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Amanda Stearns-Pfeiffer
Oakland University

Kristin A.K. Sovis
Central Michigan University

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Refuge for Teachers (and Learners) in a Turbulent Public Education Landscape

AMANDA STEARNS-PFEIFFER
Oakland University

KRISTIN A.K. SOVIS
Central Michigan University

We've all been there.

For some of us it was last semester; for others of us, it's been awhile: the newness of a teaching career. The giddiness of a new teaching idea. The spark of an inspiring lesson plan. Knowing that we can engage even the most reluctant readers and writers.

As teacher educators, we see this sureness and enthusiasm on the faces of the preservice teachers with whom we work every semester. All too often, though, as student teaching begins, that enthusiasm gives way to something else – not only a healthy dose of reality, but that initial glimmer seems to fade a bit. This phenomenon is not our imagination at work. The numbers show that fewer teachers are entering and more are leaving the profession, and this trend has only worsened during the COVID-19 crisis. Why?

A 2015 *Washington Post* article focuses on the reasons behind the U.S. teacher shortage, noting “polls show that public school teachers today are more disillusioned about their jobs than they have been in many years” (Straus 1). While this disillusionment likely contributes to teacher attrition across academic disciplines, English teachers are especially vulnerable to attrition. In fact, dating back to 2000, Darling-Hammond noted that the rate of attrition among English teachers in their first two years is more than two times that of other teachers (3). More recently, the call has become more urgent to reject the term “teacher shortage” for language and discussion that acknowledge

the inability of school districts to attract and maintain the number of teachers needed (Greene 1; McCoy 1). The word *shortage* suggests that there are not enough interested individuals to satisfy the unfilled teaching positions in this country; however, the argument against terming this problem a *shortage* posits that the real problem isn't that there aren't enough individuals wanting to become teachers, but rather there isn't enough support being given to those willing to teach (Akhtar 1). This article responds to the increasing teacher crisis in the United States, and to the decades of early-career teacher attrition preceding it (Ingersoll; McCann; Straus 1).

Individual states are making concerted efforts to examine teacher attrition and what causes it, as teacher attrition may contribute to teacher shortages (Robinson and Lloyd 3). In other words, in addressing teacher shortages, examining how to recruit new teachers accounts for the “supply” side of the equation, while focusing on how to retain the teachers already in the workforce, speaks to the “demand” side of the teacher shortage problem.

Literature reveals that states are motivated to address attrition, in large part, because attrition is expensive. The State of Michigan, for instance, cites that The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimated that in 2005, each teacher lost to attrition can cost \$9,501” (Barnes, Crowe, and Schaefer in Robinson and Lloyd 14). This cost accounts

for the recruiting, hiring, processing, and training of new teachers. In the 2016-2017 school year alone, the Michigan Department of Education notes 7,251 teachers were “leavers,” meaning they left the profession all together (or, in some cases, crossed state lines for employment) (Robinson and Lloyd 6). This means the State of Michigan lost over \$68 million due to the attrition of these 7,251 teachers. The Michigan Department of Education notes, based on the United States’ Department of Education’s Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS), that 259,400 teachers were leavers in 2012-2013, resulting in an estimated, jaw-dropping loss of nearly \$2.5 billion to our nation’s public school systems (Robinson and Lloyd 5).

But what about the costs beyond the fiscal in addressing attrition? What about the human costs affecting students, teachers, families, and communities? In addition to the financial losses associated with attrition, there are certainly costs in stability for schools, affecting students, faculty, staff, administration, and the broader community, as well. Ingersoll, in 2001, notes that high turnover rates may signal systemic problems in school culture and climate: “high levels of employee turnover are both cause and effect of ineffectiveness and low performance in organizations” (505). Particularly troubling is that national studies show such costs as disproportionately affecting schools serving minority and economically disadvantaged students, suggesting cultural inequities plague our profession (Haynes 6).

