Learning By Doing: Brock Pre-Service Course Prepares Literacy Teachers

Giselle Whyte and Ruth McQuirter Scott

“T”

T

Teacher candidates often make statements such as these during their first language arts methodology class. Many of them with university majors and minors in areas of study other than English enter this initial class with a great deal of intrepidation. They question their ability to teach English to junior (4-6) or intermediate (7-8) grades when they themselves have not had the background or extended courses in this discipline. For many, their concerns are very real and are often grounded in lack of experience or exposure to broad-ranged reading and writing opportunities.

Our challenge as course instructors and teacher educators is to immerse these teacher candidates in a comprehensive, experiential pre-service language arts course (20 sessions totalling 50 hours of instruction) that models and provides ample opportunities for these students to learn and grow into their role as language arts or English teachers. Since English is the basis for communication across all subject areas, we also consistently emphasize that all teachers are instructors of English and, regardless what subject area they may specialize in, they will all assume some responsibility for strengthening this curricular foundation in the classroom.

To ensure that we maximize the impact of these 50 hours, our philosophy of instruction supports the “learning by doing” approach; we emphasize that our teacher candidates need to experience first hand various key aspects of language arts that emerge from the principles of literacy instruction before they actually teach them in their practicum placements. We strive to model exemplary literacy practices both in curriculum design and delivery to ensure deeper student understanding. From one pre-service year to another, our language arts course undergoes systematic revision and adjustment. It is responsive to new provincial initiatives and current research-based pedagogical directions ensuring that teacher candidates are knowledgeable, up-to-date and prepared for some of the changes being implemented within the elementary classrooms.

Guiding Principles

Currently, there are several thrusts that have guided us in reshaping our pre-service language arts course. They include:

- new Ministry of Education documents such as English Achievement Chart for Grades 1 to 12 (draft)
- the emphasis on literacy and developing and applying “critical thinking skills” across the curriculum by all teachers as highlighted in the Ministry’s Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches Grades 7-12
- the backward design model, a curriculum design model developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe and outlined in their publication Understanding By Design (2000)
- Creating Writers Through 6-Trait Writing Assessment and Instruction by Vicki Spandel (2005)
- the emphasis on using authentic demonstration tasks to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to apply their understanding of the concepts and skills acquired throughout the course,
- the consistent use of a variety of assessment strategies and tools to provide valid feedback and to monitor growth, and
- the integration of several cooperative learning opportunities.

Specifically then, how are these directions reflected in the design and delivery of our pre-service language arts course?

Culminating Activities

During the first session, the teacher candidates receive a detailed course of study package. This includes an overview of the two culminating tasks that incorporate our course priorities - the “enduring understandings” as well as some “important to know and do” instructional elements. In support of the backward design model (Wiggins and McTighe (2000), our demonstration tasks highlight what teaching and learning practices need to take place before students can successfully provide
evidence of their learning. These are put into the context of the provincial curriculum (Ontario Curriculum: Language 1-8, 1997). Not only do these culminating tasks suggest the main components of our course and how the assessment will unfold, they also function as reference points during our weekly sessions. To this effect, our two culminating tasks are a literature-based unit plan due in early March and a writing folio celebrated as a Writers’ Café during our final class in April. Individual rubrics are provided for each major demonstration task to show students how they will be evaluated and what criteria they should address to successfully complete them.

**Mini-Unit Plan**

The teacher candidates cooperatively plan the literature-based mini-unit plan. At the outset of the course, teacher candidates place themselves into Canadian author study groups. Each group member reads a different junior/intermediate level novel written by their selected author and then submits an individual novel rationale defending the use of this novel in their language arts program.

The rationales provide the planning kernels for the group’s unit plan, which may take the form of an author study, an in-depth novel study, a comparative novel study, a thematic study or an integrated unit. Modelling our use of a culminating activity and the backward planning process, teacher candidates begin their collaborative unit planning process.

**Figure 1.** Pre-service instruction linked with unit plan requirements.

**Writing Folio**

Designed to teach the application of the writing process and to familiarize our students with a wide variety of writing forms and genres, our second culminating task is a writing folio. On a weekly basis, we immerse our students in an experiential process through which they explore 12 different kinds of writing forms. For the initial four weeks, we model the process of presenting a writing stimulus after which the students write a draft piece and add it to their writing folio. Once the students are familiar with this on-going process, they assume the responsibility for the remaining eight writing stimuli mini-lessons. Students present these as groups. By the end of the process, students have 12 draft pieces in their writing folios together with a learning log where they add weekly

**Figure 2.** Pre-service instruction linked with writing folio requirements.
When we "begin with the end in mind" (Covey, 1989), we know what understandings and skills we want our students to acquire. Following sound assessment principles, our course design deliberately sets out to address the following criteria of authentic assessment:

* Use of a variety of strategies, in particular "triangulation" (Tompkins, Bright, Pollard, and Winsor, 2004)
* Applied in the context of the course and linked to instruction, and
* Gathered throughout the year (formative).

