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Description

This article presents the narrative of three teachers and one teacher educator who became acquainted during their experience in an Invitational Summer Institute. They maintained their writing community as the three teachers began graduate studies. They examined their experiences with creative writing in the ISI and writing to learn in a graduate class. They grew in their inquiry and professional writing experience.

Disciplines

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Narrative Analysis, Creativity, and Professional Development: Critical Pedagogy of Becoming Writers, Teachers, and Researchers

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Abstract

This article presents the narrative of three teachers and one teacher educator who became acquainted during their experience in an Invitational Summer Institute. They maintained their writing community as the three teachers began graduate studies. They examined their experiences with creative writing in the ISI and writing to learn in a graduate class. They grew in their inquiry and professional writing experience.

Introduction: Four Voices of Experience

Read. Write. Model. Get Naked. Share. Respond. Learn. Read. Write. Model. . . . These simply stated and simply written statements encapsulate the knowledge gained from my participation in the Writing Project summer institute 2002.

—Krista Jauregui, Ninth Grade English Teacher

As I entered the Writing Project summer institute, my heart and mind were not at ease. Here I came, not as a writing teacher or even a certified language arts instructor, but as a learning disability teacher who only taught English in collaboration with persons with English degrees.

—Lindsay Wolf, High School Special Education Teacher

Little did I know the Writing Project summer institute was to be the beginning of my journey into many more educational and professional endeavors throughout the next year. I was persuaded by a teaching friend to give it a try. I had recently switched schools and teaching

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roles, which placed me in the role of a writing teacher rather than a language arts teacher. I had never really thought of myself as a writer, but I wanted to develop my writing skills for my students' sake.

—Heather Alexander, Sixth Grade Writing Teacher

If anyone ever asks me what the summer institute meant to me, I may say, "It's about teaching and writing in collaboration with other teachers and writers."

—Glenda Moss, Associate Professor of Secondary Education

Contextualizing Professional Experience

We begin this story of professional experience in writing by identifying ourselves within our professional roles as teachers at the time. Krista, Lindsay, and Heather were three beginning secondary public school classroom teachers when this project began. Glenda was a first-year university teacher educator. They each brought unique experiences, individual presuppositions, diverse beliefs and perspectives, and differing goals to a common participation in the 2002 Invitational Summer Institute (ISI) in the Midwest. Krista was a ninth-grade English teacher in a rural high school. She had just completed her first year of teaching some of the most difficult-to-engage students in her school. Lindsay had completed her second year as a high school special education teacher. Heather had just completed her first year as a sixth-grade language arts teacher. Krista and Heather felt the pressure to gain more skills for writing and teaching writing so their students would pass the ISTEP test.

Glenda brought with her the presupposition that she was already a writer and the institute would afford her time to work on her research writing project, specifically preparing a proposal to present her research on portfolio assessment for teacher certification at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. She also held the belief that she brought a creative writing style to her research by integrating a critical lens with narrative methods. Glenda believed that writing in a way to prick the hearts and minds of readers to think about issues of racism and social inequity in schools was a creative way to write for social justice. Her dean had asked her to attend the ISI so that she could then help write a grant application to start a writing project at her university.

The four of us met at the ISI, where we had the distinct impression from the summer institute facilitators that Glenda's research writing was considered academic and not creative, yet she wrote about her teaching experiences by analyzing narrative stories as data. The distinction between academic and creative writing paralleled the perceived divide between academics with distant theories of teaching and the expertise of the facilitators who were not situated in an academic, university setting. We perceived the

ISI facilitators wanted us to write “real” and “creative” and defined “real writing” as personal and “creative writing” as poetry, prose, and narrative stories. We perceived real and creative to be further distinguished as superior in quality to academic writing, which was portrayed as lacking voice and authenticity. While this current writing would be considered academic by those definitions, we hope that our voices are heard and our story is authentic.

Our narrative analysis was further contextualized by critical narrative inquiry methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 1999; Barone, 1992; and Polkinghorne, 1995). We used narrative methods as a way to open up dialogue between the four of us, similar to the way Glenda had worked with other public school classroom teachers to tell their stories of experience (Moss, 2001; Stephens, Sadler, & Moss, 2002). We hoped our creative writing endeavor would contribute to the knowledge base of teaching writing.

