



Creating Teachers and Models of Reading and Writing

By Samuel J. Ayers

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Abstract: There is value in being a lifelong reader and writer; yet, preservice teachers frequently do not exhibit these attributes. As an educator of future teachers, the author of this article reflects on practice. One goal in working with these education students is to develop their competencies in the use of literary strategies, with a secondary goal of encouraging the students' reading and writing beyond academic requirements. The author reflects on specific classroom activities and discussions which address the sharing of reading selections, the discussion of books and related films, the building of classroom libraries, and finally, the reciting and writing poetry. These specific practices are intended to promote voluntary reading and writing in preservice teachers so they will, in turn, promote reading and writing among their own students.

Keywords: reading choices, classroom libraries, bio poems, poetry

When I think about doing my part to prepare preservice teachers and at the same time create models of reading and writing, I humorously conjure images of Frankenstein's lab or even Young Frankenstein's lab. Lab coats, a few assistants, lab equipment and gadgets, a little lightning and thunder for effect, a few sparks, a preservice teacher on a platform raised to the rooftop opening of the lab and lowered again. A reader! A writer! For Life! For Life! If only it were this easy.

One of the courses I teach in the LCU School of Education is designed for our middle school and secondary education majors. EDS4340 Reading, Writing and Thinking in Secondary and Middle School is not intended for just our preservice English teachers; rather, it is intended for all our preservice teachers in all four core content areas: English, science, social studies, and math. The primary goal for this course is the acquisition of a variety of literacy strategies that can be effective for introducing lessons or reinforcing the learning across content areas. Students then use these strategies in the two-week units they plan in consultation with a middle school teacher and then present in middle school classrooms at the end of the semester. A secondary goal is to engage all these preservice education students in discussions and learning activities that will foster and encourage their own desire to read and write beyond academic assignments.

In *The Book Whisperer*, Donalyn Miller (2009) states, “By allowing students to pass through our classrooms without learning to love reading, we are creating adults (who then become parents and teachers) who don’t read much” (p. 107). I read these words for the first time in 2013 and realized that I wanted my university students to take a stance where they choose to read. My preservice teachers are just one semester away from clinical teaching, and very few choose to read or write beyond what is required for their courses. Even if they generally enjoy reading and writing (most do not), they rationalize that they are just too busy with required reading and writing assignments for their college courses. Many have other obligations such as family or part-time off-campus jobs. Still, I strive to plant explicit and subliminal messages about the importance of each of them engaging in reading and writing outside of their academic lives.

Literacy Activities

Among the strategies I employ with my preservice teachers, there are a few I repeat each semester to encourage my students to reflect as they read and write.

What I Am Reading

In class, we have a textbook discussion centered around Daniels and Zemelman’s (2014) argument for a “balanced diet of reading” and their overview of Donalyn Miller’s “Forty books a year” (p. 66). As a part of this discussion, I talk about my own journey from choosing to be a non-reader to reading for academic purposes only to becoming an enthusiastic reader. I share a list of authors I enjoy (S. C. Gwynne, Kristin Hannah) and the books I have read during the year, as well as the books I am currently reading, usually three different titles depending on my reading mood. I share some unexpectedly enjoyable reads (*My Southern Journey* by Rick Bragg) and some of my favorite reads from the past few years, representing a variety of genres (*The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown, *Prayers for Sale* by Sandra Dallas) and books I have recently read that could be of interest to middle schoolers (*Esperanza Rising* by Pam Munoz Ryan and *Ghost* by Jason Reynolds). Pesek (2019) states, “If we want our students to be lifelong readers and writers, we need to show them that we are lifelong readers and writers. We have so much power and influence as teachers” (p.12). At the end of this class session, the students share topics they are interested in learning more about and literary titles they are interested in reading. My hopes are that a title or an author that I mention will entice at least one of my students to pick a book to read for enjoyment or information on his or her own.

Books Made Into Movies

I learned about Mary Shelley’s (1818) writing of her Gothic novel while I was in high school, and I finally read *Frankenstein* last fall. It was nothing like any of the movies I had seen over the years. Although this is not my preferred genre, it felt satisfying to finally read the original story and be in a position to know the difference between Mary Shelley’s original creation and Hollywood’s many recreations. This led to the practice of sharing a movie trailer during the last few minutes of selected classes. I share a movie trailer (*Tuck Everlasting*, *The Book Thief*, *Freak the Mighty*, *Holes*, *Spare Parts*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *Frankenstein*) and provide a brief comparison of my perceptions between the movies and books, as well as why I judged the books as usually better than the film versions. Of course, I encourage my students to read the books and then consider watching the

movie. I also introduce a few films involving reading or writing that went from life to screenplay with no book in between. I share background information about the author and screenplays as a form of writing for films such as *Mr. Church* (Nelson, Buelow, & Beresford, 2016) and *McFarland USA* (Gray, Ciardi, & Caro, 2015). These short classroom experiences often end with a reflective writing and brief sharing of initial responses to the stories and how they may relate to our class.

Classroom Libraries

From the textbook *Subjects Matter*, we read and discuss Daniels and Zemelman (2014) extolling the importance of classroom libraries across the content areas. We discuss their “KEY ingredients of a classroom library” (p. 80) and possible book categories and authors to include in their own classroom libraries to be utilized by their students. We discuss inexpensive ways to build classroom libraries (garage sales, Scholastic Book Fair, birthday lists to parents and family, Amazon wish list and Donors Choose). During school visits to observe clinical teachers and principal practicum candidates, I have observed middle school classrooms where individual teachers across content areas (English, math, science and social studies) have created personal collections of libraries for their students to access. These include books of interest to students in specific grade levels, books and magazines related to their content areas, and some of the teachers’ favorite titles. The materials are for use in the classroom and sometimes for students to borrow, read and return. I show my students photos of these classroom libraries taken in secondary classrooms from our community in order to emphasize that this is not just a suggestion from a textbook but is actually being implemented in our area middle schools.

