

## SUPPORTING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' DEVELOPMENT AS WRITERS AND WRITING TEACHERS

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### Introduction

"I always wanted to write my own story but I never got down to it. This course gave me the opportunity to craft my own fantasy story with creativity. I realised that there was so much more to writing than I thought. In the future, I hope that my students will be inspired to write their own stories and that they will be able to derive as much joy as I felt when I finished my story." (Janice).

This paper explores how a course that was primarily intended to foster the participants' own language skills, allowed them to experience a process approach to writing that helped them develop as writers and deepened their understanding of being writing teachers.

The notion that writing teachers need to have a good understanding of the theoretical frameworks influencing writing pedagogy (Gebhardt 1977) and be writers themselves (Hairston 1982; Graves 1983) is not new. In fact, the National Writing Project (NWP) in the United States was inspired by precisely this belief. The NWP consists of a five-week intensive summer writing programme for in-service teachers that has been offered for the past 40 years and that many teachers have repeatedly proclaimed to be life-changing (Whitney 2008). Given the project's reportedly positive impact on teachers and its long-standing role in supporting writing teachers in particular, it would seem worthwhile to set aside time during a teacher training programme for pre-service teachers to provide them too with an opportunity to hone their own writing skills.

According to Whitney (2008: 178), not only does a specially tailored programme 'increase confidence and empower teachers to argue and defend their own professional judgements', it also enables pre-service teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practice as well as address any preconceived notions they may have about learning to write based on prior experience. Given that teachers' beliefs and experiences affect their actual teaching practices (Street, 2003; Norman & Spencer, 2005) and determine what they value in writing instruction, it is important that writing teachers' beliefs be positively shaped by providing an avenue for them to experience various writing approaches as adults.

Furthermore, teachers who write and create their own stories should be better able to support their students with their own writing as well as help them 'make abstract or conceptual content more understandable' (Robin 2008: 222). The expectation is that teachers who are themselves practising writers, albeit within the limited scope of a course, will be better prepared to empower children to go beyond the declarative and procedural dimensions of texts and to develop a sense of perceiving themselves as writers (Packwood & Messenheimer 2003). Interestingly, while writing teachers clearly play a role in helping students develop the texts they need to write, they themselves rarely engage in writing the same kinds of texts. This is a gap the National Writing Project in the USA addresses by providing an opportunity for teachers to attend a programme that focuses on how to 'write and reflect with other teachers [to] help create an ongoing social network of teachers' (Lieberman & Wood 2002: 40).

Unfortunately, such a course is generally not offered to pre-service teachers who are often expected to learn the basics of writing pedagogy as part of in their teacher training programme rather than how to develop their own writing skills. Socialisation into writing, as Prior (1998) suggests is dependent on the writers themselves and the activities in which they engage in the writing classroom rather than on rules and norms. An opportunity to be writers could therefore help pre-service teachers into writing practices they would want their students to emulate and increase their confidence as writers. As a result, these newly-confident pre-service teachers would be better able to foster in them the passion for writing that they themselves acquire on such a course (Street 2003).

Bearing these factors in mind, this study followed a group of pre-service teachers enrolled in a mandatory two-week intensive course at a teacher training college in Singapore. The course consists of 45 hours of instruction and practice. As part of the coursework the participants wrote one text collaboratively and another individually. The research questions below guided the data collection and analysis:

1. What experience of and beliefs about writing did pre-service teachers bring to the course?
2. Did they develop as writers during the course? If so, how?
3. Did the course help them develop as writing teachers? If so, in what ways?

### **A Two-Week Intensive Course where Writing Teachers become Writers**

The course introduces the participants to a comprehensive process approach to writing which stresses the importance of scaffolding the writing process and moving learners from the generation of ideas to the finished product (Tribble 1996). The approach assumes that writing and producing a text do not take place in isolation but with the support of both peers and the writing instructor. Writers begin this collaborative process by brainstorming ideas together with their instructor, who plays the role of facilitator. They then plan and draft their text individually based on what they discussed. A few drafts are then shared with the class, and students learn from giving and receiving feedback. They then incorporate the feedback they receive on their individual drafts into the final product.

Appreciating the different stages in the process (planning, drafting, editing and revising) and, in particular, being able to give and receive feedback is essential for these course participants' future roles as writing teachers since they are encouraged to move beyond the traditional approach of 'viewing writing as an academic and basically solitary ability' (Boscolo 2007: 290) and to view it instead as a collaborative and recursive activity. Through reflection at each stage of the process, the participants are encouraged to relate what they learn as writers to the development of their future students as they in turn learn to write.

