

by Maureen Connolly, Alison Buske, and Ana Lanfranchi

This year, students from the first undergraduate class that I taught at The College of New Jersey entered into their careers. The course that I am referring to is SED 399—Pedagogy in Secondary Schools, and it aims to prepare pre-service teachers for instruction in secondary classrooms. Students learn to create an instructional unit using Understanding By Design. They teach this unit to a middle or high school class as part of their 100 hours of pre-student teaching, junior practicum experience. I asked two students from this class, Ana Lanfranchi and Alison Buske, to reflect on their past experiences at TCNJ (particularly, in their junior practicum teaching experience), consider where they are presently in their careers, and think about where they want to go in the future.

During the junior practicum experience at TCNJ, students are required to utilize Wiggins and McTighe’s Backward Design model to create and teach a 10-day unit plan. Ana and Alison designed language arts units for middle school students, with powerful enduring understandings related to developing socially responsible citizens. Dewey would be proud! Below is an account of Ana and Alison’s pre-service experience (their past), reflection on how their experience designing and teaching units related to social issues has influenced their first year of teaching (their present), and plans for further development of their instruction (their future). Following these accounts, I consider my own past, present, and future in my role as teacher educator.

Ana

Ana’s Past

My intention with my junior practicum, 10-day, banned books unit was to bring awareness to my eighth grade students about the way that they are shielded from literature based on the perception that certain knowledge can be harmful to their age group. My enduring understanding was as follows: *The ability to create and defend original ideas is an imperative skill that will help us to be active and informed citizens within our communities and potentially, beyond.* With this in mind, I encouraged my students to analyze different elements of their texts, question the controversial elements of their books, and fully understand two sides of the argument regarding censorship and their books. I worked in a school that utilized the reading/writing workshop model, so I implemented this unit through book clubs and mini lessons. As a summative assessment, I had the students share their thoughts on censorship by participating in debates, arguing whether their books should be banned in public schools.

My students worked in pre-determined book club groups, each consisting of three students. The texts that students read in these book clubs included *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes, *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, and *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel. Students chose these works from lists that were appropriate for their reading level.

Throughout the unit, I taught mini-lessons using “Harrison Bergeron” as the model text for exploring literary elements. Following the mini-lessons, students would meet with their book club groups to apply the skills learned to their own book club texts. This led to a culminating set of debates regarding whether their book club texts should continue to be banned.

In order to expose students to both sides of the argument of censorship, I showed a YouTube clip called: “Is Censorship Ever Justified?” which presents the way that governmental systems in some countries abuse their power in contrast with the way that the United States government can be viewed as lacking enough censorship. The video showed a group of Ethiopian people jailed on “vague terrorism charges” for speaking poorly about their government juxtaposed with a group of KKK members in the United States gaining a permit for demonstrations and rallies. Students were intrigued by this contrast. The classroom was split almost perfectly, with half of the students arguing that the KKK “should have a right to express their beliefs” while others stated, “That is a hate crime.” I questioned the students about how a “physically peaceful” demonstration by the KKK is different from a “physically peaceful” protest against war. Students respectfully conducted a discussion, raising points about the technical definition of a “hate crime,” the constitutional right regarding freedom of speech, as well as how some believed it to be a complete injustice to allow demonstrations with hateful intentions.

All of this led to the culminating debate as to whether students’ book club texts should be banned. I waited to have students research the reason for the banning of their assigned texts because I wanted them to read these works without external influence. I wanted the students to have a completely authentic reaction to their reading and then later find out why others thought the work was inappropriate.

Through their research, students found that many of their books were banned due to use of inappropriate language, implications of alcohol/drug use, and/or sexual content. Not a single student genuinely believed that his/her assigned book should actually be banned from public schools. Students believed that throughout their books, the references to language, sex, or substance abuse were minimal and unimportant to the main messages of the works. Students additionally thought that sheltering middle school students from any of these topics was unrealistic.

For the final debate, I assigned the groups to the position that they would be defending because I wanted to ensure that students fully understood both sides of the controversial issue, despite their personal opinions. Because all students authentically agreed that their books should not be banned, students who were assigned to argue the opposite position reacted very strongly. However, the students took on their argumentative roles with gusto, and argued well for their assigned sides. For the debate, students were allowed to use the outlines that they collectively made with their book club members the day before, to aid them in making their points. They also designated Speakers One, Two and Three so that there was no confusion about the order of turns. Each speaker spoke twice, alternating with the other team, for the duration of 30 seconds each. After each speaker on each team spoke twice, there were two minutes for the students to speak freely and to make any last points that they were not able to make during the more structured segment of the debate. All students were enthusiastic, despite some of their personal disagreements with their stances, and presented an informed argument with a convincing disposition.

