Montclair State University’s Secondary English Education Program: Perceptions and Expectations of Pre-Service and Beginning Teachers of Writing

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Montclair State University's Secondary English Education Program: Perceptions and Expectations of Pre-Service and Beginning Teachers of Writing

by

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Introduction

As a former student in the Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University, I have a specific interest in the perceived effectiveness of Montclair State University's Teacher Education Program in preparing writing teachers to enter the Secondary English classroom. As a Graduate Assistant in the English department, working in The Writing Center and teaching a Basic Writing course, I am exposed to serious inadequacies in the basic writing abilities of students, specifically freshman level students. When I began work in the Writing Center, I expected students' writing skills to be fairly developed by the time they reach college level writing courses and I have found their lack of ability is disconcerting. As educators, our concern should be preparing students to be intelligent, thoughtful, and ultimately functional members of our society in any career path they choose. Without the basic skills of communication, including writing, success will be hard to find in an increasingly complex world. If individuals are not able to write in a clear and effectual manner, their messages will be lost.

In a seemingly daily repetition of the same conversation, I ask students to describe their writing process and too often I am answered with blank stares, shrugs and a proclamation of "I just sit at the computer and type." There is a great sense of discomfort for students when they are asked to go outside the conventions of a five-paragraph essay and develop an argument that involves thinking beyond a summary of the texts' main points. It is rare to find a struggling writer who can recall a positive writing experience in his educational past. Most students come into The Writing Center lacking a sense of confidence in their writing; this insecurity often correlates to a negative experience in a writing class from kindergarten all the way to their current college writing course. I often
wondered if students should be held fully responsible for this obvious and well-documented decline in writing skills. In my role as a Writing Center tutor and a Teaching Assistant in a Basic Writing course, I have come to believe that writing teachers (at all levels) need to accept some culpability in the diminishing writing abilities of students. These facts bring me to what I believe is an immensely important question facing education today, “How are Teacher Education Programs preparing writing teachers to competently implement writing pedagogy in their classrooms?” More specifically, I wanted to look at the perception of pre-service and beginning teachers in regards to how effectively Montclair State University is preparing teachers to teach writing.

Universities have an important and crucial role in exposing future teachers to writing pedagogy. Teacher Education Programs have the potential to produce competent and prepared teachers which should result in more confident and well-prepared writers as students leave high school. As Linda Darling-Hammond points out in her book, *Powerful Teacher Education*, numerous studies evaluating student achievement data find, “students who are assigned a succession of highly effective teachers have significantly greater gains in achievement than those assigned to several ineffective teachers in sequence” (19). Accordingly, students need effective writing teachers; this need led me to investigate if the decline in writing skills could be traced to teacher training. Evidence shows that “only one of five teachers feels well prepared to work in a modern classroom” (Thomas and Loadman 195). The objective is not to place blame or pass judgment on the Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University. I want to determine how well-prepared MSU Teacher Education students feel to teach writing. Given that research
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points to a decline in K-12 writing skills and to the significant role of teacher education in preparing effective teachers, how can MSU adjust the ways in which we prepare teachers to teach writing?

The problems facing students and teachers in schools today must be addressed and solved before we are faced with a generation of non-writers. Students alone can’t be held responsible for the decline in writing proficiency; teachers and teacher educators must be held accountable as well (Darling-Hammond 19). Examining secondary English teachers’ perceptions of their preparation to implement writing pedagogy will provide insight into improvements that are necessary and what is working in the Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University. This study assessed, through authentic discussion groups and reflective interview questioning, pre-service and beginning teachers’ perceptions about their preparedness to teach writing in a secondary education English classroom.
Literature Review

There were several steps taken to assess the perceived effectiveness of the Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University, specifically as it pertains to students’ preparation to teach writing in a Secondary English classroom. In order to evaluate the program, I focused on two groups of students, pre-service teachers and beginning teachers who graduated from the Teacher Education Program with a focus on English Education. Prior to beginning these conversations, I investigated several important lines of inquiry that were critical, as they pertain to Teacher Education in general. I began with an evaluation of the scholarship that outlines the importance of writing instruction in the English classroom and the skills a fully prepared writing teacher should possess. Once the significance of writing instruction in the classroom was established, the discussion shifted to the importance of evaluating Teacher Education Programs, components of effective Teacher Education Programs, and different methods of evaluating these programs. Armed with significant background information, I believe I am able to properly assess the students’ perception of experiences at Montclair State University and their efforts to teach writing in high school English classrooms.

The Role of Writing in our Academic Communities

The role of writing in secondary schools needs to be placed within the discourse of the expectations of a Teacher Education Program. Peter Elbow writes:

Most schools and colleges emphasize reading and neglect writing. An investigation of English classes in secondary schools has found that students spend less than 3 percent of their class and homework time devoted to writing a paragraph or more. (10)
The status of writing in our secondary classrooms only serves to complicate the role teaching writing plays in Teacher Education Programs. The justification for spending any time on teaching writing is complicated if we understand that “in most school and college courses, reading is more central than writing” (Elbow 10). Writing is an academic exercise that is given value only in its relationship to analyzing and explaining what we read. If teachers assign writing almost exclusively as a response to reading, does this diminish the need for quality writing instruction? I argue that regardless of the function writing plays in the classroom, it should be taught as effectively and with as much emphasis as any other academic challenge.

Elbow continues by addressing some root issues that cause the subjugation of writing in classrooms:

The word *literacy* really means power over letters, i.e., reading and language. The word *literacy* is used casually and even in government policy and legislation, it tends to mean *reading*, not *writing*. Similarly, the word *learning* tends to connote reading and input—not writing and output. Finally the very words *academic* or *professor* or even *teacher* tend to connote a reader and critic, not a writer. (13)

Writing seems to be doomed from the very start. Writing faces an uphill battle to become an important and well regarded value in the minds and habits of our students. Yet, we expect our Secondary English teachers will be able to enter a classroom and sidestep the intrinsic attitude towards writing. At the very least, the interdependence between reading and writing in our schools should be included in any Teacher Education Program.
Subject Matter Knowledge vs. Pedagogical Knowledge: The Effects on Teacher Preparation

A question that is unavoidable but also surprisingly unanswered is, “What is the subject matter knowledge of teaching writing?” In my research, I was unable to find any concrete definition of the expectations Secondary English teachers face in terms of subject matter knowledge as it pertains to writing. In fact, David W. Smit writes, “there is very little discussion of just what the subject matter of courses to prepare writing teachers should contain and what a writing teacher should know” (162). Some research maintains that teachers of writing must possess an understanding of, “subject matter of the curriculum in a deep, flexible, and generative way” (Shulman 262). The organization of the educational system holds the clue to why we don’t have a clear definition of subject matter knowledge for teaching writing. Because each district and school curriculum is developed independently and with great variance, “a teacher must understand both the first principles of the problems, topic, and issues of curriculum...and the characteristics of their successful instantiation” (Shulman 262). A strong pedagogical foundation is presumed to be the only way to ensure a teacher is prepared to teach whatever curriculum is prescribed. I found that any attempts to categorize “appropriate” subject matter for teaching writing ultimately falls back to a pedagogical discussion.

Michael Allen compiled the findings of 92 research studies pertaining to Teacher Education and teacher effectiveness concluding, “the research generally is not fine-grained enough, however, to make it clear how much subject-matter knowledge is important” and “the research suggests there may be a point after which additional courses [subject-matter] are of minimal value” (4). Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden feel
strongly that when it comes down to subject matter knowledge vs. pedagogical knowledge, “teacher education cannot impart a body of knowledge that comprises everything a teacher will ever need to know, it must lay a foundation for life-long learning” (115). The closest we come to a definition of subject-matter knowledge is what Smit refers to as disciplinary knowledge, “drawing the line between useful background information and what is absolutely essential for all teachers to know in particular contexts” (172).

Darling-Hammond (2000) addresses the importance of teacher education programs from a student-oriented perspective and assesses the preparedness of teachers to begin their teaching careers. She raises important questions that should be asked of writing teachers about their training in relation to their ability in the classroom. Of particular interest is the relationship of subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge to teaching ability and her conclusion that subject-matter knowledge, “exerts a positive effect up to a threshold level and then tapers off in influence” (167). Darling-Hammond also writes, “measures of pedagogical knowledge, including knowledge of learning, teaching methods, and curriculum, are more frequently found to influence teaching performance…stronger effects than subject matter knowledge” (167). This is reinforced by the findings of The National Academy of Education Committee on Teacher Education after their evaluation of effective Teacher Education programs. This study shows that strong programs favored curriculum focused on, “solid pedagogical training in subject-matter instruction” (Darling-Hammond, et al. 120).