Other criteria as outlined by Olson (2003) include:

* Clearly stated and task-appropriate elements
* Both process and product specific elements
* Feedback and student input opportunities provided
* Collaborative learning addressed
* Both teaching and learning outcomes oriented

A form of diagnostic assessment takes place during our first two sessions when we conduct a quick student survey or informal inventory of their personal reading and writing practices. These "reading and writing territories" (Atwell, 1998) provide us with a general picture of the range of literary interests and expertise being brought to the classroom. This is a valuable contextual reference. For the students, this diagnostic assessment affirms their various skills in reading and writing and hopefully motivates them to add to their existing repertoires so that they can be more confident junior/Intermediate language teachers.

Our formative assessment scheme includes both individual and group accountability. Seventy percent of the assignments are completed on an individual basis with the remaining thirty percent done collaboratively in a variety of group settings. As Olson (2003) states, "it is desirable to construct one's own understandings in collaboration with others" (p. 322).

A novel/author rationale is completed and assessed individually using a criteria-based checklist/rating scale. Later, when students regroup to use their rationales in creating unit plans, we reinforce group accountability by distributing a contract in which members identify their respective tasks and responsibilities. This is signed by all and submitted with the unit plan culminating task. A writing mini-lesson collaboratively planned and taught is also assessed as a group using a criteria-based marking scheme.

Two comprehensive rubrics assess each of the two culminating tasks. Using the new draft English achievement chart categories (Knowledge/Understanding, Thinking/Inquiry, Communication and Application), the criteria focus on both the process of learning as well as the final product. With a weighted scale, the rubrics demonstrate their flexibility of design and their analytical value. When applied toward assessing the writing folio, the rubric gives extra weight to specific criteria relative to others depending on complexity. Spandel and Stiggins (1997) maintain that the process of analytical scoring can guide students by clearly identifying for them areas where they need to concentrate their efforts while working through a particular writing assignment. This is the very practice that we model with the use of this kind of rubric. The criteria of the writing folio rubric also include the integration of the six traits of quality writing (Spandel, 2005). They are ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions.

Our writing folio is a key example of authentic assessment using a portfolio method. Its contents (12 draft pieces of writing) are developed over time (5 months) and follow the various stages of collect, select, reflect, project, and affect (Hansen, 1998). From these 12 pieces, our students select four (one from each category) that best showcase their writing skills and growth through the folio process.

As part of the reflective stage, our students are required to explore their personal journey through the writing folio process. This reflective exercise captures the dual role they have while working through the writing folio culminating task. Guided through a series of questions, they examine their growth on two levels, that of a writer and that of a prospective teacher of writing in a JI classroom.

Peer conferences conducted three times during the year accompany the writing folio's development. These conferences provide students with specific feedback on selected pieces of writing and also contribute to the reflective component while guiding them in their writing goals for their project step.

At the conclusion of the course, students transform their classroom into a French café complete with clusters of tables draped in red and white checkered tablecloths, candles, empty wine bottles and music for ambience. At the tables, students proudly read
selected pieces in a comfortable, casual setting. There is little doubt that the journey undertaken during the writing folio process encourages some students to continue to write personally and/or professionally. Some rediscover a “lost love of writing” but all are much more confident as future teachers of writing.

Conclusion

Becoming a teacher of literacy is a complex process that develops over many years of classroom practice. To illustrate the magnitude of the whole language arts spectrum, we use an illustration of an iceberg during the introductory session of our course. This graphic metaphor is powerful in representing the learning challenges ahead. The tip of the iceberg, the portion appearing above the waterline is what our pre-service course aims to do – to set our teacher candidates on the right path and to provide them with the basic concepts and skills. However, the far greater part of the iceberg remains submerged; this is what they will yet discover about language arts instruction as lifelong learners in teaching.

By providing a clear direction and purpose for the course, by building in opportunities for exploration and application in a variety of ways, by using strategies that scaffold instruction, we work toward dispelling their initial fears and developing their confidence toward the teaching of language arts. Through an experiential delivery that focuses on both process and product, our teacher candidates discover that “the strategies they use to teach students to learn are also the strategies they use to learn to teach” (Olson, 2003, p.399).

Our modelled and applied learning based upon current pedagogical principles and practices is proving to be successful.

“I am excited about teaching language “ and “I never thought I’d love teaching English so much” are wonderful endorsements that we consistently hear at the conclusion of the course. Though we fine-tune and make minor adjustments as needed each year based on students’ feedback, we know we are on the right track!

References


Giselle Whyte is a retired educator from the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (previously the Hamilton Board of Education) where she taught for 31 years. During her board career, she was a junior teacher, teacher-librarian as well as a program consultant. She has presented many workshops across Ontario on various aspects of the school library program and resource-based learning. She has also taught several continuing education courses for Brock University including overseeing the school librarian-ship courses and has co-authored a series of resources for teachers titled Quick Start Technology (published through Irwin Publishing, Canada). Currently, Giselle is a part-time instructor at Brock University’s Faculty of Education (Hamilton Campus) with pre-service education responsibilities for teaching junior/intermediate language arts and counselling. She is an avid reader and gardener.

Ruth McQuirter Scott is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University. She has authored or co-authored over thirty books in the field of spelling, and conducts workshops on educational publishing.