### **Methodology**

The course is taken by pre-service primary school teachers at a teacher training establishment in Singapore.

Participants: The 61 participants in this study were drawn from an intact cohort of pre-service teachers and comprising 14 males and 47 females. Only after the course had ended and the pre-service teachers had been given their results were they told about the research project and asked to allow the researchers to use their reflections for this study. Of the 66 students in the cohort, 61 gave their consent in writing. Pseudonyms are used for all citations included in this study.

Data sources: The data were generated as an integral part of the course. They were drawn from a pre-course reflective task in which the participants were asked to reflect on their prior experience and exposure to process writing, and reflections on their learning at various stages during the course. Following their school attachment after the course, they were asked in a final reflection to highlight the main items from the course they hoped to use in their subsequent teaching. Reflections were chosen as a mode of data collection as they have the potential to broaden and deepen teachers' professional development (Korthagen 2001).

Data analysis: As the researchers were the instructors for the course, they were concerned that their 'previous thinking about extant theory, professional knowledge and experience, and lay experience and knowledge' (Birks & Mills 2011: 93) would influence the way in which the data were collected and analysed. Steps were therefore taken in order to reduce individual bias.

First, sample reflections comprising 10% of the data were analysed by the two researchers who worked independently on different component in order to identify core categories. These were established by reading the reflections several times to identify key themes in the data. Phrases, such as 'collaboration', 'plot development', etc. were used as codes 'to make the preliminary codes authentic' (Dörnyei 2007: 251). Explanations of the codes were written up along with examples and detailed descriptions. Each researcher then coded the other's components using the draft coding scheme. All discrepancies in initial coding were discussed until a shared understanding was reached as to key themes and suitable descriptions for the codes. The codes that emerged clustered into the three main categories: lived experience, approaches and application.

A second round of practice coding using further data was then undertaken to establish inter-rater reliability. The inter-rater correlation when coding the data drawn from the pre-course and during-course reflections was high (82%). For the post-practicum reflections it was somewhat lower, so the researchers selected only themes and items they agreed upon for this study.

Final descriptions of the predominant themes were then written up (see Table 1 for a sample relating to the participants' development as writers).

Theme	Code	Explanation
Lived experience	Experiential knowledge	The pre-service teacher refers to drawing on own experience and prior knowledge of the situation in crafting the story.
Approaches	Collaboration	The pre-service teacher refers to working or learning to work with others.
	Feedback	The pre-service teacher discusses feedback from instructors or peers or decisions the pre-service teacher made about revisions in the process of writing a story.
Application	Audience Awareness	The pre-service teacher makes explicit reference to the audience and seems to be writing with the reader in mind.
	Language Proficiency	The pre-service teacher refers to gaining language proficiency (grammar or vocabulary) as a result of completing the course or of writing a story. In some instances, this could simply be a reference to a lack of language proficiency or to how the pre-service teacher used language effectively in the writing.
	Plot Development	The pre-service teacher refers to how the story, plot, or characters were developed as a result of the course.

**Table 1:** Sample Codes and Criteria for Establishing Codes (Developing as Writers)

Subsequently, the coding scheme was applied to all the data. Only the elements that focused on the respondents' beliefs about and experience of process writing prior to the course or to their development as writers and writing teachers during the course are analysed in this paper.

**Findings**

This section outlines the scope of the study and analyses the three key stages in the participants' development as writers and writing teachers. Firstly, it outlines their prior experience with process approaches to writing. Secondly, it explores what they learnt and experienced during the course, and finally it analyses insights from their first experience of writing classrooms where they were observers and sometimes co-teachers.

**Pre-service Teachers' Prior Experience and Beliefs: What did they bring to the Course?**

To enable the researchers to establish a baseline understanding of the course participants' experiences and beliefs, they were asked to identify and reflect on their previous exposure to process writing.

The reflection questions first asked them to consider any in-school experience of process writing, including all prior experience in educational institutions as well as during teacher training. A further major category, that of contract teaching, emerged from the data. Contract teaching is a period of time spent in school as an untrained teacher undertaken by some (though not all) students. The lived experiences (Creswell 2013) of the participants over three phases are

discussed in chronological order: school, contract teaching, and teacher training courses.