What is considered pedagogical knowledge? At Montclair State University, The Center of Pedagogy, which offers support and guidance for the Teacher Education
Program, has developed a statement, “Portrait of a Teacher” outlining the characteristics of an effective teacher. According to this document, teachers must, “Understand principles of democracy and plan and carry out instruction that promotes democratic values and communication in the classroom” (Appendix A). Shulman believes we should “create a teacher-education experience that would prepare teachers to create, sustain, and educate in a ‘community of learners’” (257). This model, referred to as ‘Fostering a Community of Learners’ (FCL), mirrors the principles of Montclair State University’s “Portrait of a Teacher” in its democratically based principle of classroom management and experience for teachers and students. Shulman describes the pedagogical functions of FCL as being made up of four constituent processes:

- Understanding the subject matter of the curriculum in a deep, flexible, and generative way;
- Comprehending the pedagogical principles and being capable of designing and implementing instruction consistent with them;
- Discerning useful instantiations of FCL-compatible teaching from incomplete applications, non-implementations, and lethal mutations, that is, knowing it when you see it; and
- Assessing variations in student learning, interaction and development that (or should result) from FCL teaching. (262)

With this understanding of expected pedagogical knowledge for graduates of Teacher Education Programs to be effective classroom teachers, I can begin to develop important questions about the pedagogical knowledge being administered and addressed at Montclair State University:
1. Do pre-service and beginning teachers feel that their education contained more subject-matter knowledge or pedagogical knowledge?

2. As teachers of writing, do they feel one is more important than the other?

3. Additionally, were there attempts/opportunities to merge the two? If not, do they feel there should have been and how do they envision such a merger?

It is obvious that pedagogy is an important tool in preparing competent and effective teachers. But, pedagogy is not all there is to being an effective teacher. If that were the case, any individual with access to theories of teaching and classroom management would be an adequate teacher and all our students would be performing at the highest levels of achievement. However, in order to understand MSU students' preparedness to teach writing, we must explore the intersection between knowledge about writing practices and pedagogical approach.

*Outcomes Based Education May Get (Gets) in the Way*

Pedagogy seems to be the great equalizer for teachers who are increasingly expected to prepare their students to perform on standardized tests. As the pressure mounts for schools to show proficiency, teachers must prepare students to perform stylistically and formulaically; the actual text or subject matter begins to bear less and less importance.

A major issue facing teachers today is the increased emphasis on evaluating the effectiveness of teacher education programs on the basis of student performance on standardized tests. In fact, Marilyn Cochran-Smith points to several initiatives in the Higher Education Act that allow the federal government to appraise teacher preparation
and proficiency on annual increases in student achievement (414). Cochran-Smith terms the complicated issue of standards based curriculum and evaluation ‘the outcomes trap’ referring to, “the working theory that evaluating policies and programs related to teacher education on the basis of test scores will bring about major teacher education reform” (414). The outcomes trap is sprung when we allow the assumption to prevail that teacher preparation/quality is a direct reflection on student achievement on standardized tests. Additionally, there is an argument to be made that the outcomes testing currently in place, which all school districts are under increasing pressure to perform well on, is not the appropriate measure of education. When considering the impact of outcomes assessment on a writing classroom we realize:

By and large, the rubrics that states have adopted to evaluate writing and the instructional materials they offer as suggestions for better teaching ...support the idea that general knowledge suffices for teaching writing. (Hillock 244)

What does this mean? The role of writing teachers is focused on teaching students a form of writing that will be recognizable to those individuals who grade the statewide testing. This type of performance-based assessment undervalues schools and teacher education programs that emphasize the development of students into positive, active contributors in a democratically based society. Simply testing for written form, such as the 5-paragraph essay, dismisses the important function and goal of all education to produce thoughtful and inquisitive students.

The increased emphasis on the accountability of schools and teachers has grown throughout the nation and “nearly all states are faced with state tests of composition at
three or more grade levels” (Hillocks 244). The pressure of preparing students to compete on composition tests has an impact not only on student performance but how teacher preparation programs must approach their educational philosophy and motivation in educating future teachers of writing.

**Reflecting on Experience as a Teacher Training Tool**

Having established that pedagogical knowledge is considered paramount over subject-matter knowledge for writing teachers, we must look at what other factors are considered important in the development of an effective teacher of writing. I am convinced that pedagogy alone is not enough ammunition to enter the challenging arena of the writing classroom.

Montclair State University’s “Portrait of a Teacher” is not directly focused on classroom instruction, curriculum or pedagogy. Instead, the Center of Pedagogy determined competent teachers, “Are reflective practitioners who continually inquire into the nature of teaching and learning, reflect on their own learning and professional practice, evaluate the effects of their choices and actions on others, and seek out opportunities to grow professionally” (Appendix A). Critical reflection is a key to discovery of best practices in the classroom and developing the ability and willingness to be flexible in teaching practices. Critical reflection can not be an independent practice, occurring at home at the kitchen table, contemplating the reasons a writing assignment didn’t turn out according to the anticipated outcome. A key component to the success of Shulman’s 4-year project developing a ‘community of learners’ was to bring, “together both pre-service and experienced teachers with whom we worked to reflect together on their experiences, to develop cases from their practice, and to explore what could be
learned from their experience and cases” (264). Based on these findings, Teacher Education Programs should be encouraged to facilitate the development of reflective and collaborative opportunities for their current and former students.

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection on previous writing experiences is a critical component to new teachers' attitude towards teaching writing. Urquhart investigates commonalities among successful teaching preparation programs specifically focused on, “the skills and knowledge a teacher will need to improve student writing” (30). Her research aims to unravel myths related to teaching writing by exposing some simple but often overlooked facts that will help teachers improve in their implementation of writing pedagogy. She believes that the, “single action that effectively improves teachers' abilities to teach writing...is for teachers themselves to write” (30). Urquhart believes that teachers serve students well by modeling specific writing strategies in the classroom to inspire their students to use those techniques in their own writing. The ability for teachers to implement specific strategies only occurs through their own learning experiences, “as they build and sustain their own skills as writers, they improve their classroom writing instruction” (32). Urquhart’s convincing assertion of the importance of writing as part of teacher training programs and professional development is further supported by Street’s study of pre-service teachers’ attitudes on writing. Street looks to pre-service teachers’ attitudes about writing and learning to teach writing for answers to the monumental problem in our schools, as he explains, “only half of the students in grades 4, 8 and 12 in the United States...write adequate responses to informative, persuasive, or narrative writing tasks” (1). Street emphasizes the importance of writing attitudes and self-
confidence as keys to successful writing instruction for pre-service English teachers. Street asserts, "Gaining insights into the writing attitudes of pre-service English/language arts teachers is essential...to understand...the relationship between the learning experiences of these future teachers and their effectiveness as teachers of writing (2). Additionally, the National Writing Project found that "teachers must be comfortable and confident with writing before they can feel a sense of competence with the teaching of writing (Street 3).

Urquhart and Street bring to the forefront two important components of teacher preparation that need to be explored further. For the purposes of my own research, I will evaluate how the Teacher Education Program addresses the writing experiences and self-confidence of potential teachers through reflective evaluation. Based on these studies, it is important to investigate both positive and negative writing experiences and the amount of writing instruction received as measures of the perceived effectiveness of Montclair State University’s Teacher Education Program. Questions that arise from Urquhart and Street include: How much writing are pre-service teachers actually doing as part of their studies at Montclair State University? Are they doing the types of writing they’ll be expected to teach? Do teachers learn reflective practices as a way of better understanding themselves as writers and teachers of writing?

Models of Research

In contemplating this study, I decided to use a focus group model for data collection. In 1999, Frances Rust evaluated the experiences of pre-service and new teachers using focused conversations to explore teachers’ perceptions about the classroom and their preparedness to teach. Although Rust’s study does not specifically
address the preparation of writing teachers, there is still tremendous value in the type of model Rust uses to discover the attitudes of new teachers. In my own work, I hope to create an environment that encourages what Rust refers to as "authentic conversation." An important factor in fostering productive discussion about a student's experience as a pre-service teacher and eventually a first year teacher is removing a fear of negative consequences. As Rust maintains, "These conversations are satisfying both as ends in themselves and means to professional development...members actively work on learning and change" (370). Rust's results solidify the decision to use conversation groups as a tool to assess the perceptions of pre-service and new teachers. Much like the conclusions of Dean, et al., Rust believes that students need supported opportunities to reflect upon their own "funds of knowledge."