Furthermore, the added trepidation and stress many teachers have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic puts our profession at a tipping point. A recent RAND Corporation Survey of 1,000 ex-public school teachers found “about three-quarters of former teachers — including those who quit in the two years leading up to the pandemic and those who quit after March of 2020 — indicated that their jobs

were ‘always’ or ‘often’ stressful during their most recent year of teaching” (Jagannathan 1). Moreover, this survey revealed that teachers under 40 who left the profession due to the pandemic attributed “the move to their pay not justifying the stress and the risks” (1). Interestingly, the survey results show no change in the profiles of teachers who left in the two years before the pandemic and the teachers who left during the pandemic. Respondents noted that structural problems such as lack of flexibility in workday schedules, low pay, poor work environments, and long hours won’t fade and will likely continue to worsen— even should pandemic-related problems fade (Jagannathan, 1).

In a similar vein, Michigan teacher Paul Ruth notes in his 2021 op-ed: “The pandemic exposed many inequalities in society that have been ever present. Sadly, for Michigan this includes schools” (1). He continues to observe that the “current teacher shortage is of no surprise to those in the field,” as its roots go back decades (1). Ruth cites systemic issues and poor policy, such as the outsourcing of support staff positions and the expansion of charter schools as contributing factors to an unstable retirement system, as well as issues that negatively impact teacher effectiveness and student learning. These include a lack of quality teaching materials, a lack in supportive rather than punitive professional development, and evaluation systems focused more on “how the principal looks than supporting good teachers” (1). Moreover, average Michigan teacher salaries in 2009-2010 were higher than in 2017-18 not counting inflation, and Ruth argues that while higher pay and an increase in classroom funding may seem like obvious solutions to addressing the shortage problem, such solutions are only partial. In addition to the pandemic pushing teachers to take earlier retirements, he notes that teacher

education programs that were once robust in Michigan have waned and even ceased to exist; go-to teacher residency programs are “filling holes to buy time for people to earn certification” (1).

Such realities contribute to an arguably dire professional reality facing preservice teachers. And so, with each graduating class of preservice teachers, a handful decide after student teaching that they do not want to pursue a teaching career. For the majority who do move forward with their choice to teach, the attrition rate within the first few years of teaching is an unfortunate reality. This “perfect storm” of factors adds to an increasingly desperate situation, and one that must have intentional policy attention paid to it (Garcia 1). And so we consider here: What can help sustain our teachers as we weather these circumstances?

What Can Keep Our Teachers in the Classroom?

Keeping current teachers in the field and positioning education as a competitive option for our nation’s top undergraduate students likely means addressing workplace necessities: this includes lower numbers of students in classrooms, more competitive pay for teachers, supportive professional climates, and a strengthened prestige of the profession (Garcia 1). Arguably, these factors are largely at the mercy of our political leaders and policy-makers; however, what factors *can* we help our teacher candidates prepare for as they enter their classrooms? How can we help early-career teachers gain agency and confidence in their skills as educators? What factors can we, as teacher educators, help teacher candidates feel some agency or control over as they enter a profession that is tenable? Those are the questions we aim to deconstruct. And, while our work here is focused primarily on preparing and supporting teachers, it should also be

mentioned that, at the heart of our work, is a desire to make all classrooms a place of equitable education for students. We want to ensure that the graduates from our teaching programs are ready for diverse student needs, and we want to spread the stability and security that teachers bring to a district when they stay, flourish, and grow along with their students. What we suggest here are sustaining and beneficial strategies for both teachers and students.