*School Experience:* Although the research question directed the participants to consider their school experience, interestingly, only about half of them chose to write about school. There are two possible explanations for this. This first is that many simply could not remember what they did in school, or, as some commented, what they had done in school did not match their understanding of process writing. 'I am not too sure if what I went through in my secondary school was considered process writing', commented Helen, who then described having to 'write and rewrite over and over again a given essay until it met her teacher's expectations'. For those who felt that they had experienced some form of process writing in school at different grade levels, some recalled doing so in primary school, some in secondary school, and others during initial tertiary education, while a few felt that it was a consistent component of their entire schooling. Irrespective of grade level, the predominant stage in process writing they recalled was pre-writing, though they also mentioned planning and brainstorming and sometimes language input. Some wrote about revising their work, primarily with the focus on form. Generally, any revision seems to have been carried out individually. There were a few mentions of peer feedback, one by a Chinese national who joined the Singapore educational system and needed a great deal of support, and two at higher levels, when 'occasionally in [higher grades], the teacher would let us exchange written texts for peer editing and evaluation about the storyline or for help with correcting grammatical errors when there was enough time' (Shima).

Overall, the participants appear to have had (or at least to remember having had) a rather limited experience of process approaches.

*Contract Teaching Experience:* Contract teaching is a period of teaching as an untrained teacher that some prospective trainees undertake prior to their courses at the institution. Contract teaching was a rich source of exposure for those who talked about their experience during this period (about 20% of the respondents). They learned through both observation and co-teaching. As Mabel commented, 'through parallel teaching in my contract school, I was able to observe how my mentor carried out process writing'. Others experienced the approach in a limited way through their own experimentation. However, one respondent commented that despite this exposure, 'it was only through [the tertiary institution] that I came to understand the purpose and meaning behind each approach and the proper steps to take for each stage of writing' (Kartini). This is a good illustration of how multiple sources of input can come together in an individual's development.

*Teacher-training Experience:* When they talked about exposure to process writing during their first year of training, the respondents primarily referred to two courses. The first is a course in teaching reading and writing (TRW), and the second a course in academic and professional writing skills (APWS). Of the 61 respondents, only seven failed to mention either or both these courses. The course predominantly mentioned was the TRW course. This course includes an introduction to process writing based on Tompkins' (2010) work and has the participants write a lesson plan, including all the stages of process writing, as component of the assessment. Although the course aims to provide the pre-service teachers with an understanding of the process approach, it does not give them immediate experience of it.

The APWL course integrates the application of some elements of the process approach. The respondents noted that in addition to planning and drafting, there was also a focus on structure, noting, as Zenath did, that 'I was taught how to analyse different forms of writing, the flaws in the writing, and what could be done to improve the writing'.

*Perceptions about Process Writing:* A second set of questions asked about the respondents' perceptions of process writing. In the main, prior to the course, the respondents felt that the process approach was beneficial either to themselves as writers, with Siva commenting that 'most of my essays and letters are more readable thanks to the

skills I learned from process writing', or as teachers, with Cassie considering that 'peer-editing ... gives the teacher a good guide to the students' understanding of grammar and vocabulary', or to their students as 'this step-by-step process enables teachers and students to be focused and to generate ideas for their writing' (Cassie). Given that quite a number of respondents referred to the TRW course as the main source of exposure to process writing, it is probable that for some at least, the positive attributes of the approach reflect an anticipation of benefits their own instructors may have pointed out to them rather than their own experience. The most frequently cited benefits were being able to focus on content before form, resulting in a step-by-step approach that made writing more manageable and giving students more ownership of their writing as well as a better, more organised product.

However, 30% of respondents had concerns about the process approach, mostly counterbalancing the positives they also noted. There were two main issues. The approach was seen as 'daunting, tedious, and time-consuming', especially since, in Lee's words, 'in our current situation, where teachers are required to cover a standard syllabus, time is a significant factor, which prevents teachers from fully engaging in all the stages of the process'. In Singapore English, the term 'tedious' is closer in meaning to 'time-consuming' than in British or American English. Here, the pre-service teacher is probably saying the same thing twice for emphasis.

The second main issue was that some respondents felt that the approach was restrictive as its lockstep nature 'can severely limit the creative potential of students, who may see topics from a different perspective' (Matthew). However, this final point was clearly controversial since approximately the same number of respondents noted as a positive the fact that process writing 'gives us the freedom ... [to] be creative' (Cassandra).

This section has outlined the main experiential and affective nature of the prior experience the pre-service teachers brought to the course. The next two sections analyse the impact of the course on their development as writers and writing teachers.

#### **How did the Participants Develop as Writers on the Course?**

To study how the participants developed as writers, they were asked to reflect on each stage of the course and on their own development. Specifically, they were asked to reflect on what

they had learnt about improving their language skills as well as their writing skills in terms of plot development and effective narration and how their own awareness of writing for an audience had increased.