While Rust's work was a catalyst for my own research, she had remarkable access to the same individuals over a considerable amount of time. Compared to Rust's study, I had a limited number of participants with less access and a relatively small window of time to complete this work. In order to ensure an appropriate level of authenticity, I searched for an additional level of structure to give to these conversation groups. Irving Seidman's book, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, provided the type of structure needed to ensure a sufficient level of authenticity in my conversation groups. Seidman offers a three-part series of questions that focus on reflection about earliest education to current practice. His work provided a framework through which the conversation group participants could explore the length of their educational experiences. By intertwining these two methods, Rust's authentic conversation groups and Seidman's three part questioning, I was able to
create a technique that would be sufficiently reflective, allowing me to gauge the perceptions held by pre-service and beginning teachers regarding the Teacher Education Program at MSU. (See Chapter on Methodology for further information on the combination of these two formats.)

What is a Fully Prepared Writing Teacher?

In order for the discussion of effective teacher preparation to begin, we must first understand the characteristics of a fully prepared writing teacher. Richard Gebhardt provides four distinctive types of knowledge that a writing teacher must possess:

First, writing teachers need to have an understanding of the structure and history of the English language sound enough to let them apply their knowledge to the teaching of revision, style, dialect differences, and the like... The second kind of knowledge that writing teachers need to have is a solid understanding of rhetoric... The third kind of knowledge that composition teachers need to master is some theoretical framework with which to sort through the ideas, methodologies, and conflicting claims of texts, journal articles, and convention addresses... future writing teachers need a broad awareness of reliable, productive methods to help students learn to write. (134-37)

While this definition of a writing teacher seems complete, will pre-service and beginning writing teachers agree? Is this view of a writing teacher missing any characteristics? How do the pressures of standardized testing impinge on our notions of a prepared teacher? Once these questions are answered and we define a fully prepared writing teacher, MSU students’ perceptions of preparedness to become a teacher of writing can
be addressed. A key to improving the writing performance of today’s students will depend on defining a fully trained teacher and understanding the extent to which beginning teachers have been prepared to meet the criteria.

Ultimately, I hope to use this work to positively impact the abilities of writers and teachers of writing alike. I already addressed the need for adequately trained writing teachers but have yet to carefully look at the outcome of this process—student writing. The focus on teacher training and the perceived effectiveness of this training allows me to determine the attitudes towards writing that new teachers manifest. Previous writing experiences do influence teachers’ implementation of writing pedagogy in their classrooms and therefore must be evaluated as part of my research.

The writing abilities and experiences of pre-service and beginning teachers are just as important as the training they receive. However, training new teachers has to guide teachers in evaluating these factors as part of their preparation to enter a writing classroom. Without proper training, new teachers “have a very difficult time understanding how to convey material that they themselves learned effortlessly and almost subconsciously” (Darling-Hammond 169). I would propose that an effective program should evaluate this history and address these issues during the course of that program.

*What Makes a Teacher Education Program a Positive Experience?*

In order to determine pre-service and beginning teachers’ beliefs on the outcomes of their Teacher Education Program as it pertains to writing pedagogy, we must first investigate the perceptions of pre-service teachers in Teacher Education Programs in relationship to what makes a good teacher (Fajet, Bello, Leftwich, Mesler, Shaver). Fajet
et al. maintains, "when teachers become overwhelmed with the challenges of learning to teach, they revert to teaching how they were taught" (725). While this literature focuses on the characteristics of effective and non-effective teachers, I used my own work to investigate how the participants view teaching and more importantly what skills they think are important to acquire to be a better teacher of writing. In addition, my own study will be important in helping to structure future developments of the Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University. Fajet et al. concludes, "teacher educators need to understand the perceptions and belief structures of teacher candidates in order to improve professional preparation and teaching practices" (725). This led me to believe that part of teacher education must be not only teaching future teachers how to be reflective practitioners but also to be willing to encounter their own history as students learning to write.

Dean, Lauer and Urquhart (2005), address the importance of institutions conducting evaluations of their own Teacher Education Programs. The article lays a foundation for this type of research. The authors focus on the four most successful Teacher Education Programs in the country and the common thread which makes those programs outstanding. All four program leaders were found to be successful because they, "...provided time, money and training to support the collection of data through surveys of graduates" (Dean, et al. 288). The authors conclude that "improved teacher preparation depends on systemic evaluation" (289). This literature enforces the need for a comprehensive discussion of Montclair State's Teacher Education Program. Currently, Montclair State University, through the Center of Pedagogy, only evaluates the success of their program through data collection while students are enrolled in the program.
There is currently no comprehensive study of the success of the program or a continuing conversation amongst graduates facilitated by the institution. Only through authentic evaluation can any program ensure they are providing future teachers the best possible opportunity to become positive influences in writing studies. I do not expect to be able to complete a full evaluation given the scope of this project but hopefully I can act as a catalyst towards that end. Further, this study is an indicator for me as to the type of atmosphere I hope to encourage across MSU’s Teacher Education Program, “Leaders need to pay attention to the program’s culture, build trust, facilitate conversations between key players, and foster open, two-way communication that values all participants as equals” (289). Unfortunately, the research draws conclusions that illuminate a common thread between four highly ranked programs but do not provide data to support their findings. As a researcher, I must take into consideration the lack of hard evidence to back up any claims made by this article. However, there is adequate justification for the importance of institutional self-evaluation in order to better understand teachers’ preparation to implement writing pedagogy and the possibility of creating an improved teacher education program.

This literature review is not an exhaustive look at the issues facing Teacher Education Programs and the perceived and real preparedness of pre-service and new writing teachers. My hope was to heed the advice of the literature and encourage authentic conversation to improve the quality of the Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University. By doing so, perhaps the effectiveness of writing pedagogy in secondary education will improve and students will be better prepared as writers.
Ongoing Questions

Some questions remain, to be addressed later in this project: What are some shortcomings of the social nature of the discussion groups in qualitative research? How might the absence of anonymity shape data? In what ways will the use of discussion groups be effective or ineffective with respect to issues of writing pedagogy, specifically? Rust asks her participants to make a three year commitment and I do not have that same liberty. Will the shortened length of my research have an impact on the veracity of my discoveries? Despite these important questions, I believe exploring the attitudes of pre-service and new teachers through supported conversation about their education and preparedness will allow me to fairly evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the Montclair State University Teacher Education Program.
Methodology

We Must Make Choices

I investigated the MSU students’ and alumni perceptions about the effectiveness of their preparation using a qualitative approach of discussion groups and a series of three focused set of interview questions. Creating this new method allowed me to incorporate the best qualities of Rust’s work in conversation groups, which led to authentic discussion, and Seidman’s reflective interview process meant to fully explore past and current learning experiences. Using this approach allowed participants the opportunity to authentically reflect on, “their knowledge and skills enacted in the real world of classrooms and appreciate their emotional and moral encounters with the lives of the people they teach” (Omstein 7). If I relied solely on empirical data, there is the possibility that teachers would not have been self-reflective, a critical component in becoming an effective teacher.

Authentic Conversation and Reflection

Authentic reflection is meant to provide pre-service and beginning teachers with the ability to better understand their limitations and expectations as they begin to implement writing pedagogy in their classroom. As Omstein reminds us:

Through reflective practices, or forums, people learn to listen carefully to each other and teachers are able to provide insight into their own work. By teachers reflecting on their practices or what they do in the classroom, and the basis for it, they provide insights for researchers. The latter is in the position to take the teachers’ implicit knowledge and particular point
of view and translate it into explicit knowledge and integrate it with other viewpoints. (15)

This is exactly the type of experience that I hoped to create during this process. My research engaged pre-service and beginning teachers in discussion about their preparation to teach writing and their actual experience in the classroom. Drawing analysis of their attitudes, perceived expectations and assessment of the Teacher Education Program may inform possible revisions to MSU’s approach to the preparation of writing teachers.