Conversations about keeping our teachers in the profession are becoming increasingly popular. At NCTE in 2018, Kelly Burns, Cindy O’Donnell-Allen, Jennifer Putnam, and Molly Robbins presented a session on sustainable teaching in which there was standing room only. Energized by the popularity of this session, the group then conducted a workshop titled, “Body and Soul: Mindfulness Practices to Sustain Your Teaching (and Your Life)” at the 2019 NCTE. The inclusion of and demand for sessions that focus on the self-care, emotional support, and self-compassion of educators is increasing—and this is a good thing. This approach acknowledges that those in charge of the social-emotional well-being of young learners need also to have their own personal social-emotional well-being considered (Kaplan, 2019). In the *English Journal* article they published on this topic, Burns et al. write: “In this article, we contend that the prerequisite for teaching courageously is developing staying power. As fewer enter the profession and attrition rises, a teacher shortage looms. Yet we feel it’s still possible to share our passion for learning with students” (45). While Burns et al. focus their efforts on reimagining and redesigning professional development to include regeneration, personal restoration, and profession renewal time for teachers, our focus here is on what can be done *within* the confines of the classroom to position the

career of teaching as a sustainable, fulfilling option.

Why Classroom Environment Matters

In our work over our combined 30+ years in education, both as classroom teachers and as teacher educators, the notion that *classroom environment* plays an important role in establishing a positive rapport with students, a positive outlook on teaching, and an increased likelihood that teachers will stay in the game, has become increasingly apparent. If teachers are able to build structure in their classrooms that foster student relationships, positive participation in reading and writing activities, and a mutual respect for the sanctity of reading and writing, then the potential to keep these teachers motivated to stay in the classroom increases. If students want to be there, teachers will want to be there.

But how do we create this structure and make it sustainable? How, as teacher educators, do we instruct our preservice teachers to create this type of classroom—one that inspires creativity and gives (rather than depletes) energy (mental and physical)? What strategies for creating a classroom culture of community, openness and democracy are tangible, reproducible, and therefore teachable? How can we support preservice and early-career teachers in building these skills and not allow the term “classroom environment” to become a vague expression without concrete, identifiable actions or teaching moves?

Many of our preservice teachers, in their enthusiasm to become English teachers, report a deep love of literature and writing. They reflect on the assignments, class structures, and projects that their former English teachers employed—activities that made a lasting impression on their literacy histories. Central to many of these activities are the agency, student choice, and routine that we describe in the following sections.

By remembering what draws us to this discipline in the first place—our love of books and notepads (or blank Word screens, waiting for our words to occupy it)—and by prioritizing time in class for routines that provide regular opportunities to read and write, teachers can help their students (and themselves) find refuge in their own classroom environments.

What Is Teachable in Building a “Classroom Environment?”

At the heart of this issue are a multitude of factors that combine to create a classroom environment, including the topic that few want to directly tackle: classroom management. Even in one of the best-selling (few other educational books have sold over 3 million copies), formative books on the topic of classroom management, authors Harry K. and Rosemary Tripi Wong assert that their book can *help* teachers with classroom management, but should not be considered a foolproof plan or model. “The book will only help. There is no teacherproof method of education. There is no one way to teach. There are no pat answer, quick fixes, or foolproof plans for teaching. There is no way to reduce teaching to a simple and predictable formula. To do so would ‘de-skill’ and deprofessionalize education” (Wong and Wong xii). There are millions of combinations of situation-specific factors that could result in millions of situation-specific remedies. And this is perhaps why, even though student teachers perennially cite fears about their classroom management, teacher educators are reluctant to slay the discipline dragon. We recognize the enormity and complexity of classroom management issues, and how they affect the overall classroom environment, and we likewise recognize the enormity and complexity of the solutions.

But we can do better—and we should, especially for the sake of preservice teachers

who feel unprepared and who are therefore more vulnerable to leaving the profession within the first few years, and for the students they serve. What are the content-specific strategies that help English teachers keep their ELA classrooms running smoothly? How do teachers create a positive, democratic classroom culture? How *do* teachers build strong relationships with their students? A more recent effort to make these practices tangible and teachable is TeachingWorks, an organization which grew out of the teacher education program at the University of Michigan. Their mantra, that “great teachers aren’t born, they’re taught,” contradicts traditional rhetoric about teachers and the act of teaching (i.e., that a teacher is “born to teach”). While there are perhaps inherent personality characteristics, such as extrovertedness, that may aid in the ease of classroom presence, there are also definite methods that can be learned and practiced in order to establish an efficient, effective, positive classroom environment—and these strategies are not burdensome, but rather simplify many of the otherwise chaotic moments of class time (such as transitions). Of the nineteen high-leverage teaching practices that TeachingWorks has identified, three relate directly to our work here:

#5 Implementing norms and routines for classroom discourse and work;

#8 Implementing organizational routines;

#10 Building respectful relationships with students.