Ana's Present

I am now teaching ninth grade Language Arts at Monroe Township High School where I continue to address social issues in my classroom. In discussing the theme “environment affects identity” in *The House on Mango Street*, students offered the ways in which this concept applies to real life. Students discussed which factors contribute to environment and how issues in our world are perpetuated by environment. They each researched a local organization that addresses their chosen issue, and wrote a letter to the organization either asking for more information on the issue or organization, or volunteer opportunities. Students are just starting to get replies from the organizations, and some students are moving forward with taking action. Upon reflection, students voiced that they enjoyed knowing that they were actually sending the letters out to organizations, and that they didn't realize taking action could be so simple. They stated that they didn't think they would actually get responses, and so when they received responses, they were excited to be a part of the interaction. Finally, students shared the information that they learned about issues and organizations with their classmates.

In considering strategies that were effective, I believe that giving students time to reflect has been of utmost importance. I provide opportunities for students to discuss ideas with a partner or prompt students with certain situations to allow them to realize the gray area of all issues. I also ensure that students are presented with several different perspectives on the same issue in order to allow them to create a well-rounded opinion.

In reflecting on how my experience teaching social issues in the past influences my approach now, I realized that students need practice with addressing complex and sensitive issues. In the past, I noticed that some students would get stuck in wanting to argue their point of view. However, with time and redirection, I have found that teaching how to have a discussion about social issues is just as important as the content of the conversation. My focus on analyzing literary and informational text and my choice to incorporate writing for an authentic audience reflect my commitment to helping students gain a strong understanding of how to have a well-informed, effective exchange about serious issues.

Ana's Future

I plan to extend the work that my students and I have done, by helping several students take action and spread awareness through school events. I believe that the best way to address social issues with students is to show them the power that they have as agents of change and to allow them to realize the potential of their own hard work and commitment.

Alison

Alison's Past

My junior practicum unit was centered on the development of writing skills through the construction of a narrative story. Prior to this writing unit, the students completed an in-class novel, entitled *The Girl Who Owned A City*. This book, by O.T. Nelson, places a heavy emphasis on the importance of independence, describing the “coming of age” period as a time of personal growth and development of leadership skills. Using the framework of a society absent of adults, the literary work features a ten-year-old heroine, Lisa, and her unique plight. Amidst the tragedy of a “flipped” world, she attempts to ensure the survival of her younger brother, Todd, as well as her own.

The idea of confidence in one's own ability as well as innovative thinking is perpetuated consistently throughout the work, portraying the ideal citizen as one who questions and reflects out-of-the-box thinking. Through the personal narrative writing unit that followed, I encouraged students to build on the theme of being a good citizen and encouraged the transfer of literary devices found in reading (such as setting, plot, character development, point of view, paragraphing, and dialogue) into their writing. My enduring understandings were as follows:

- *Writing can be used to explore and connect with social issues in the local and global community.*
- *A coherent and comprehensible writing structure can be used to engage a reader and transmit ideas.*

All of the students' stories were based on social issues that resonated with them. The students were given the autonomy to choose a problem from a list discussed in class, thus defining their role as a proactive author, connected to the community. The students chose to address issues such as hunger, poverty, bullying, the effects of war, and many other prevalent concerns.

Through the use of a writer's journal and a set of carefully outlined mini lessons, the students each slowly constructed a writing piece that represented a sense of civic responsibility. The writer's journals encouraged reflective work, allowing students to explore different ideas and concepts through an informal framework. Often, students shared their writer's journal entries with peers in order to gain feedback and spark new ideas.

The mini lessons, on the other hand, provided a foundation for basic skills and the building blocks for creativity. For example, one day was spent solely on the subject of setting. Students discussed common descriptive words, ways to tell about the characters and the plot using the landscape of the story, and the impact of setting on the reader.

Furthermore, I used a story of my own as a model for the class. The students clearly understood how I incorporated each of the elements of the mini lessons into it. When they listened to my story, they became emotionally involved and commented excitedly on each step that I took. They saw my commitment, as a writer, to a larger cause, and they emulated it in their own writing. As I read their successive drafts, not only did I notice attention to the smaller details (correct paragraphing, proper dialogue format), more importantly, I saw my students' commitment to the larger impact of their words.

When they wrote these stories, students spent some time reflecting, drawing deeper insights on their full-class novel than they had in their previous exploration. For example, when asked whether Lisa had made the right decision in placing herself in the leadership position, students differed in their responses. Some said that, like in all societies, someone needed to step up, while others noted that not all people want someone to control them. These statements demonstrate an awareness of others, as well as the concept that there is not always a "right" answer.

The idea of a "hero" (which was mentioned in the previous story unit) was introduced without prompting, and as students outlined their main characters, they were sure to include the same attributes of perseverance, innovation, and responsibility. However, when they included other characters, they made sure to note that these individuals were not always "evil"—rather, they included the mature concept that society contains many unique perspectives, and when approaching social issues, it is important to consider the feelings of all. Given a significant level of purpose and

sovereignty, these students were able to question their own perception of individuals in their community, as well as invent innovative methods of solving modern concerns.

Alison's Present

I am now teaching ninth grade at the STEMCivics Charter School. Only two years old, this school is an unusual case in many aspects. Although it is a part of the Trenton Public School System, it is currently residing in neighboring Ewing Township for the 2015-2016 school year. Home to a student body of just 200, the school contains a freshman and sophomore class, as well as a fairly new staff, within its walls.

