

Information is Not Enough: Facilitating Reflection and Changing Beliefs

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Preservice English teachers come into teacher education programs with strongly held beliefs about literature and reading. In some cases, they loved *Great Expectations* and can't wait to read the book with their own students. In other cases, they hated *Great Expectations* and vow to never waste their students' time with boring books. These beliefs most likely grow from their own experiences learning to read and interpret literature as they progressed through elementary, middle and high school. As these preservice English teachers enter teacher education courses, teacher educators often see their role as one of exposing students like these to new methods and ideas. As a teacher educator, I have often assumed that the preservice teachers I teach will naturally adopt newer strategies and methods as they see ways in which these new strategies and methods are effective. This study, however, challenged those assumptions.

In my role as an instructor at a medium-sized private religious university, I first encounter preservice English teachers in the juvenile/adolescent literature course—a place where I hope some of these changes will begin to take place. In this course, the texts are accessible, and the students who choose to enroll in the course generally love to read. Students learn genre elements, significant works, and response activities, interacting both with texts and readers during the course. My students complete a “reading buddy” project in which they correspond with local eighth grade students during the reading of a common book and then write a response applying the theories we have covered in class. The written assignments and tests showed that students were making good progress on mastering information and skills. In addition, students participated in simulations,

literature circles, discussion groups, and meaning-centered reflections, all activities which research indicates will help students reflect on and make meaning themselves (Langer 2000). As the instructor, I judged that since these preservice teachers participate in activities designed to increase the focus on meaning-making, their attitudes about reading and literature study would also become more meaning-focused.

This focus on meaning is extremely important as it provides a conceptual base from which preservice teachers can make decisions. Techniques and standards change over time, so teachers need to have the tools they need to make decisions as these changes occur in the field. Additional work (Brooks 2010) has shown that when teachers believe that students construct meaning as they read, the likelihood of student engagement increases. As preservice teachers move through the program at my university, I want them to reflect and develop in how they think about teaching literature, moving from a focus on surface features, like literary elements and developing reading skills to an orientation in which making meaning is most important and surface features would become means to this end. In short, I was expecting that the knowledge and activities would compel students to change their beliefs and by extension, inspire them to use this knowledge in their own classrooms.

In order to determine whether this strategy was working, I gathered data from participants in a recent juvenile/adolescent literature course. In other research, I have seen that teacher beliefs about the nature of literature are extremely important to student learning (Brooks 2010). I was hoping to see that these preservice teachers were developing ways of thinking about literature that were more meaning-centered. I administered a simple classroom survey, expecting to confirm these expectations.

Method

Participants

Participants were students in a class in juvenile and adolescent literature (materials for grades 5-9) at a medium-sized private religious liberal arts university in the midwest. The course is open to all students and a variety of majors are represented, but the course is also required for any student who is seeking licensure in teaching middle or high school English. The majority of participants had not yet taken any coursework that asks them to consider issues of literacy for adolescents.

Research Questions

What does this group of participants believe to be the most important aspects of literacy for college students—those related to surface features or those related to meaning?

What does this group of participants believe to be the most important aspects of literacy for adolescents—those related to surface features or those related to meaning?

How do these perceptions differ before and after their participation in the juvenile literature course?

Procedure

This was designed to be a preliminary study to be undertaken as action research. Participants completed a survey at the beginning and the end of the course, asking about what they perceive to be the most important aspects of literacy for people their own age (college students) and for their future high school and middle school students (adolescents). Although there are many different approaches to literary study in middle and high schools, ranging from the theoretical to the cultural, I was most interested in whether students felt it was most important to focus on surface features and elements or

meaning-related aspects of literary study. The questions simply asked students to rank purposes of literature study in order of importance. The items “develop critical thinking skills,” “learn about literary terms and techniques,” and “improve language skills” refer to surface elements, while the items “enjoy the experience of losing oneself in a story,” and “explore questions about life and humanity,” refer to meaning-related aspects of literary study. This set up a somewhat artificial binary, but it did allow me to simplify the questions.

In addition, I wanted to know whether my students had different expectations for themselves as readers than they did for their future students, hypothesizing that the common approach of beginning with surface features and then moving to meaning as is advocated frequently in the field of reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013), would have been internalized by these participants. One way to confirm or refute that hypothesis was to see whether participants felt that younger adolescent students should have different goals in their reading than college students, and by extension, themselves.

Since this research was part of a course that I was teaching, I kept the data collection simple and anonymous. After permission for classroom research was granted by the IRB at my university, students filled out a simple survey on the first day of the course and then completed it again when the course was complete. A teaching assistant compiled the data using numerical labels, so when I received the data, there were no names attached. I also did not look at the data until after the grades for the course were compiled. Data was compiled by taking the simple mean score of rank on the pretest and on the post test. This data was then analyzed to see whether there were significant differences.

Results

Student Opinions on College-Level Literacy

The first survey asked participants what they felt were the most important reasons for college students to read literature. Since most of the participants had taken significant college-level coursework in literature, they were essentially reflecting on their own experiences or the experiences of their peers. In the results, a lower number indicates higher importance and a higher number indicates lower importance. A negative difference indicates that this characteristic became more important during the course and a positive difference indicates that the characteristic lost importance. Statistical significance was set at the $p < .05$ level, as indicated by the shading on the results charts.