Data Collection

I developed a series of discussion groups to assess the perceived expectations, preparedness and attitudes of Montclair State University students and former students regarding the Teacher Education Program as it specifically relates to teaching writing in a Secondary English classroom. These conversation groups were inspired by the research Rust used in investigating the perceived preparedness of beginning teachers. Although Rust’s study does not specifically address the preparation of writing teachers, I will discuss the tremendous value in the type of model Rust uses to discover the attitudes of new teachers. Fostering productive discussion about a student’s experiences hinges on my ability to position myself as an impartial facilitator and encourage what Rust refers to as “authentic conversation.” As a vehicle to discover the perceptions held by pre-service and beginning secondary English writing teachers, I found that Rusts’ conversational groups provided the best opportunity to, “reflect the belief that there is much to learn from ‘authentic’ teachers who tell their stories about experiences” (Ornstein 7). Each group of participants, made up of pre-service and beginning teachers respectively, committed to a series of three video-taped 90-minute interview sessions over the course
of a semester which allowed for these groups to initiate in a conversation that extended to email correspondence as well. The first interview took place approximately two weeks into the semester allowing for students in the Methods course to begin their initial observations as well as ample time to properly advertise the study and recruit students. The second session was in the middle of the semester, prior to spring break and the third and final session occurred at the completion of the semester. In addition, I encouraged participants to continue the conversation in between sessions by emailing me as situations arise that related to writing instruction.

Additionally, I urged participants to correspond through email about their experiences and any questions that arise during our conversations that remain unanswered or unexplored. Each pre-service and beginning teacher in this study has a distinct story and I needed to respect individual struggles and successes. Interview-based discussion groups encouraged authentic storytelling critical to uncovering participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness of MSU’s Teacher Education Program to implement writing pedagogy.

Participants

The size of each conversation group was between 4-7 students. The number of participants was not as important as making sure there were a sufficient number of participants to allow “others outside the sample...to connect to the experiences” (Seidman 48). By making the discussion groups a manageable size, I was able to gather meaningful data within the time constraints of the study. The basic principle for selection of participants was to make sure there was a diverse, representative sampling of Montclair State University students. Reaching out by email to individuals who were not
able to make the time commitment to attend the conversations guaranteed that their voices were heard and resulted in an even stronger representative sample. A sample large enough to represent the make-up of a typical education classroom accounted for anecdotal, personal storytelling that has value.

The conversation groups were broken up into two distinct groups of participants. One group included students from a current Methods of Teaching course or a section of English 271/Teaching Writing. The second conversation group included graduates of the Teacher Education Program who were either first year or second year English teachers required to teach writing in their classrooms.

Site

The conversation groups took place on the Montclair State University campus. The specific room was in Dickson Hall and accommodated up to 10 students.

Bringing Together Discussion Groups and Conversational Interviews

In addition to conversational groups, it was imperative that I devised a format to conduct efficient and beneficial interviews with each participant. Conducting in-depth conversational interviews as my tool was a choice made after reading Seidman’s work which explains the value of in-depth interview and the successful structure of this research tool. Seidman invokes the writing of Aristotle, “Every whole story...has a beginning, a middle, and end” (1). In order for stories to be complete and accurate, people must have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Reflection is the real key in interview based research because it allows the storyteller to make sense of experiences and “makes telling stories a meaning-making experience” (Seidman 1).
My true goal was focused on uncovering the pre-service and new writing teachers' perceptions of their educational experiences to determine if their expectations were met by Montclair State University's Teacher Education Program. This goal fit well with what Seidman views as the purpose of interviewing, "an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (3). Another hopeful outcome of this project is to determine what kinds of programmatic revisions, if any, Montclair State University can make to meet the needs of future teachers.

Seidman's development of specific structure to conduct in-depth interviews has the most intrinsic value to this project. He proposes using a "semi-structured interview protocol" as a tool to most completely explore participants' experiences:

The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience. The second interview allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (11)

In addition to these focused interview conversations, I investigated the courses required to complete the Teacher Education Program. The types of questions I look to answer include: Do courses in the professional sequence offer anything on writing pedagogy? Out of all the courses students could take, which/how many offer instruction in how to teach writing? And—what does this instruction look like, generally? Overall, I am concerned with how the expected outcomes of these courses translate to the perceived preparation of these new teachers as they begin to implement writing pedagogy.
Focused Interview Question Prompts

See Appendix C for Question Prompts used during this study.
Anticipated Outcomes

I am excited about the potential of this research to aid future teachers of writing and future writers but I am also realistic in the limitations that could affect the validity of its outcome. Questions considered include: Would participants be as invested in sharing their perceptions as I was in learning through those experiences? How could I encourage open and honest communication and dissuade the participants from turning the discussions into an opportunity to air grievances? The only way to overcome the potential for these conflicts to impair the validity of my research was to establish expectations during the first meeting. Although I was a graduate student at Montclair State University, it was important to stress the absolute anonymity of the study. I navigated this by providing participants with a confidentiality agreement that promised to not divulge their names. I had full confidence that the structure of the discussion groups and my ability as a facilitator would not allow for these conversations to deviate from their intent.

By facing these shortcomings prior to commencing the series of discussion groups, I included them in my expectations for the outcomes of the study. I envisioned this process as an important step in understanding perceptions of the Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University. The conversations should help illuminate potential discrepancies between the training provided to teach writing and the real classroom experience of implementing writing pedagogy. Hopefully, my work will encourage leaders within the Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University to offer continued collaborative space for students and graduates to reflect on and evaluate their experiences.
Data Collection

As I began to compile data for this research, it was important to remember that the objective was not to evaluate or pass judgment on the program’s effectiveness. The purpose of this research was to engage graduates and current students in a conversation that the College of Education, Center of Pedagogy and English Department would recognize as important enough to continue and expand. Hopefully, the discussions I facilitated with these two groups of Montclair State University students and graduates will influence those departments to conduct an in-depth, long-term qualitative and quantitative reflective self-evaluation of the effectiveness of their Teacher Education program to train teachers of writing.

My vision for the series of conversations was to allow an opportunity for beginning and pre-service teachers to engage in authentic discussion about their perceptions of the effectiveness of the training, primarily pedagogical, received while at MSU. I made the decision to make every effort to design questions discouraging participants from any impulse to evaluate individual syllabi or instructors. Syllabi and instructors for particular courses are constantly evolving and evaluating specific situations could be moot by the time this study is published and I did not have the liberty to conduct a long term study which would allow me to trace those changes. In addition, I wanted to maintain an objective view and dissuade participants from discussing specific instructor/classroom deficiencies. By taking Rust’s model of discussion groups and Seidman’s question format, I felt confident that I could extract from participants important information about their experiences as writers, as students and as teachers in their reflection on the Teacher Education Program.
Montclair State University Teacher Education Program-Secondary English

Before I invited students and graduates to take part in the discussion groups, I investigated the requirements of the Teacher Education Program at MSU for those who aspire to teach Secondary English. The Center of Pedagogy presents to all Teacher Education students a program mission statement, “Portrait of a Teacher” (last revised September 2003), which provides prospective students with an idea of the “disposition, knowledge, and skills” they are expected to master (Appendix A). Of the 12 items on this list, 6 served as inspiration for many of the questions I designed as part of my discussion forums:

1. Have expert knowledge of the disciplines they will teach and can use various strategies, including media and technology, for creating learning experiences that make the subject matter accessible and meaningful to all students.

4. Plan instruction based upon knowledge of subject matter, students, families, communities, and curriculum goals and standards; and take into account issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, age, and special needs in designing instruction.

5. Understand critical thinking and problem solving, and create learning experiences that promote the development of students’ critical thinking and problem solving skills and dispositions.

6. Understand principles of democracy and plan and carry out instruction that promotes democratic values and communication in the classroom.
9. Are reflective practitioners who continually inquire into the nature of teaching and learning, reflect on their own learning and professional practice, evaluate the effects of their choices and actions on others, and seek out opportunities to grow professionally.

10. Build relationships with school colleagues, families, and agencies in the community to support students' learning and well-being, and work to foster an appreciation of diversity among students and colleagues.

(Appendix A)

These criteria formed my conversations with study participants. I was interested in exploring the ways in which these stated goals worked, for participants, into a usable writing pedagogy.