Bio Poems

Not all classroom or personal writing must be in the form of an essay or formal research paper. Consequently, I introduce bio poems as a formula poem that describes someone in eleven lines. I provide my students with examples written by my former university students about people who made contributions in their content areas and people the students personally admired. I share my own bio poems about family members and book characters who impressed me. I have my students submit two original bio poems (a person from their content area and either a family member or personal role model). This assignment serves to have my students write about a topic they care about and can potentially use with their own students as they summarize literary characters, people from history or individuals who have made significant contributions in specific content areas.

My practice reflects the idea that it is much more powerful to engage students in learning activities that reinforce what I want them to actually do in their own classrooms rather than to simply hear a lecture or read an article or portion of a textbook espousing ideas for teaching and learning. Pesek (2019) states that, if we want “students to be genuine readers and writers, we need to read and write consistently. After all, what we do with our class time shows students what we value” (p. 11). Although Pesek refers to influencing her middle school students, I incorporate each of these activities to explicitly reinforce the importance of reading and writing with my university students who will soon be teaching middle school students.



Poetry Reading Invitation and Minilesson

This semester, a colleague requested some professors invite our students to sign up for a live poetry reading event in our campus Starbucks, which is connected to our library. Jana Anderson (personal communication, 2019) stated in her invitation: “This is a busy time of year—our students are swirling in many different directions. We hope to use this event to pause and to take a moment to reflect on our lives and the power of words.” I shared her complete email with my students, and I verbally referenced the invitation in class, but I felt compelled to do more.

I adjusted my schedule for the next class and included a minilesson to introduce the students to Paul Laurence Dunbar, an American poet, playwright and novelist of the late 1800s and early 1900s. After providing visual images and background information on his early life and writings, we watched the *Glory* (Fields & Zwick, 1989) movie trailer. Using a Power Point presentation with historical images, I provided a brief overview of the real Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and talked about Matthew Broderick’s portrayal of the man. Then I read aloud *Robert Gould Shaw* by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1900, 1993). I showed them a historical photograph of Black Union troops from the Civil War and again referenced the movie trailer. Then I read aloud the first four stanzas of *The Colored Soldiers* by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1895, 1993). I informed my students that there were still six more stanzas to this poem and encouraged them to look up the poem and read the remaining inspiring stanzas. I then shared with my students that many of Dunbar’s most famous poems were those written in Black dialect. I read *A Negro Love Song* by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1895, 1993) and they chorally repeated the lines “Jump back, honey, jump back.” They enjoyed this and requested a second reading.

I completed the mini lesson with a little local history. I shared the story of the hiring of the first Black school teachers in Lubbock (1920-1922), the establishment of the first schools for Black students in Lubbock and how the name Paul Laurence Dunbar was chosen by those early Black educators as the name for the east Lubbock school that served our Black students before and after the days of segregation. I left them with an open invitation to explore the world of poetry and consider reading a poem at our poetry event.

Student Feedback

With both large and small goals, it is important to recognize incremental growth. Miller (2009) states, “It is important to celebrate milestones with students and focus on their reading successes, not their failure to meet requirements, which only serves to discourage students” (p.83). While no students from this call chose to be live poetry readers at the event, I did receive some gratifying feedback worthy of celebration. A few weeks later, some students, majoring in math and social studies, shared with me that they had read the remaining six stanzas from Dunbar’s poem. Regina Cummings (personal communication, 2019) commented, “I know my content area is math, but I would still like to introduce minilessons like this [about Paul Laurence Dunbar] in my class.”

At the end of the semester, I received some additional feedback, via exit tickets, about the students’ personal reading progress. One wrote, “I thought the information you shared was significant because it taught me something that I didn’t know.” A math student shared, “I am listening to *The Book Thief* on audiobook because of your minilessons. If I can get some of my students to do the same, it will just further enrich their education and their lives.” A science



student stated, “I am writing more details in my journaling instead of just what happened during the day. I started actually reflecting on emotions and thoughts.” Another math student wrote, “I have started buying a few books for my classroom library. I am so excited about having my own library. If not for this class, I would never have considered it.” Two students reported listening to PDFs on iBooks and another has opened an account with Audible to listen to books while commuting to and from school. It is truly gratifying when students take the time to share with us how our teaching has affected them.

Conclusion

Miller (2009) states, “Reading changes your life. Reading unlocks worlds unknown or forgotten, taking travelers around the world and through time. Reading helps you escape the confines of school and pursue your own education” (p. 18). My university students know how to read and how to write, but many have placed reading in a proverbial box. I want to remind them that their reading skills are waiting to be used and it is crucial for them to apply their reflective reading skills while they are teaching in classrooms and serving as role models for their own students. Even though my primary goal is providing my preservice teachers with instructional strategies that they can effectively utilize in their lessons with middle school students, I still want to nurture their often-latent interests in reading and writing and to model being lifelong learners. Some might suggest that our highest motivation as teachers should be cultivating a love for reading and writing. A public school colleague, Shelly Reid (personal communication, 2019) advises, “While we can certainly attempt to cultivate that love, our highest goal should be to create capable, on-level readers and writers.” I will continue equipping my university students with instructional strategies they can effectively use in their classrooms to enhance learning, and I will continue to incorporate strategies to promote an appreciation for reading and writing in these young adults who will soon be teaching middle school students.

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