Many of the points they made about language skills related specifically to word choice aimed at achieving the target impact as well as accurate use of language, both to create a professional impression and to act as a model for their students. Beyond this, they focused on being inspired to write by drawing on their own experiences and prior knowledge, on how they developed as writers by becoming more aware of their audience as they created characters and plots that were engaging, and on developing effective writing strategies when learning to write collaboratively in groups, revising the language in their texts based on their peers' feedback.

The comments fell into three broad categories:

- a) how some of the respondents learned to draw on their own *lived experience* to write digital stories;
- b) *approaches* to process writing or writing in general; and
- c) *application* of the experience in terms of developing their own writing skills (See also Table 1).

*Lived experience*: A theme that was recurrent in their reflections was how many of them drew on their lived experience to write their stories. As Jancy put it, 'I also found it easier for me to write a story based on personal experience as the words seemed to flow more naturally'. The lived experience the participants drew upon enabled them to craft better plots and stories. This was a feature many of them reported to have been missing from their previous writing experiences as students:

"I feel that many students, even myself, still struggle with writing most of the times because there isn't enough experiential content to write on. This could be because the writing experiences that are usually done in school are usually fixed around a particular theme and [students are] not given much of a choice...If everyone is given the freedom to write on any personal experience, they would probably be able to write very well, because the story they will be writing is going to be very personal and special." (Dorothy)

While this conclusion is hardly surprising since many successful writers have often commented on drawing on their own life experiences and observations of the world in crafting their stories, it was not something the researchers had expected to be so predominant in the data. Rather, going through a typical process writing experience was expected to be perceived as the most essential component of the course.

*Approaches*: As noted above, the researchers expected the participants to comment primarily on the different stages in process writing, i.e., generating ideas, collaborative writing, drafting, editing based on feedback, and revising, because this was the first time they had gone through the process as experts equipped with pedagogical knowledge about teaching writing and the meta-language needed to describe the stages in the process.

This expectation was fulfilled but with regard to very specific approaches. Although the pre-service teachers had experienced some aspects of process writing as students in school, seen it in other classrooms, and studied it during teacher training, all references to approaches in the reflections focused on collaboration and feedback. Indeed, there were no references to the pre-writing stage that had dominated the reflections prior to the course.

Given that the participants rarely reported peer feedback, collaborative writing, or revising texts as a group as part of their school experience, it is likely that they were experiencing such an approach for the first time as writers or became conscious of its benefits to writers only during the course. This is an important realisation as shared reading and writing dominate primary school writing pedagogy in Singapore, and appreciating their benefits would seem vital to future teachers.

As Yvonne commented, 'pair or group work could help students to check one another's work and build up their friendships at the same time'. In addition, working with peers also helped the participants address language-related issues in their writing rather than relying on their own, sometimes limited, skills when revising independently, as they reported having done in their previous writing experiences.

By reviewing each other's stories, the course participants were able to make the transition from writing primarily for themselves to writing for an audience. Their peers' feedback helped to strengthen their writing and made them conscious of the gaps. Having an audience enabled them to edit their story for greater clarity for the reader, 'from the feedback given, I have improved my writing by proofreading it and ensuring that the grammar is accurate so that the audience will be able to read the story without interruptions' (Sana). Furthermore, by reviewing their peers' writing, the reviewers themselves said they 'benefited from reading [my] peers' stories and being exposed to different writing styles and ideas' (Shyama).

The study also showed how such courses have the potential to foster pre-service teachers to

become confident writers who embrace writing in a positive light, as in the case of Victoria, who found that:

"The help given by my group mates really gave me a lot of encouragement and support in what I need to put into my story... As a participant of this course, my perspective of it changed entirely and I begin to like reading and writing more."

*Application.* The findings revealed that these pre-service teachers most frequently (70% of the time) commented on application, that is, how they applied the skills they learned in order to develop as writers who are conscious of the effectiveness of the texts they are crafting. One of the reflection questions encouraged them to focus on how their stories would be received by their target audience, and they talked about this issue and its implications for both plot development and language.

Their reflections revealed that they developed their writing skills by using language to shape the way the story would be perceived by their target audience. For example, Matthew's reflections show that he chose to develop soliloquies or dialogues as a way of getting his audience engaged rather than by using descriptive language to explicitly present the characters and situations: 'I like to delve into the thoughts of my character as it allows me to flesh out their personality without having to actually tell the reader what they are like'.

Others displayed a desire to reach out to their audience by developing a plot the audience would be able to relate to easily so that 'the story will then be able to evoke emotions from the readers based on their own experiences' (Victor). Thus, some participants 'crafted [the] stories from a personal experience so that readers will be able to relate to it' (Pedro), while others 'included a learning takeaway in the story, thus making the story more impactful and meaningful to the reader' (Cale).