In addition to examining the overarching requirements elaborated in The Center of Pedagogy's "Portrait of a Teacher" of all Montclair State University students who aspire to become teachers, I looked at the specific course requirements for both the MAT program in Secondary English and the Teacher Education Program for undergraduates who are motivated to become certified while obtaining their Bachelor's degrees. Both require two semesters of practical work within a high school English classroom; the first semester includes an observational period and the second semester consists of student teaching under the supervision of a Cooperating Teacher. Undergraduates interested in teaching a subject area such as English and obtaining New Jersey Certification are required to complete 10 courses which are primarily focused on the philosophy and history of education in America and pedagogical courses, titled as follows:

"Psychological Foundations of Education; Historical Foundations of American
Education; Philosophical Orientation to Education; Public Purposes of Education: Democracy and Schooling; Teaching for Equity and Diversity; Inclusion in Middle and Secondary Schools; Educating English Language Learners; Language and Literacy Across the Curriculum; Assessment of Learning, and Integrating Technology Across the School Curriculum.” Additionally, there is one Methods course requirement offered within the content core department and students must fulfill the requirement of a major in the content area, in this case English. Again, as part of my attempt to evaluate how pre-service and beginning teachers respond to their expectations of the MSU Teacher Education Program, I developed questions that would directly reflect the program requirements (Appendix C).
Results

I present a case report on the pre-service and beginning teachers’ responses by focus area. The cases include the following components for each group: a) focused life history on experience learning to write b) details of experience in the Montclair State University Teacher Education Program c) Reflection of meaning of both a and b, independently and in relation to each other. Following the presentation of each question, there is an analysis of the difference/similarities of perception between pre-service and beginning teachers. Implications of the analysis are presented in the conclusion.

Writing Experience Memories

The first of three conversation groups with all participants, pre-service and beginning teachers, was designed to invite reflection on their writing experiences and the effect of their writing history on the decision to pursue a career in teaching.

The opportunity to explore their earliest memories of writing was met with a sense of initial shock and uncertainty by the seven (7) pre-service teachers. When I asked why, the overwhelming response was that there had never been an opportunity in their education to reflect on those moments. Answers were divided between students having no memory of their earliest experience and others who had recollections of early writing that left lasting impressions. For those who had memory of writing at an early age, the experiences ranged from “writing anything I could” and “I had a way with words for as long as I can remember” and one student who remembered a 3rd grade experience when she was encouraged to author a book and “publishing something I wrote was so magical.”

For all five (5) beginning teachers, experiences of learning to write did not have the same long-term impact as learning to read. Writing experiences were varied a ranging
from handwriting, “We worked on handwriting and mine was really sloppy so I ended up writing letters over and over again until I got it perfect...” to drill and skill type of assignments, “I remember having to write creative stories for 10 minutes a day...they were supposed to be creative stories but we all used to write the same thing using the same format...” and “For me, learning to write was never about creativity...it was about structure and rules and the practical, business side of writing...” Beginning teachers were expressive about their experiences and had the ability to find specific experiences to share from their years learning to write:

‘In Second grade I wrote an article for a newsletter about the school atrium and got a huge sense of accomplishment...nobody told me to write the story, I just took the initiative...it was a one time thing but it stays with me and I think about it often’... ‘We had to draw a picture and write 'my family is'... ‘I think we were just expected to know how to write and nobody really told us what to do’... ‘In kindergarten we had the letter people and each one had their own song.’

Beginning teachers shared the opinion of writing’s importance in their education, “I always got the feeling that writing is more reading and you learn to read before you can write, you only write to respond to something you read...” Overall, the conversation with beginning teachers in regards to their earliest memories was more expansive than the same conversation held with pre-service teachers. I believe that beginning teachers had more need to reflect on those experiences in order to make meaning of their current challenges as teachers. Only two of the pre-service teachers were enrolled in the
Methods course which, according to beginning teachers, is where reflection of experience was explored during the teacher education program.

Reflection on earliest writing experiences

As pre-service teachers analyzed their relationship today to their writing experiences as students, all (except for one non-responder) shared the same views. All were given the opportunity to be creative writers as younger students and enjoyed those moments, “I look back now at some creative stories that I have written for fun...and I love them.” However, they reached a consensus that as future teachers who will have to present formal processes of writing to their students, they all wish they had more formal training:

I wish I had more clear instruction...maybe even seeing and analyzing other people’s writing would have been helpful...I was never properly taught how to draft, revise, edit, etc.

The common thread for beginning teachers was that literature and reading were given more attention than writing in their early education and it didn’t bother them at the time. As teachers they feel that they are finding it difficult to teach writing because when they were students, “Everything was literature and then write about it...writing was never something that anyone made out to be important.” In this respect, pre-service and beginning teachers felt similar in their desire as teachers for more formal writing instruction in their early education that wasn’t focused on responses to reading.

This leads me to believe that more attention should be given to understanding how the lack of formal writing instruction affects future teachers’ ability to teach those skills in their own classrooms as part of the Teacher Education Program. The lack of attention
given to writing was a source of concern for both pre-service and beginning teachers as they were faced with the reality of implementing writing pedagogy in a skills-based curriculum.

**Focused Reflection on Writing Experiences**

*Memories of favorite writing teacher*

As future teachers of writing, I expected each pre-service participant to have a story of a favorite writing teacher from their past that served as inspiration for their chosen career path. Only one participant from the pre-service group recalled a writing teacher that made an impact and he was actually a professor at Montclair State University, "...he made me want to come back and be a teacher, to teach writing and reading, because they are inextricable from each other." One response of note was a student who had no favorite writing teacher but also shared, "I don’t remember being taught by one teacher and it [writing] was never really much emphasis on until I reached seventh or eighth grade when they began teaching the five paragraph essay format."

Unlike the pre-service teachers, there were three out of five beginning teachers who did have teachers who had a positive impact. Responses were varied:

'I don’t have any favorite writing teacher...can’t even recall someone teaching me to write’... ‘I have horror stories...I decided to become an English teacher to spite a high school teacher’... ‘Seventh grade English teacher told us you were allowed to like writing instead of having to do things by certain rules’... ‘At Montclair State University, she gave great feedback, seemed to care about our work and no teachers in high school seemed to care that much.’
As the conversation continued I discovered that the lack of positive influences in writing classrooms drove all participants at some level to become writing teachers. But, no participants thought about writing as the primary objective in their role as English teachers in an outcomes driven school environment. These current and future teachers were determined to focus on writing in the classroom so they could emulate those professors at Montclair State University who cared about their writing and have the same influence in their own classroom. Unfortunately, this optimism was under constant fire from the reality of the skills based curriculum they have to adhere to in their districts.

Influence of experiences as a writer in decision to become an English teacher (A secondary line of inquiry was self-categorization as a good or struggling writer)

Most pre-service respondents did not consider themselves particularly good writers as students but also found no correlation between their writing skills and the decision to become an English teacher. Decisions to be English teachers were based on interest in reading/books or encouragement from family, friends and/or teachers such as one student who told a story of how she, “knew I wanted to be a teacher since I was very young and writing never really had anything to do with my decision.” Responses here were the most unexpected. However, when we look at Elbow’s work on the substandard treatment of writing in schools in comparison to reading, this type of response makes sense. All pre-service participants found joy in reading and books, writing was seen as a task they had to complete in response to their reading. For many, the writing they did detracted from the pleasure they derived from reading. Because of writing’s purpose and presentation in their own experiences, many of the pre-service teachers did not consider writing to be as important as reading as future teachers of English.
The majority of the beginning teacher participants shared the same benign feelings about their experiences learning to write and felt that their history as students did not encompass a great deal of writing. All the participants in the discussion forum felt that they did not have a desire to teach writing as part of their decision to become an English teacher. Continuing the trend of reading superseding writing in their classroom experiences, the participants felt that their appreciation for literature and love of reading were the important factors in becoming English teachers:

‘I like teaching literature and reading and writing is not the reason I wanted to go into teaching’... ‘I love to read which is why I decided to become a teacher’... ‘I wanted to teach English because I love to read...figured out that I like to edit work and maybe I can help students write but I never went into teaching to instruct writing.’

The lack of writing instruction in their own experiences is now detrimental to their own teaching because they strong backgrounds as students of writing, “I don’t feel like I had a lot of experience learning how to write which makes it hard to teach writing because there is no outline in my mind...I just know what is right and it is hard to explain why now that I am a teacher...”

Reflection on these experiences as part of your teacher education at Montclair State University

Of the 7 pre-service discussion participants, 2 were able to point to specific moments in their Montclair State University course work when they were given the opportunity to reflect on their writing experiences as students. All beginning teachers pointed to moments that mirrored the experiences of pre-service students. One pre-service teacher mentioned, “Both of the professors aimed at getting us to remember our
early experiences and how they could have been altered to better the writing process.”
Another student related to the group that one class encouraged students to, “think back to
when I was young and the effect that the school system had on me in regards to writing,
grammar etc. However, I have not learned much more from the class.” Across the board,
beginning teachers pointed to their one Methods course in the Teacher Education
Program that offered them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. It is important
to note that the reflective work undertaken in the course was not specific to writing but a
more general look at learning experiences as a whole.