Our relationship had begun during the ISI as we visited regularly during the institute, discussing the complexity of teaching writing in an age of accountability testing and in settings where some students seemed disadvantaged while others seemed to be afforded a more advanced track of education. It was during these discussions that Glenda suggested Krista, Lindsay, and Heather begin a master’s degree and enroll in her graduate class, Adolescent Development.

Adolescent Development: An Academic Class

There was nothing special about the Adolescent Development class except it would be an opportunity for the four educators to continue their professional relationship. This class was frequently taken by classroom teachers working towards a graduate degree in education. Glenda approached the class as an opportunity for classroom teachers to develop their inquiry and writing skills while exploring topics of adolescent development. Each week, teachers read research articles and wrote reflective-reflexive responses in preparation for class dialogue. Glenda defined reflective reading responses as summary of salient points, quotes, and thinking about the quotes in terms of prior theoretical knowledge. She defined reflexive as a kind of introspection in which participants used the readings to examine their connective stories of experience and imagining how to use something learned in practice as a teacher. We used this process in the class and later as part of our narrative methodology for this project.

Besides the weekly readings and dialogue sessions, the teachers designed a project on their own to further explore a concept that was of interest to them. Exploring adolescent development in relationship to practice became quite interesting as some class members were elementary teachers. One first-grade teacher gave her students an assignment to write and draw pictures about teenagers. The 6 year olds imagined what it would mean

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to be a teenager. The ability to drive, shave, and date were frequent responses. Glenda saw the first-grade teacher's product as a creative endeavor even if it was an academic assignment and saw her narrative analysis as creative professional writing.

Narrative Analysis of Beginning the Research Process

Following completion of the Adolescent Development course, we agreed to continue our writing and learning community by engaging in a narrative analysis of our experiences in becoming writers during the earlier summer institute and our use of writing to learn in graduate studies. We intended our research to be critically pedagogical in that it would create an opportunity for us to cross barriers between our positions as teachers, learners, and researchers. We engaged in learning by researching and writing professionally as we explored our practical experiences as writers, writing teachers, and teacher educator (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 1999). We defined this as critical pedagogy in that the research was designed so we could critique the narrow definition of creative writing as referring primarily to poems, prose, and personal narrative stories. We explored how we used knowledge of creative writing from the 2002 Writing Project Summer Institute to integrate creativity with academic writing to learn in a graduate education class in spring 2003.

This project could have come to an abrupt end if we had answered the initial question from the traditional definition of creative writing as referring to identifiable genre — poetry, prose, and personal narrative. What emerged through our research was a narrative analysis of critical questions of writing, pedagogy, and professional development in relationship to the National Writing Project perspective.

National Writing Project Perspective

National Writing Project summer institutes are framed by the National Writing Project (NWP) presupposition that good teachers of writing can be developed into teacher leaders, who can develop other writing teachers into better teachers of writing (Gray, 2000; Lieberman & Wood, 2003). The philosophy of the NWP promotes intense summer writing institutes through which participants emerge with confidence in their self-identities as "writers." Lieberman and Wood (2003) found that "permeating the entire NWP culture is the idea that constant questioning and searching are fundamental to good teaching" (p. 30).

Our inquiry project was not framed by the basic assumptions of the NWP, which takes a stance that "Effective teachers of writing regularly write themselves," "Exemplary teachers make the best teachers of other teachers," and "Teachers are the key to reform in education" (NWP, 2000, p. 27), which are among the stated perspectives of the NWP. We framed our research by the ideal of scholar-practitioner teacher leadership (Moss,

2004), which emphasizes classroom teachers adopting a critical stance that addresses the challenges of cultural diversity, multilingualism, social disadvantages that impact children's learning, inequities in education, and the continued reproduction of the status quo through institutional policy-making such as the *No Child Left Behind* legislation. It seemed clear to us that education is politically influenced. Viewing writing in an ISI as more authentic than writing in academic courses seemed like a kind of political stance. Glenda having the power to require graduate candidates to write in a certain format could also be perceived by participants as part of the politics of higher education. In our research, we challenged each other to think about how on every level of education, there is a kind of political dynamic.