Like our colleagues at TeachingWorks, we recognized and felt called to act upon the notion that we can do a better job of preparing our preservice teachers in these areas. While the term “classroom environment” has traditionally been a slippery term that was difficult to define/capture, there are strategies/practices that we can teach, model, and provide

opportunities for our preservice teachers to enact. While simplistic in theory, we realized a key to building a positive classroom environment that sustains students and teachers alike was something we inherently knew all along: routines.

Routines. A mundane word? Perhaps. But a word that suggests structure, safety, and simplicity in the ordering of a day that allows for a safe space. As Linda Shalaway writes in *Learning to Teach...not just for beginners*, “Routines are the backbone of daily classroom life. They facilitate teaching and learning.... Routines don’t just make your life easier, they save valuable classroom time. And what’s most important, efficient routines make it easier for students to learn and achieve more” (26). Adherence to routines is also a celebration of the shared experiences of a classroom, honoring the ceremonial opening, closing, and functioning of a classroom ebb and flow. Routines have the potential to lessen the emotional burden for teachers by defining expectations for students. Upon further reflection, we realized that we were really talking about three categories of routines: Routines for beginning and end of class, routines for writing and reading, and routines that build student relationships. While the following lists are written with face-to-face instruction in mind (at the time we are writing this, heading back into the classroom is where most secondary instruction seems to be heading), we want to mention that most of these routines can be modified for a virtual classroom as well. In fact, incorporating routines into virtual learning may be even more important than in face-to-face settings because they allow students to feel connected to their teacher, fellow classmates, and the purpose of class time more so than they otherwise might (while logging into class from their bedrooms, dining rooms, or even from their cars).

Routines to Begin Class

Students shuffle in (if you are lucky enough to see them face-to-face). Most of them take their seats; some wait to be told to do so. What happens next is often very telling about what the teacher prioritizes. Is there some downtime to chat with a neighbor? Is there a writing task posted somewhere? Maybe students know they will have something to read before class “really” gets started. Whatever the routine of those opening moments of class, students quickly become accustomed to the “rhythm” of a teacher’s expectations for the beginning of class. And while transitions in the classroom can be difficult to navigate in general, the transitions between classes, and those opening minutes of a new class, can be where students decide to tune in/out, start a fight, or do homework for another class.

In an effort to provide a snapshot of what this looks like to our teaching methods students, we routinely begin our university methods course with one of the following:

The One-Minute Sentence Starter:

Students craft a one-sentence summary or response to an excerpt we’ve chosen that relates to that day’s upcoming lesson/discussion (adapted from Kelly Gallagher)

The Quote of the Day: Students respond to a famous quote (“Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final” by Rainer Maria Rilke, for example) and consider questions such as: What does the quote mean to you? How can you relate to it, or make a connection to the world? (adapted from Kelly Gallagher)

The Article of the Week (AoW): Our students are given an article (or excerpt

of an article/chapter) with the directions to “mark confusion and show evidence of close-reading,” followed by an opportunity to turn and talk with a neighbor. An example article to use for this activity is “Attention, Students: Put Your Laptops Away” (by James Doubek, *NPR Weekend Edition*, April 2016).

Each routine to begin class can also be specified to reflect the larger learning goals and objectives of the class that day. In other words, depending on the writing prompt or the reading material, any of these routines can serve to help build student background knowledge, hook students into the content, access prior knowledge, or connect to students’ experiences outside the classroom. The flexibility lies in the choice of content in these activities; the structure lies in the routine of them.