This sense of audience and the choices a writer makes to reach out to and engage an audience was the strongest theme in the data. These stories, unlike most other pieces of academic writing, were creative pieces crafted with the benefit of multiple feedback cycles and in the knowledge that they could be shared with target audiences and used in any way they wished. This made the pool of potential audiences for the stories much wider than for most of their writing. This sense of audience was also encouraged as part of the feedback given to peers and in the reflections.

A developing awareness of a target audience also gave rise to new considerations not previously consciously part of the writing process. As Callum

pointed out, 'the use of vocabulary is also challenging to me as I was afraid that the vocabulary I used may be too easy or difficult for the intended audience'. Not only did the participants reflect on the need for accurate language use, but as illustrated here, they had to make language choices with their audience in mind: 'As I proceeded on with the development of the storyline, I had to keep in mind the choice of words used and if it was suitable for the intended audience' (Ralph).

The course provided these pre-service teachers with an opportunity to develop a text and to experience process writing as writers. The experience raised their consciousness about the need to address an audience that does not consist exclusively of the instructor and to bridge the gaps in their prior writing experience. Like the National Writing Project, the course increased these teachers' confidence in the efficacy of the writing pedagogy they were going to employ in their classrooms and at the same time increased their confidence in themselves as writers as they crafted stories from their own experience with specific readers in mind.

#### ***How did the Course Impact their Participants' Development as Writing Teachers?***

At the end of the course, the participants were attached to a school for a five-week teaching assistantship, during which they primarily observed experienced teachers. In addition, many of them were asked to conduct a few lessons under the guidance of their mentor.

The participants drew on their experience of learning to write stories when discussing their roles as writing teachers. Their reflections on the writing lessons they observed during their attachment and their comments on what they would have done differently indicated that many of them were able to draw on their own experience as writers on the course when discussing how they would teach writing. For instance, Patrick commented that he would have incorporated peer reviews for his writing classes based on how helpful this had been for him:

"During the course, my group mates' feedback to me was very useful in helping me improve my work and pick out the mistakes I had missed out... So instead of collecting the students' work to mark after the exercise, the teacher should schedule another session for the students to read one another's work and give constructive feedback to one another. This will help improve their language accuracy and expose them to more ideas and writing styles from their friends."

Another key feature that was evident after the teaching assignment was how the experience of being in their students' shoes that made them realise the need to adopt multiple approaches to teaching writing in order to reach out to different types of learners. As Benedict commented,

"As a kinaesthetic learner, experiencing the process approach allowed me to understand what it is about. I was also able to experience the benefits of the process approach and understand its strengths and weaknesses better. I feel that I am able to apply this approach in my teaching as I have a better understanding of the process approach and some of its practices."

The course also resulted in some participants becoming acutely aware of some of the writing strategies they would *not* employ in their classrooms. After watching a writing class that primarily involved drilling phrases and using adjectives in sample sentences, Abraham commented:

"If I were teaching that class, I would certainly change the methods of teaching writing. I strongly feel that writing should NEVER be drilled. Creative writing should be ... [taught] among the students since young. I would have done more story-building activities before the actual writing. Maybe a drama skit or even a comic strip. I feel these can allow students to picture a story better."

However, despite these very positive indications, a main limitation of this study is that, because the respondents had not yet completed their training programme, it was not possible to assess how their understanding of the approaches used on the course along with input from other courses they had taken or would take actually translated into sustained classroom performance. A follow-up study of selected respondents is recommended in order to address this issue.

## Conclusion

The key feature this study teased out was the importance for writing teachers to be engaged actively in writing themselves in order to broaden and deepen their knowledge of writing pedagogies. Often, learning about pedagogies theoretically is insufficient. Rather, it is through experiencing the processes that writing teachers come to truly understand what writing entails. This is particularly true since, as students, they may have been exposed to only partial versions of process writing. Experiencing and analysing the full process as pre-service teachers thus enables them to appreciate this process and to become better writing teachers who understand the complexity of the writing process, enabling them in turn to reflect on their own teaching practices in order to support their

students in the classroom. This study thus suggests that courses that aim to develop writing skills of future teachers have an important place in teacher education.

## IRB Clearance

The NTU Institutional Review Board has endorsed the ethics application for this study (IRB-2013-04-003), which was supported by a Start-Up Grant from the Office of Education Research through the English Language and Literature Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, under Grant SUG 7/13 LMH.

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