Our research was designed to allow us to cross instructor-graduate candidate boundaries, write collaboratively, and express our individual voices as we each narratively analyzed our personal experiences as teachers and learners. As co-teacher-researchers, we challenged each other to critically examine our experiences in the summer institute and in the graduate-level course for political issues of curriculum and instruction. This was a creative way to move our professional relationship beyond the limitations of the summer institute framed by the National Writing Project assumptions or the Adolescent Development class framed by the pursuit of an academic degree, to a level of collaborative inquiry through narrative methods.

Narrative Methodology

Drawing on Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative configurations in inquiry, each of us reflectively and reflexively analyzed our writing experiences in the 2002 ISI and our experiences in the graduate Adolescent Development class. First, we reflectively reviewed our writings from the 2002 ISI and the Adolescent Development course for lessons learned about teaching writing, writing to learn, and writing to teach. Secondly, we electronically sent our narrative analyses to each other so that we could each analyze the narratives for themes (Polkinghorne, 1995). We were particularly interested in themes of experience with writing in the educational process. We then met to dialogue about our analyses and to construct a narrative analysis of our writing experiences.

This dialogue was critical to our study, both in terms of our growth in understanding and use of narrative methods, and in terms of our development as a collaborative research team. It was during this dialogue session that both critical questions and observations emerged. The role of community in the writing process emerged as a common theme across all four narratives. We realized that our presuppositions and assumptions had affected our actions and learning outcomes in both the summer institute and the Adolescent Development class. The role that our goals play in the learning process crystallized as an important theme. The subjective nature of writing and responding to

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writing emerged as both a positive element and source of tension, depending on the interactive dynamics. Three main themes emerged: community, presuppositions and assumptions, and politics of writing standards. Each of these themes played a role in our development as writers, teachers, and researchers.

Developing a Learning Community of Writers and Learners

In any classroom — elementary, middle, or high school, undergraduate or graduate — building a classroom community is essential to stimulating students' growth, emotionally, socially, and cognitively (Watkins, 2005). When we felt comfortable within the ISI community, especially with the facilitators, and the Adolescent Development class, what we initially perceived to be standardized norms and practices for writing began to disappear. The disappearance of these standards allowed us to emerge with stronger self-identities because the learning community promoted this goal. Our experiences with writing in the ISI and the Adolescent Development courses indicate that writing can play an integral role in developing a learning community. Dialogue communication positively impacted our ability to reflect on our own experiences and on each other's experiences. Simply being in the same ISI and same Adolescent Development class did not mean that we had the same experiences.

Glenda, inspired by Freire's (1998) critique of the banking system of education and Vygotsky's (1978) notion of education as a sociohistorical event, noted that "learning is an intersubjective social event. Likewise, it is clear that critical literacy and writing are integral to the learning process." An example of this occurred at the summer institute as we experienced working in peer response groups. Lindsay explored the nurturing relationship of working within these groups:

...[A]s I began to overcome the trepidation of thinking that I had no right to call myself a writer, I allowed myself to share freely the writing that I was doing. Time was given to the fellows to work in small groups where our sole purpose was to lend a listening ear and offer praise and suggestions on our writings....Fellows were facilitated to nurture the inner core of writing — bringing out the best work. Persons huddled tighter in concentration to make writing meaningful, challenging, and one ounce better than the previous.

Writing, sharing, and responding within the "social event" helped Lindsay see herself as a writer, sharpening her skills within the learning community and allowing her to see room for improving her writing, and therefore, her learning. The context for learning and writing within the community allowed her to feel safe.

Krista saw writing as recursive within building the learning community — writing and sharing writing helps develop the community and the community helps develop

writers. This process of showing our writing and receiving reflective feedback from our response groups was encouraged when we were given a short essay from *Teacher's Magazine*, "Get Naked!" by Lou Orfanella, to read and discuss during the summer institute. Each participant had to be willing to share and "Get Naked." Krista noted, "Sharing personal stories through my writing has become much easier since I practiced frequently at the summer institute." From her perspective, when a strong community is built, students feel safer to share, critique, question, and respond to another's writing. Without this community, sharing may occur, but it will not occur at the inquiry level, where students begin to care and think about each other's writing.