The opportunity to reflect on writing experiences during this conversation was
welcomed enthusiastically by all participants. The consensus amongst participants was
that more reflective practices on writing during their coursework would have helped
better prepare them to teach writing in the classroom. The ability to identify the lack of
writing they did in their own academic careers would have enabled them to deliberately
avoid repeating those mistakes as teachers. However, the conversation (especially, but
not limited to, beginning teachers) did veer back to the realistic view that “all the
reflection in the world would not change the fact that the school values outcomes, not
good writing.”

**Perceptions of the Teacher Education Program**

*Current perceptions of the Teacher Education Program as it pertains to writing*

4 of the 7 pre-service teacher participants agreed that they were given ample
opportunity to learn about the professional nature of the field. The remaining three pre-
service participants held very different views, feeling as though the lack of required
teaching writing courses “leaves a significant gap in the understanding of the professional
field of English Education.”

The perceptions beginning teachers held in relation to the MSU Teacher
Education Program focused on the conflict between pedagogy/theory and actual
classroom practice, with one participant specifically stating:

‘I think that it has a lot of philosophy that was a great ideal, but not that realistic. I have to teach the five paragraph essay and don’t have time to figure out how to make the classroom democratic’... ‘We should learn what tests these students will be taking so we know what we are up against’... ‘I have never heard of the HSPA and my freshman take it in writing’... ‘I wish I knew how to teach picture prompts and persuasive five paragraph essays.’

Beginning teachers also believed that MSU does care about producing quality teachers and they appreciated the knowledge they gained from the program. While in school they felt like a part of a community of learners but once they graduated felt lost with no support structure.

These responses illicit many questions for me that the Teacher Education Program needs to consider as part of the curriculum. The biggest question is what to value in terms of writing instruction. We want our teachers to be experts in the field but how can they balance the expectation of outcomes based curriculum? Literary theory and democratic pedagogy are interesting and important but how do they help teachers become better when the schools don’t allow for this to happen? Obviously, changing school curriculum to be focused on writing ability rather then outcome would be the easiest way
but not a realistic solution. Until standardized tests and outcomes based curriculum are removed from schools, mustn’t MSU and other universities assist their students by preparing them to be teachers in that context? Another glaring point of interest for me was beginning teachers’ disenfranchisement with MSU now that they were graduates. I will discuss this further in my conclusion.

Perception of how well the Teacher Education Program prepares students to implement writing pedagogy

All pre-service teachers felt adequately prepared but not entirely comfortable with writing pedagogy, “Nothing is perfect—but the general result is good.” There were 2 students who wanted to comment more specifically and agreed that their answer to this question be recorded as:

Not very well at all. That’s why I’m taking teaching writing this summer but that’s only just 6 weeks before I begin student teaching. That’s not enough in advance, not enough preparation or time for me to learn about a new pedagogy.

Other pre-service participants agreed that they seemed rushed and there were not enough teaching writing courses offered or available.

Based on their responses, beginning teachers felt adequately prepared to implement writing pedagogy mainly because, “You only learn a fraction in school compared to what you will learn once you actually begin implementing writing pedagogy.” They agreed that too much time was spent on pedagogical theory and not enough time was spent on practical lessons of test preparation, navigating school politics, and the paperwork required of teachers.
This conversation highlighted a glaring difference between pre-service and beginning teachers. Pre-service teachers still put a great deal of importance on learning pedagogy and yearn for more instruction on teaching writing. Beginning teachers found through their experience in the classroom that too much time was spent on pedagogical theory and more classes should be dedicated to understanding how to navigate the responsibilities of a teacher that are not classroom related.

**Overall perception of the Teacher Education Program**

This hotly debated subject illicited the most emotion than any other discussion during this session. Most of the conversation centered on how well the program met students' expectations when they enrolled and the goals that The Portrait of a Teacher promised to meet. Responses included statements such as:

‘Overall, I heard MSU was a ‘teacher’s college’ which is what prompted me to come back get my MAT’… ‘With the new building [University Hall] and anniversary, my perception of the teacher program is decent’…

‘The programs are all mixed up, changing and there is a need for counselors’… ‘I agree…the program is different on line, on WESS, with my counselor and in the handbook. The program just needs to get things straightened out’… ‘I don’t think there are enough required teaching writing, teaching reading, teaching Shakespeare classes.’

All participants agreed that the program requires too many general pedagogy/methods courses and not enough of practical courses on how to teach writing. Additionally, students felt that they were somewhat confused and let down about the promises made by the college prior to enrolling and the messages they receive as current
students. The overall perception was that the program requirements were confusing to navigate and the Teacher Education Program is “inconsistent with the messages they try and convey in the classroom and in the expectations that The Center of Pedagogy espouses in The Portrait of a Teacher.” Pre-service students were specifically concerned with their lack of knowledge when it came to curriculum goals and standards and the standardized testing they would encounter as English teachers. While they did have access to some curriculum in their courses, their confidence levels were not high.

Beginning teachers explained there was “no sense that any of the administration attempted to instill a feeling of community or unity within the program.” Some positive aspects of the program beginning teachers expressed included pride in the coursework they completed and a feeling that the overall experience helped them grow as teachers. Additionally, graduates of the program felt that their professors were, “extremely well qualified, supportive and advocates for our best interests as future teachers.”

Comparison between cooperating teachers’ writing instruction and Teacher Training writing pedagogy for Pre-Service Teachers

Of the 7 participants, 3 were currently observing a cooperating teacher and the other 4 were doing so the upcoming semester. One student had an extremely negative experience, “My observations were miserable and I’ve since been moved in my placement. Neither taught writing at all, it was terrible.” Another student’s experience, with a different cooperating teacher, was quite different:

Some teaching practices fit perfectly with the writing pedagogy I have studied so far...however, some individual teaching practices were out of
Sync...the experience humanized the teachers for me in ways I could not have predicted at the start.

This topic of discussion also prompted a discussion about the placement of students with cooperating teachers. The participants were not satisfied with the matching process that runs through the Center of Pedagogy. The students who had already observed a cooperating teacher felt that their placements were not focused on finding teachers who taught writing or followed the principles of The Portrait of the Teacher.

Comparison of personal experience in the classroom teaching writing to your training in the Teacher Education Program for Beginning Teachers

Beginning teachers agreed that teaching writing in the classroom and learning how to teach writing “are two worlds apart.” There was a large discrepancy between what participants were taught about teaching writing in the Teacher Education Program and their experiences once they were the ones expected to implement writing pedagogy. Respondents weren’t convinced that any specific course would “prepare us for what we found once we had to actually teach writing” but “additional required courses on subject matter knowledge (writing, Shakespeare, etc.) would have given me more confidence and a greater sense of preparation.”

This conversation mirrors the scholarship I addressed earlier by Hillocks, Darling-Hammond, Smit and others. The lack of consensus about the appropriate dissemination of subject matter knowledge vs. pedagogical knowledge for teachers of writing is problematic for all Teacher Education Programs. With no clear cut answer, we can only listen to practicing teachers and try to adjust teacher preparation to address the needs of those involved in classroom writing instruction.
Reflection on the meaning of the teacher education program

The effect of previous writing experiences on the ability to teach writing

All the pre-service participants agreed that because these conversations have allowed reflection of their writing experiences they feel better, but not fully equipped to answer this question. They hoped that they would find a way to “incorporate my previous writing experiences into how I teach but it may be too early to tell” and “I do think reflection on my experiences is important and hope to find the opportunity in a course that guides me through that process.” Only a couple of students had strong attachments to their writing history but all participants agreed that reflecting on what the classroom was like will help them create positive experiences when they control that environment.

None of the 5 beginning teachers seemed to think previous writing experiences had a great deal to do with their ability to teach writing. The common sentiment amongst these participants centered around the belief that schools, “especially the politicized nature of testing,” are different than when they were learning to write, “I always remember writing was thought of as a creative process and except for AP classes, we didn’t think much about format or ‘passing the test’.”

How has the Teacher Education program changed your position on becoming a teacher? Positive/Negative?

Four pre-service participants felt that the Teacher Education has had no effect on their desire to become a teacher but they were also the members of the group that were newest to the program. One of the remaining pre-service teachers felt that their Methods course and observation of their cooperating teacher were the two contributing factors that convinced them that they don’t want to become a teacher. This participant felt that the
lack of consistency between the pedagogy presented at MSU and the reality they experienced in the high school English classroom they observed were too divergent and, “didn’t fit my expectations of what it meant to be an English teacher.”