My students are very aware of the racial/political issues surrounding their home city of Trenton. Therefore, I have found that the best way to contextualize particular novels, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is to explore controversies in the modern courtroom. I have shown a CBS 60-minutes special touching upon the conviction of an innocent man, Glenn Ford, because of a skewed trial. The students were assessed through a letter-writing activity, where they persuade an official from the judicial system to reconsider "compensation" for Glenn Ford's family. Viewing this special and writing the letters has increased the relevancy of the concepts explored in this 50-year-old novel.

I believe that authenticity is essential to keeping students engaged. If a problem is introduced, the students need to feel as though the solutions they offer can extend beyond the classroom and, hopefully, reach the ears of someone outside the school walls. A letter to a councilman or someone in the judicial system allows what could be an academic exercise, such as letter writing, to turn into a form of agency.

In my practicum experience and in my current teaching experience, I have been impressed by how aware and invested students can be in the issue surrounding their community. Seeing the social awareness of my sixth-graders during junior practicum gave me greater confidence in approaching social issues with my current ninth graders. Students want, and need, to feel like what they're doing in school is important. It gives students a necessary sense of purpose.

Alison's Future

I will continue to address social issues with my students through an independent reading assignment. Students will read novels of their choice and create a children's book using the theme of their chosen literary work. With the children's book, they will visit a local elementary school and act as "reading buddies" for the day. I have been instilling the idea that the primary way my students can make a difference is by sharing their successful educational experience with youth who may be at risk. The idea of mentorship will, hopefully, benefit both parties.

Conclusion

Teachers like Ana and Alison are going to change the lives of their students by showing them the power of the written word. I use the phrase "written word" loosely here, since students were moved by music and video as well. I think that Ana and Alison, and many other new teachers, recognize that the push for more expository text in our classrooms can mean supporting a deeper understanding of theme and increasing the relevancy works that we know and love.

Maureen

Engaging in this collaborative reflection with my former students has deepened my thinking about my own past, present, and future.

Maureen's Past

In the past 17 years, I have worn many hats as an educator. I was a high school English teacher for 15 years and a service learning grant coordinator for the greater New York City area. I've also been a teacher educator and a consultant for CBK Associates, which offers professional development opportunities related to infusing service learning into curriculum. I am constantly sharing my passion for service learning, and I'd like to believe that my enthusiasm was contagious during Ana and Alison's time with me in the practicum course two years ago.

In addition to my roles above, I've co-authored two books on The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Literacy, *Getting to the Core of Literacy for English Language Arts, Grades 6-12* and *Getting to the Core of Literacy for History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, Grades 6-12*. Throughout my research, I've consistently come back to the Capacities for Literate Individuals that are outlined in the introduction to the CCSS. These capacities describe what learners should be able to do by the time they graduate and enter into the world of college and career. The last of these capacities is the ability to recognize multiple perspectives. In our global society, this capacity seems most important. I'm happy to say that Ana and Alison are supporting their students' ability not only to recognize multiple perspectives, but to envision alternatives to the realities that are in place.

Maureen's Present

Currently, I am co-authoring a book for ASCD entitled *Achieving Next Generation Literacy-- Using the Tests (You Think) You Hate to Help the Students You Love*. The premise of the book is simple: our focus as educators must be on engaging teaching and learning experiences rather than on test scores. Believe it or not, The College Board supports this premise:

We believe that the rates of college and career readiness and postsecondary success will improve only if our nation's teachers are empowered to help the full range of students practice the kinds of rigorous, engaging daily work through which academic excellence can genuinely and reliably be attained (14).

I believe that the approaches that Ana and Alison are taking with their students are excellent models of rigor and engagement that can be differentiated for all learners.

Maureen's Future

I am slated to teach the junior practicum session again next semester. As I consider what has worked in the past and think about revisions for the future, I think that I may change my "Considering the Learner" assignment that practicum students write about their middle school and high school students. Currently, I ask them to consider their students' academic standing, means of differentiation that have been successful, and areas for growth. Based on what Ana and Alison have shared about authentic experiences, I would like my juniors to include information about issues that are important to their students. This may be gathered through interviews, surveys, or observations. Also, to encourage my juniors to design authentic assignments that support their students engagement with groups that support change, I will require my students to investigate two to three social agencies that are local to the school district in which they are placed.

Often, when I work with teacher candidates, they are particularly concerned about motivation and classroom management. I continuously tell them that there is no magic answer for either of these, but perhaps there is. According to Cathy Berger Kaye, “motivation comes from within. What educators can do is engage students by harnessing their ideas, interests, curiosities, abilities, talents, and skills, and through that engagement, students are likely to choose to be motivated” (43). Ana and Alison’s focus on social issues through intellectual analysis and debates and writing for an authentic audience clearly has engaged their students thus leading them to choose to be motivated. Engaging with Ana and Alison to discuss the progression of their development as educators and learning that they continue to address social issues through their teaching keeps me motivated to continue to promote this practical approach with my SED 399 students.

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