Similarly, Lindsay found "freedom from the traditional molds of many classrooms" within the summer institute learning community and also noted a newfound autonomy within writing:

Through the sharing of each other's writing and building of a writing community, creativity was freed and new talents unveiled. It was then that I began to hone in on my own style and really feel as if I was deserving of the title "writer."

Glenda recognized this recursive process and engaged Krista, Lindsay, and Heather, along with the other members of the Adolescent Development class, in reflective-reflexive writing and dialogue practices with others in a learning community. In the dialogue community the students became teachers, and Glenda became a learner along with the members of the class. Krista, Lindsay, and Heather had to grow to a new level of trust as they related with Glenda, who was officially their teacher and assessor. Classroom community was built, and students relaxed. Krista reflected on her own experiences and noted:

This is exactly what happens in my English classroom or any classroom. When the students begin to feel comfortable with my expectations and they begin to feel comfortable with taking risks and knowing that the risk can still satisfy the objective, they breach out into uncharted territory. The key is feeling comfortable, and I think also the desire to make a dent in the established expectation — to be remembered. Writing allows students to feel remembered if the learning community is such that participants feel equal and safe with all stakeholders.

With the growing intensity and need for writing across the curriculum, the advantages of utilizing writing and its implications for the necessary growth of community come into focus — students emerging with self-identities, students practicing inquiry, students thinking critically, students sharing and responding, and students becoming global learners concerned for the good of the group. In the safety of our inquiry community, we were able to reflexively look at our presuppositions and assumptions.

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Presuppositions and Assumptions: Blurring the Experience

Writing for Whom and What Purpose?

Our perspectives on the role of writing shifted for each of us. Lindsay, who began the summer institute with the notion that writing is an academic subject, shifted to entertain the idea of writing as a philosophy and started believing that “we do not teach writing, but help craft what is already there...” Similarly, Krista began to see writing differently; “Through the summer institute, the teaching demonstrations, and professional literature, I gained an understanding of the language of writing — its craft.” Heather “found that writing can be anything that you want it to be...” We saw the role of writing pivoting on the development of personal identity and a mechanism to free creativity, but we all wrote based on the assumption that the goal was to use this creativity to produce poetry, prose, or short stories.

Glenda expressed feeling like her interpretation of creativity was stifled by the structural definition of creative writing.

I perceived during the summer institute that the primary focus was on narrowly defined creative writing...I remember feeling like my writing time was being controlled by having to write one “creative” start after another in my “writer’s notebook”...

Glenda saw the goals of the National Writing Project as reproducing the status quo for what constitutes creative writing.

Glenda’s expectations for writing in the Adolescent Development class to learn were clearly stated as intended to develop critical thinking and professional development in the teachers as they inquired into understanding adolescent students’ patterns, contextualized by culture and society. She did not openly express to the class that she believed that critically responding to research with stories of experience and imagination of application is a creative endeavor, and Krista, Lindsay, and Heather did not recognize this writing as creative but as stifling and reproducing the status quo for what they perceived to be academic writing.

They experienced frustrations as they attempted to critique the research, think critically, and reflexively make connections between scholarly research and their personal teaching experiences. Lindsay felt as if the purpose of this writing was entirely different than other writing that she had done in the past year. Similarly, Heather describes her frustrations as she

didn’t see the reflective/reflexive writings as something to embrace creatively, but rather as a tool to get me thinking about what I am reading in terms of how I would relate it to my students. I saw creative writing as something I did for fun and leisure, rather than to help me gain understanding of an article or text.

Likewise, Krista felt that the role of writing in the class was bothersome as she pushed herself to think and personally connect to the text. Writing became stifling as Krista felt forced to conform to Glenda's writing assignments. She felt as though the reflective-reflexive responses did not allow her to express her ideas and feelings in a creative format. Krista, Lindsay, and Heather were prepared and confident in the ways and styles of the National Writing Project and were not prepared for the ways and styles of writing to learn in a graduate class.