As opposed to the pre-service teachers, the beginning teachers’ discussion was more reflective because they could contextualize their classroom experiences. Overall, “since I wanted to be a teacher before entering the program and I am still a teacher, the teacher education program didn’t really affect my decision.” One participant did admit that she would not be teaching after the end of the school year but, “I am not sure that MSU had anything to do with that decision...the reality of the classroom and the politics of schools were the main factors and the Teacher Ed. Program could not have prepared me for those situations.” Three participants did relate that based on their fieldwork experiences, “I almost didn’t become a teacher because of the horrible experiences I had observing my cooperating teacher...not sure if this was a MSU issue or the school district so while it was a negative factor maybe it wasn’t directly related to Teacher Ed.”

Do you feel more or less confident to teach writing in the classroom based on your education at Montclair State University?

No participants in the discussion groups, pre-service or beginning teachers, felt confident about teaching writing in the classroom. The most specific concerns came from the pre-service teachers taking part in the study felt that they were essentially unprepared to teach writing and MSU did not address, “writing instruction in great enough detail” and “there should be at least one but optimistically two or three teaching writing courses required prior to completion of the program.” Although there was expression of disappointment in their perceived preparation to instruct writing in the classroom, they all felt confident that the pedagogy obtained throughout the program
would allow them the “ability to adapt and overcome any lack of specific subject matter
knowledge.”

*Do you think the Teacher Education Program is meeting your needs as a future writing
teacher? (Pre-Service Teachers Only)*

This question did not illicit a great deal of response from the pre-service
participants. Several students felt that at this point in the program, with a lack of hands-
on teaching experience, they could not adequately evaluate what their needs were as
future writing teachers. They did sense that based on the stories from more experienced
teachers that nothing could fully prepare them for what was going to happen in the
classroom, “...theory and pedagogy are important and interesting but what really happens
in the classroom does not always match up.”

*What would you change/keep the same about the program?*

All participants, pre-service and beginning teachers, were extremely pleased with
the faculty and would not change that aspect of the program. There was, however, a call
for more consistency in the messages delivered by The Center of Pedagogy, the Teacher
Education Program and the English Department regarding curriculum choices and
program requirements. One pre-service teacher made a statement that all the other
participants responded to with more positivity and sense of urgency than any other in the
entire process:

I think the prescriptive nature of the requirements is a weakness of the
English Education program. To send people into classes in order to check
off boxes and say something is done leads to a different learning
experience than to let people pursue classes for their own growth as an
English person. I think we’re at our best when we have agency – so
adding real choices to the program, not just choice-of-less-evil style choices would make it a better learning journey.

The conversation was continued by email and the majority of the participants were encouraged that I was undertaking this project and hopeful that Montclair State University would continue the dialogue.

During the discussion with beginning teachers, the topic of increased hands-on work with student writers being an important part of the development of a writing teacher that was overlooked. As one beginning teacher commented, “Graduate Students in the MAT program are cut off from a learning opportunity by being denied the chance to work in the MSU Writing Center.” This beginning teacher felt that requiring students to work in The Writing Center as a substitute for observing a cooperating teacher would be a more appropriate way to learn how to teach writing. Another student commented that they would keep the faculty because they were, “exceptionally committed and well intentioned.” Other aspects that some participants appreciated about the program was the commitment by The Center of Pedagogy to create a sounding board on Blackboard but other members of the group did not even know this existed. The biggest changes that the entire forum of beginning teachers wanted to see were, “a larger offering of courses geared towards teaching writing” and “an attempt by someone on campus to build a community of students enrolled in The Teacher Education Program and graduates of that program.”
Conclusions

The conversation groups I facilitated offered an appealing and informative view into perceptions about the Teacher Education Program at Montclair State University. This was an opportunity for pre-service and beginning teachers to engage in reflection of their own writing experiences and the perception of how well they were prepared to implement writing pedagogy in a school curriculum based on the requirements of the Teacher Education Program. My conclusions show that students and graduates do feel that MSU offers many of the elements of a successful Teacher Education Program and The Center of Pedagogy is innovative and meeting the demands of the highly competitive school environment in New Jersey. I also found that there are areas of the program that need further evaluation and discussion and there needs to be a new initiative aimed at surveying the long-term effects of the Teacher Education Program on graduates who teach writing at the Secondary level.

The biggest area of needed change is focused on the curriculum standards in place for candidates. The beginning teachers I interviewed for this research confided that the administrative functions of their positions as writing teachers were unchartered waters and stressed that the Teacher Education Program needs to put a greater emphasis on preparing students for the functional practicalities of being a teacher. The consensus among these beginning teachers was that providing them with a stronger understanding of the responsibilities of a teacher would allow them the ability to spend more time becoming better writing teachers. This concern was shared by pre-service teachers who were anxious about the type of job responsibilities outside of implementing writing pedagogy they felt MSU was deficient in addressing as part of the required coursework.
Montclair State University adheres to the principal that meaningful classroom experience coupled with reflection of this experience is one of the hallmarks of successful Teacher Education Programs. As Darling-Hammond contends, “These programs...connected clinical experiences to formal course work, in part by interweaving student teaching with course work and by infusing classroom practices into the curriculum” (Darling-Hammond, Et al. 120) In addition, Darling-Hammond believes that clinical experience is the glue for the entire teacher preparation process and “Although selecting a school is important, selecting a good cooperating teacher is the highest priority” (Powerful Teacher Education 173). According to the responses of participants, when it comes to the fieldwork component of the Teacher Education Program, MSU may be losing the battle. The Center of Pedagogy must reevaluate the ways in which they find cooperating teachers and ensure that the cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers share standards of practice and work collaboratively to put them into action. Placing students with cooperating teachers in English classrooms that include writing will hopefully expose future writing teachers to positive and practical examples of writing pedagogy.

One of the largest problems discussed in the literature is the definition and teaching of appropriate subject matter for writing. Hillocks finds that “most teachers of writing and English education appear to be staunch advocates of the principle that a little general knowledge of writing suffices for most purposes” (247). MSU tends to follow the path of least resistance by offering a broad framework of pedagogical knowledge aimed at preparing writing teachers to be lifelong, reflective learners but not requiring an extensive amount of writing courses. The hope seems to be that by providing candidates
with the tools to be reflective practitioners and classes aimed at developing professional relationships, MSU hopes to supplement any missing subject matter knowledge. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, the majority of students I spoke with during the course of this study felt that they were ill prepared to implement writing pedagogy.

In their research, Thomas and Loadman found:

Good teachers must be well prepared. Many educational researchers have suggested that data gathering, teacher education program evaluations, and sharing findings with the education community are imperative to teacher education programs and overall improvement in the teacher profession. (195)

It is recognized throughout the teacher preparation community that Teacher Education Programs should undergo self-evaluation on a consistent basis to ensure graduates are fully prepared to enter the classroom. Unfortunately, although many teacher education programs do use survey research to collect data from their graduates, in many cases these efforts are simply vehicles for satisfying accreditation standards (Thomas and Loadman 195). Montclair State University’s Center of Pedagogy does evaluate the Teacher Education Program but only as part of the accreditation process which is concerned with the standards of the program and not the success or failure of graduates in their own writing classrooms. There is no attempt to survey graduates about their educational experiences in relationship to their preparation to teach writing. Thomas and Loadman determine that, “in many instances, follow-up studies, their findings and improvement efforts, coerced by accreditation, go unpublished and unshared with the teacher education community at large” (196). The majority of data collection continues to occur while
students are in their respective programs and are typically aimed at fulfilling requirements related to accreditation. Montclair State University has taken the accreditation quite seriously and is rigorous in their surveys of the Teacher Education Program. In a testament to the seriousness with which MSU takes their dedication to a democratic and reflective environment in the Teacher Education Department, the Center of Pedagogy does not hide their results and publishes all information about the program on their website (http://cehs.montclair.edu/academic/cop/). They have also been pioneers in the nation by developing a database, “tracking the progress of every teacher candidate toward meeting every NCATE standard” (Cochran-Smith 8). The Center of Pedagogy should be lauded for their innovation and pioneering spirit when it comes to tracking student progress but the issue still remains that this evaluation is focused on candidates and not graduates.