Routines to End Class

As the clock inches closer to the end of class time, students may begin to fidget and rustle books and paper into their folders and backpacks. Antsy with anticipation of whatever comes next, this is yet another transition (similar to the beginning of class) when distractions threaten to disrupt student attention and engagement. Two closing time routines that can provide purposeful class endings:

The 3-2-1 Reflection Prompts (below are three variations):

- 3 things I learned, 2 things I found interesting, 1 question I have
- 3 concerns I have about the material, 2 questions I have, 1 thing I learned
- 3 significant events from the reading, 2 significant passages, 1 prediction

Goal Setting: In response to today’s session, craft an “I will” statement.

- In our next class, I will _____.
- In our next class, I will be ready to _____.
- In our next class, my students will _____.
- In our next class, my students will be ready to _____.

The routines to end class included here are particularly important in terms of fostering metacognition at the end of learning. Building in the expectation that students will be asked to perform self-reflection and assessment on a regular basis will prepare them for this final cognitive task. Thinking about what they have learned, or still do not understand, helps to solidify their new knowledge and retainment.

Routines for Writing and Reading

Perhaps one of the most important ways we can embed routines for writing and reading in our classroom is to make time and space for workshopping. One of the pioneers of the workshop model, Nancie Atwell, spends a great deal of her third edition of *In the Middle* (the quintessential guide for implementing reading/writing workshop in our classrooms) on providing reproducibles and detailing the routines of her daily classes for teachers who want to incorporate workshopping in their own classrooms; Atwell recognizes the importance and teachable-ness of routines in a workshop model. As Katie Wood Ray notes, routines and procedures are essential to the writing (and reading) workshop classroom (52). Given that we strive to grow teacher-writers in our classrooms, we deliberately cultivate a writing workshop environment per “best practices in teaching writing” in our methods classrooms. In experiencing writing workshop as writers, our methods students have experiences from which to draw in

working with student writers in their own fieldwork and future classrooms. These routines and procedures support our methods students in feeling safe to take risks in their writing, better their writing, and grow as writers:

Mentor Text Demonstrations (I do, we do, you do): We model for students the practices and strategies with which we expect them to engage as students and teachers. In our reading and writing workshops, this often involves modeling for students particular instructional work with mentor texts and often takes the trajectory of “I do, we do, you do.” To exemplify, we share with students a mentor text featuring a particular text feature and do a read-aloud-think-aloud of the text sharing the effect this text feature has on us as readers (I do). We then work with a second text featuring a like text feature and work with students in the whole-class setting to take note of and discuss the effects of the particular text feature, ultimately enacting a group read-aloud-think-aloud (we do). Finally, students are responsible for locating their own mentor text featuring this text feature and explicating its use and effect (you do); or, students are responsible for incorporating this text feature into their own writing or lesson planning (you do). A sampling of features to experiment with in reading and writing workshop:

- Parallel Structure
- Sensory Imagery
- Point-of-View
- Figures of Speech ((such as simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia, personification, oxymoron, alliteration, hyperbole)

Reading With Lenses: This invites our students to critically read the work of others and to critically revisit their own

writing in their revision efforts. Below are lenses and examples of the questions students might ask themselves in taking on each lens, as noted in Heard's *The Revision Toolbox* (21-25):

- The Lens of Focus and Clarity
What is the heart of my story? Is my focus too big or too narrow? Is there a clear theme, thesis, or main idea to my piece?
- The Lens of a Stranger
What would this reader think about my writing? What would they want to change?
- The Lens of Language
Is my language clear, precise, and concrete? Are there parts where I can elaborate and add more detail? Are my verbs vivid and active?
- The Lens of Feeling
Can the reader tell how I feel about a topic? Can the reader tell how my characters feel?
- The Lens of Sound
How can I make my piece sound better? What sounds wonderful? What sounds choppy?
- The Lens of So What?
Who will care about my story, essay, or research? How can I get readers to care about my topic?
- The Lens of Sentence Variation
Are my sentences all the same length? Which sentences can I combine to make my words flow?