Although Glenda thought creativity was evident in the reflective-reflexive responses to reading assigned journal articles in the Adolescent Development class, she listened to understand the classroom teachers' different perspective on what constitutes creative writing. Glenda grew to understand that it was not the writing assignment itself that was problematic but the fact that the articles were assigned. She changed her practice to give participants more choice and redesigned the reflective-reflexive response to include summary, reflection, reflexion, imaginary, and creative response (Moss, 2008). For all of us, our perceptions and interpretations of the summer institute and the Adolescent Development class were connected to our personal aspirations and predispositions. This parallels the dilemma of teaching writing during the age of accountability testing.

Critical Issues in Writing and Teaching Writing

Writing standards play an integral role in the development of writing. Teachers in U.S. schools have the job of assisting students in correctly implementing the rules of North American Standard English. The intersubjectivity of the writing process and the subjective nature of responding to students' writing with written comments leave teachers with the challenge of what to do when they are expected to score writing with rubrics and ensure students master writing structures. This issue immersed in the graduate class as well.

In the initial narrative analysis of writing experiences, Lindsay, Krista, and Heather all addressed grading in the graduate course. They each wrote about how they felt the grading in the graduate class was subjective and more about the personal preference of the professor rather than the correct use of Standard English. As Krista stated in her narrative:

I felt stifled, especially when each synthesis paper came back with revision suggestions that pertained to style, not content. I do not disagree with the revision suggestions; they work just as well as my original ones, but I continued to feel like creativity in style was not encouraged. I corrected them to appease my instructor, but they were not meaningful to me.

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Lindsay also wrote about this in her narrative when she stated:

Papers continued to be returned to me with comments about the stylistic part of my writing and suggestions to make the paper not mine. I felt that I had to be molded to fit the professional style of writing that our instructor preferred.

As we dialogued about this, we came to the realization that assessing writing can be subjective, but there are accepted writing standards in most professions. Writing in APA style is a frequently used style in the professional field of education. This style also promotes English syntax as recognized by academic journals and national standards for P–12 curriculums.

These rules of English were not an integral part of the insights into writing that we gained as a result of the National Writing Project. From our narrative data, it seems that the National Writing Project gave us helpful strategies to take back to our classrooms for implementing creative writing practices as defined by poetry, prose, personal narrative, and fiction. Professional writing was addressed in the NWP, but the focus was more on the content rather than the style. The opposite occurred in the graduate class. The content was still important, but the markings on the papers were often related to stylistic issues based on standard writing structures promoted by APA. Glenda and her graduated students struggled with this conflict of interest. As Glenda stated in her narrative analysis of experiences in the Adolescent Development class, “Participation in the summer writing project did not result in the development of professional writing skills as evidenced in the synthesis papers of the coauthors of this paper who were all students in my class.”

Once again we are faced with the question of what is the role that standards play in learning to write and in teaching students to write. Heather asked, “How can I broaden my students’ writing and challenge them when I can’t even do it for myself?” It was at this point we began to think deeply about the importance of teachers engaging in both creative endeavors and rigorous writing development. Becoming a writer must not stop with publishing in a summer institute anthology, but ongoing inquiry into our work as teachers and writing. We learned that creativity and writing standards can be combined to make writing meaningful and professional at the same time. The writing standards are important, but developing voice among P–12 students and classroom teachers may be more important in a democratic society during an age of standardizing education policies.

Final Reflections

We believe that classroom teachers must develop their voice of critique and join the academic and political discourses as protagonist, authoring their identities as educational

leaders. Teacher-consultants within the more than 200 National Writing Projects must critique the very procedures through which they and other teachers gained access to the government-funded graduate-credit ISI. They must critique the processes and practices of the ISI and continuity programs for effectiveness. They must critique the politics of who gets to define what constitutes creative writing and research writing, and which professional writing literature is endorsed by the nationally funded writing project. More importantly, participating teachers must continually examine their experiences in the writing project and university courses, and their experiences as classroom teachers of writing, and write in a variety of ways that are characteristic of professional teachers.

A. N. Whitehead writes: “The paradox which wrecks so many promising theories of education is that the training which produces skill is very apt to stifle imaginative zest. Skill demands repetition, and imaginative zest is tinged with impulse” (Whitehead, 1978, p 338). Writing requires both structure and imagination as does teaching in general. Our hope is that P-12 and university teachers will find writing as both a tool and common ground for dialoguing their way into a community with diverse professional voices.

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