Accreditation evaluation carries problems that are evident in the conversations I participated in with pre-service and beginning teachers over the past several months, notably that these participants felt there was no interest by the institution to hear their stories or offer collaborative space to share better practices for beginning writing teachers. Thomas and Loadman explain, “some of those enterprises have been considered weak with regard to empirical evidence, substance, and depth...research efforts have been blamed for proliferating a poor public perception that teacher education programs and their graduates lack intellectual sophistication” (204). Without being able to provide a clearer picture of the level of preparation we may never know the full success of MSU’s Teacher Education Program.
In addition to on-the-job classroom ratings of teacher knowledge and skills, narrative or perhaps ethnographic studies of individual graduates and their successes and challenges in teaching writing should be added to the assessments that The Center of Pedagogy implement. Such inquiry would provide rich data to further inform the teacher education administrators of needs in the field and challenges linked to the program. MSU and the Teacher Education Program need to take the next step of evaluation. Hopefully, faculty in either the English or Education disciplines will take my work and develop a longitudinal self-study of teacher preparation based on student and teacher achievement in the writing classroom. More importantly, MSU must provide graduates and candidates access to a supported community of pre-service, beginning and experienced English teachers that will provide opportunities for professional growth and improve the way writing is taught and learned in our high schools. The research proves that, “Being a professional involves not simply ‘knowing the answers’ but also having the skills and the will to evaluate one’s practice and search for new answers when needed, at the classroom level and school level” (Darling-Hammond, et al. 115). Teachers hone their skills when they undergo a process of learning, experimenting, and reflecting on their practice with feedback from peers and more-expert practitioners. It is important to read the ethnographic evidence of pre-service and beginning teachers of writing and keep in mind the words of Cochran-Smith, quoted earlier in this study, that we must avoid “the idea that holding teachers and teacher preparation accountable for everything will fix everything, while meanwhile letting everybody else off the hook” (11). When I began this work, I believed that a solution could come exclusively from within out Teacher
Education Programs. However, I now realize teacher preparation extends beyond preservice education and into long-term support and collaboration.
Works Cited


Darling-Hammond, Linda and Joan Baratz-Snowden, eds. "A Good Teacher in Every Classroom: Preparing the Highly Qualified Teachers Our Children Deserve."


Street, Chris. “Pre-Service Teachers’ Attitudes about Writing and Learning to Teach Writing: Implications for Teacher Educators.” *Teacher Education Quarterly* (Summer 2003): 1-18.


Appendix A

Montclair State University

“Portrait of a Teacher”

The Montclair State University community is committed to the continuing development of teachers who exemplify the dispositions, knowledge, and skills reflected in this portrait. They:

1. Have expert knowledge of the disciplines they will teach and can use various strategies, including media and technology, for creating learning experiences that make the subject matter accessible and meaningful to all students.
2. Understand how children and adolescents learn and develop in a variety of school, family and community contexts, and can provide learning opportunities that support their students' intellectual, social, and personal development.
3. Understand the practice of culturally responsive teaching. They understand that children bring varied talents, strengths, and perspectives to learning; have skills for learning about the diverse students they teach; and use knowledge of students and their lives to design and carry out instruction that builds on students' individual and cultural strengths.
4. Plan instruction based upon knowledge of subject matter, students, families, communities, and curriculum goals and standards; and taking into account issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, age, and special needs in designing instruction.
5. Understand critical thinking and problem solving, and create learning experiences that promote the development of students' critical thinking and problem solving skills and dispositions.
6. Understand principles of democracy and plan and carry out instruction that promotes democratic values and communication in the classroom.
7. Understand and use multiple forms of assessment to promote the intellectual, social, and physical development of learners and to inform instruction.
8. Create a community in the classroom that is nurturing, caring, safe, and conducive to learning.

9. Are reflective practitioners who continually inquire into the nature of teaching and learning, reflect on their own learning and professional practice, evaluate the effects of their choices and actions on others, and seek out opportunities to grow professionally.

10. Build relationships with school colleagues, families, and agencies in the community to support students' learning and well-being, and work to foster an appreciation of diversity among students and colleagues.

11. Possess the literacy skills associated with an educated person; can speak and write English fluently and communicate clearly.

12. Develop dispositions expected of professional educators. These include belief in the potential of schools to promote social justice; passion for teaching; and commitment to ensuring equal learning opportunities for every student, critical reflection, inquiry, critical thinking, and life-long learning, the ethical and enculturating responsibilities of educators, and serving as agents of change and stewards of best practice.
### Appendix B

Montclair State University

Overview of the Performance Assessment System by Transition Point

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition Points in MSU's Teacher Education Program:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Program Entry (Admission to Teacher Education)</strong></td>
<td><strong>2. Entry to Professional Semester</strong></td>
<td><strong>3. Exit from Professional Semester</strong></td>
<td><strong>4. Program Completion</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Sources of Assessment Data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Assessment Data:</th>
<th>All Programs</th>
<th>All Programs</th>
<th>All Programs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Admissions Evaluation Scale</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratings based on:</td>
<td>Overall GPA (minimum of 2.75)</td>
<td>Summarized Record of Student Teaching</td>
<td>All Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Transcripts</td>
<td>GPA in major (minimums vary)</td>
<td>Assessments conducted by selected disciplinary programs as part of student teaching (analyzed by faculty in those departments)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Overall GPA (minimum of 2.75)</td>
<td>No grade below C- in professional sequence courses</td>
<td><strong>Course-specific performance assessment for candidates in disciplinary programs:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• GPA in major (minimums vary)</td>
<td>Submission of Praxis scores</td>
<td>• Adapting instruction for an English language learner and a student w/a disability (CURR 435/528) (subject area programs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Letters of recommendation</td>
<td>Completion of all required courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Essays</td>
<td>Successful completion of assessments in disciplinary areas (data analyzed by faculty from the disciplinary programs and reported to their Specialized Professional Associations [SPAs])</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Test scores (for some)</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Cumulative GPA of 2.75 or higher</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Portfolio (for some)</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Passing score on relevant Praxis II test</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Summary of all previous performance assessments</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Course-specific assessments for candidates in disciplinary programs:**

- Participating in a Community of Inquiry (EDFD 220)
- Articulation of philosophy of education (EDFD 520)
- Organizing the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom for student learning Faculty Assessment (CURR 410/500)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Performance in Intermediate Field Faculty Assessment (CURR 410/500)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unit plan (Dept. methods courses)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Course-specific performance assessments for candidates in Early Childhood & Elementary Education:**

- Participating in a Community of Inquiry (EDFD 220)
- Organizing the classroom for student learning (Seminar I) Faculty assessment (ECEL 412/413/502)
- Performance in Clinical I Teacher assessment (ECEL 412/413/502)
- Unit plan (ECEL 422/435/528/522)
- Adapting instruction for an English language learner (READ 400/500)
- Adapting instruction for a student w/a disability (ECEL 420/435/522)
Appendix C

Focused Interview Questions for Pre-Service and Beginning Teachers

Pre-Service Teachers

Interview 1 (Focused Life History)
1. What are some of your earliest memories of learning to write?
2. How do you feel about some of your earliest writing experiences?
3. Did you have a favorite writing teacher? Why was he/she your favorite?
4. What is your overall feeling about your experiences learning to write?
5. Do you think your experiences as a writer helped you decide to be a teacher?

Interview 2 (The Details of Experience)
1. What are your current perceptions of the Teacher Education Program as it pertains to writing?
2. How well do you think MSU has prepared you to implement writing pedagogy?
3. What is your overall perception of the teacher education program?
4. How does your personal experience observing your cooperating teacher teach writing compare to your education thus far?

Interview 3 (Reflection of Meaning)
1. How do you think your previous writing experiences will shape your ability to teach writing?
2. How has the Teacher Ed. program changed your position on becoming a teacher? Positive/Negative?
3. Do you feel more or less confident to teach writing in the classroom based on your education at Montclair State University?
4. Do you think the Teacher Education Program is meeting your needs as a future writing teacher?
5. What would you change/keep the same about the program?

Beginning Teachers

Interview 1 (Focused Life History)
1. What are some of your earliest memories of learning to write?
2. How do you feel about some of your earliest writing experiences?
3. Did you have a favorite writing teacher? Why was he/she your favorite?
4. What is your overall feeling about your experiences learning to write?
5. Do you think your experiences as a writer helped you decide to be a teacher?

Interview 2 (The Details of Experience)
1. What are your current perceptions of the Teacher Education Program as it pertains to writing?
2. How well do you think MSU has prepared you to implement writing pedagogy?
3. What is your overall perception of the teacher education program?
4. How does your personal experience in the classroom specifically teaching writing, compare to your education thus far?

Interview 3 (Reflection of Meaning)
1. How do you think your previous writing experiences shaped your ability to teach writing?
2. How did the Teacher Education program change your position on becoming a teacher? Positive/Negative?
3. Do you feel more or less confident to teach writing in the classroom based on your education at Montclair State University?
4. Do you think the Teacher Education Program met your needs as a writing teacher?
5. What would you change/keep the same about the program?