Chapter 13

Practicing What We Teach: Using SoTL to Challenge Preservice Teachers’ Assumptions With the Reading/Writing Workshop Model

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ABSTRACT

Using the SoTL framework provides students with an accessible, relevant model of professional and critical reflection on practice. Explicit participation in this research can benefit students with scaffolded practice applying reflection to instruction. Guiding students in examining assumptions around literacy supports meaningful integration of these skills in instructional design. This transformation of students’ frames of reference requires meaningful reflection and a challenge to their current beliefs about disciplinary literacy. This study uses Reading/Writing Workshop format to individualize instruction, engage students in self-directed learning, and facilitate differentiation and formative assessment. This redesigned course used experiential learning and a social constructivist model to build collaboration and real-world communication skills. Transformation is supported through structured reflection. Thus, a data collection instrument was adapted from Brookfield’s Critical Incident Questionnaire to guide students with specific, practiced, and meaningful reflection.

INTRODUCTION

There is an established significant need for literacy education instruction for preservice teachers in the United States, especially for those preparing to serve students in the middle grades across all content areas. As noted by Fang and Wei (2010), “adolescents need support when interacting with the dense,
complex texts in secondary content areas” (p. 262). Graham, Kerkoff, and Spires (2017) similarly advocate all teachers to support students’ reading and writing within the structures of their disciplines. These academic demands are prominent in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that have been adopted across the majority of states within the United States of America (US) in which “students are expected to develop and demonstrate the sophisticated and distinct skills applied by real historians and scientists” (Duhaylongsod, Snow, Selman, & Donovan, 2015, p. 588). Solis, Miciak, Vaughn, and Fletcher (2014) similarly note that for low-level adolescent readers, focused instruction using content area texts to build prior knowledge should be implemented in both middle and high school.

Teachers whose undergraduate education has prepared them to teach social studies, science, math, or English/language arts (ELA) have a great deal of knowledge they can share with students about how to make sense of and use information from the various sources prevalent in their subject areas (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012). Unfortunately, our observations echo these findings as we have seen that many of our preservice teachers majoring in math, science, and social studies content areas lack awareness of this existent knowledge, skill to effectively communicate these strategies to their future students, and confidence in their own identities as readers and writers. Schoenbach et al. (2012) note this as a national problem with almost half of first year students underprepared for college-level literacy tasks. Duhaylongsod et al. (2015) reinforce this in their work with social studies teachers and their students, finding “many students do not have access to teachers with the deep understanding that facilitates the successful implementation of disciplinary literacy curricula in history” (p. 589).

In Missouri, teacher preparation programs require eight credit hours of introduction to literacy coursework for all preservice middle grades teachers, regardless of content area specialization. Determining the most effective way to prepare these teachers to serve middle-grade learners in their future classrooms is the focus of this action research. As professors of literacy education, we sought to reconfigure a required course to activate students’ existent disciplinary literacy knowledge as they plan lessons in an interdisciplinary team to integrate literacy strategies within their content area and develop both competence and confidence as readers and writers. To do this, we used the reading and writing workshop framework, discussions around disciplinary literacy professional development texts, and a New Literacy Studies conception of the threshold concept of literacy.

For our purposes, literacy is the socially and culturally situated interaction or transaction (Rosenblatt, 1960) between the reader and the text. Texts include traditional forms of novels and textbooks as well as discipline-specific formats, the arts, numeracy, digital literacies, and speaking, listening and viewing. This broad definition of literacy and texts builds on the work of Gee (2001), Street (2005) and others, and is distinctly different from the limited idea of “English class” that most of our students bring with them. Challenging these assumptions within our class is a key element of the course design, and one of our overarching goals is to refine students’ understanding of the threshold concept of literacy, defined by Meyer and Land (2005) as “a conceptual gateway” that may lead to “a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view” (p. 373).

Using a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) framework of ongoing, systematic examination of practice with feedback and refinement, this study spans three semesters of instruction, transitioning a traditional literacy education course into a reading/writing workshop format similar to that used in the local schools. In keeping with the work of Felten (2013), to further the advancement of good practices in the classroom, we have incorporated the elements of design suggested to implement SoTL in our classroom. As such, this inquiry was focused on student learning, grounded in context, methodologically sound, and conducted in partnership with students; details on each of these elements is included in the