“Fishbowl” Modeling of Peer-to-Peer Workshop Practices: This engages our entire classroom of students in close examination of real-time practices, which in turn serve to inform their execution of workshop activities. We, for instance, ask a few student volunteers to the center of the room to be in the “fishbowl” as demonstrators of, say, the peer review process for the

day. As fishbowl students participate, we moderate their sharing of and responding to one another’s writing while all other students gather around the fishbowl to actually *see* the peer review process unfold. This moderated, real-time demonstration serves to set the standards and expectations for the workshop activity--peer review or otherwise--in which all students are about to engage.

Structured Peer-to-Peer Shares

- Think-Pair-Share
Students think about and share responses to a prompt or idea.
- Small Group Inquiry Groups
Students collaborate to explore a question, problem, or idea.
- Peer Review Groups
Students collaborate to share and respond to their writing.
- Gallery Walks
Students’ post their work, either in process or polished form, around the classroom (or online) and respond to one another’s work per open-ended or focused prompting.

Routines to Build Student Relationships

In setting the tone for positive and professional relationships in our classrooms, we collaborate with students to write classroom guidelines informed by research and experience.

Collaborative Classroom Community Guidelines and Reflections: We open the semester with an article on “Best Practices in Teaching Writing” and, upon reviewing the article, writing our own classroom guidelines for our writing workshop community. Throughout the semester, we often refer to these guidelines as we work together in our workshop setting—and even adjust them

as informed by our classroom experiences and our evolving group identity. Moreover, we reflect on our growth as individuals and as a community per these guidelines. Prompting to initiate this collaborative writing activity:

- How can we bring to life what we know about “best practices in teaching writing” to life in our classroom?
- What do we value as a community and how will these values show up in our classroom?
- What needs to happen in our classroom for us to feel safe and inspired?
- How can we support one another in achieving our learning objectives and in growing as individuals and professionals?

Regular Teacher-Student Conferencing:

Below are prompts we regularly use to invite our students to share and reflect on their writing and their writing processes. The prompts position students at the “center” of their process and of the conference, and position us as guides or coaches who offer authentic feedback and response. Conferences, key to the writing workshop, acknowledge the social and collaborative nature of writing and provide writer experiences for methods students to reflect upon in pedagogical terms in our course.

- I’d love to hear your work; please read it to me.
- How are you feeling about this writing/reading/assignment/work?
- What do you love about this writing/reading/assignment/work?
- What questions do you have about this writing/reading/assignment/work?

- How can I help you?

These routinized activities provide space for informal and formal assessment of students, but do not contribute to heavy grading loads. This models for our preservice teachers that varied assessment can guide instruction and that assessment is not always time-consuming and burdensome in the ELA classroom; assessment is not always a five-paragraph essay that requires hours of grading and response, but rather can take the form of these lower-stakes activities (routines that can help to embolden the inclusivity of student voice in your classroom).

In inviting our pre-service teachers to participate in these classroom activities, they are provided space to develop as writers and learners, and also as teachers. Our entire classroom community is invited to, and has context for, reflecting on writing experiences through a “teacher lens.” This pedagogical reflection is critical to our students in developing their teaching identities and toolboxes.

Conclusion

These are the routines that we have identified as important to the building of a positive classroom environment, and ultimately to positioning the English classroom as a place where new English teachers are encouraged, empowered, and inspired to stay. The sampling of routines we share in this piece are not solutions, in and of themselves, to the myriad challenges facing our profession. However, we do believe that in turbulent times, in times of attack on the profession and fairly constant imposed changes, adhering to routines that work can sustain teachers and students alike. Our students report appreciation for these methods and routines not only as participants in our workshop-based courses, but also as developing teachers, which stems largely from our deliberate efforts to engage

our students in critical pedagogical reflection as they participate in our classroom activities and routines. As we move toward a more practice-based teacher education model in our programs, we must

also consider how to continue to provide our students with more and more opportunities to enact these teaching practices.

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