What are the most important reasons for college students to read literature?	Mean score on pretest	Mean score on post test	Difference between pre- and post-tests.	Effect Size (Cohen's d)	P Value
To develop critical thinking skills	2.46 (Rank 2)	2.00 (Rank 1)	-.462	.393	.0560
To learn about literary terms and techniques	3.73 (Rank 4)	4.31 (Rank 5)	.577	.454	.0291
To enjoy the experience of losing oneself in a story	3.65 (Rank 3 Tied)	3.81 (Rank 3)	.154	.0937	.637
To explore questions about life and humanity	1.58 (Rank 1)	3.85 (Rank 4)	2.27	1.50	.00001
To improve their language skills	3.65 (Rank 3 Tied)	3.54 (Rank 2)	-.115	.108	.587

Of the five items in the survey of what aspects of literacy should be important to college students, three showed no significant change between pretest and posttest. However, two items did show significant change between the beginning and the end of the course. One item referred to the importance of knowing literary terms and techniques. When participants entered the course, they viewed this as less important than other aspects of literacy (ranked 4). However, when they left the course, this aspect of literacy had even less importance, dropping significantly and becoming the least important aspect of reading for college students. The juvenile literature course explores literature from a number of angles, but does not emphasize the terms of New Criticism, so this change was not particularly surprising.

However, the item “exploring questions about life and humanity” had the greatest change. Before the course, students reported this as the most important reason for college students to read literature. After the course, students ranked it fourth, with a statistically significant drop in the importance of this reason. Critical thinking gained importance, but not to a statistically significant level. My personal philosophy and one I try to instill in my students is that the many tools that I teach for analyzing are so we can explore questions about life and humanity in a more meaningful way. It seems that the more explicit, skill-based aspects of literary reading overshadowed the meaning of literature—precisely the opposite of what I was hoping for.

Participant Beliefs About Adolescent Literacy

Participants showed significant change in their reflections about college students. However, their beliefs about adolescents, their future students, showed no significant change.

Question— What are the most important reasons for adolescents to read literature?	Mean score on pretest	Mean score on post test	Difference Between Pre and Posttest	Effect Size (Cohen's d)	P Value
To develop critical thinking skills	2.62 (Rank 1)	1.96 (Rank 1)	-.654	.386	.0605
To learn about literary terms and techniques	3.88 (Rank 4)	3.88 (Rank 5)	0	0	1
To enjoy the experience of losing oneself in a story	2.65 (Rank 2 tied)	3.04 (Rank 3)	.385	.289	.153
To explore questions about life and humanity	2.65 (Rank 2 tied)	3.23 (Rank 4)	.577	.297	.142
To improve their language skills	2.69 (Rank 3)	2.85 (Rank 2)	.154	.114	.566

Participants placed the highest importance on literature as a vehicle for developing critical thinking skills. They placed much less importance on teaching literary terms and techniques. Participants showed no statistically significant change in their opinions on purposes of reading for adolescents overall in the pretest and posttest. Since a major focus of the course is to help students begin to think like literacy professionals, this was an unpleasant surprise. It appears that students in this course did not reconsider their assumptions about adolescent literacy in any significant way.

Discussion and Implications for Teacher Preparation

It appears that my juvenile literature course needs to include more explicit connections between practicing literacy activities that make meaning and reflecting on their own beliefs about the role of the teacher and the role of literature in students' lives.

Preservice teachers are not coming to teacher preparation programs as blank slates. Much research has been done on the reasons why teachers tend to "teach as they have been taught" regardless of what has happened to them in teacher education courses. Scales (2013) describes this in terms of Lortie's (1975) "apprenticeship of observation."

Therefore, whatever understanding pre-service teachers construct about their developing visions has two components (1) the thoughts or mindset they brought with them to the teacher education program, and (b) some possible adjustments and/or additions to those thoughts based upon what they learned in the social environment of the teacher education program (Scales, 2013, p. 3).

In current English classrooms, the standards focus on New Criticism and critical thinking and reading skills. The AP exams focus on literary terms and techniques. Although there are many high school and middle school teachers that engage students with questions of life and meaning, it is not an official function of the study of literature in schools. It appears that students entered the course with the view that this prioritization should be preserved and they left the course with no change in these views. Although this information was not what I had hoped for, it motivates me to make changes to the juvenile literature course.

The work of Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2010) indicates that knowledge alone does not facilitate teacher change in the area of classroom technology. The results of this project seem to bear that out. Four variables are necessary for preservice and inservice teachers to truly embrace change: knowledge, self-efficacy, pedagogical beliefs, and

subject/school culture. Pedagogical beliefs are similar to Scales concept of the vision. Roy Scales (2013) encourages preservice teachers to develop what she calls a “moral purpose” (p. 2) which is paired with an “intellectual vision” (p. 2) . The purpose of these visions is to provide a base for decision- making and focus when teachers enter school environments that may not reflect the concepts and practices they have learned in their teacher education programs.

The literature indicates that teacher education programs should address beliefs. Barnyak and Paquette (2010) discuss their work with elementary preservice teachers, indicating that often they come in to teacher education programs committed to models of literacy. However, these models and beliefs are implicit, even though they are crucial to teaching success. “The educational belief system held by preservice teachers is the foundation they will use in making decisions about how to teach. Research supports that teachers hold implicit beliefs about students and subject matter that affect their learning and their teaching practices” (Fang, 1996). The strong influence of teachers’ belief systems on their reading instruction affects the ways in which the information is presented to their students which in turn, greatly influences lesson planning and student learning (Cheek, Steward, Laurenny, & Borgia, 2004).

Because the belief system plays such a major role in teaching practice, teachers are unlikely to change their teaching style when a change is warranted unless their belief system can be changed first. Therefore, examination of belief systems should be an essential part of teacher education instruction. Preservice teachers must examine their belief systems connected to teaching practice and identify the ways in which their beliefs, in this case about the nature and purposes of teaching literature, may or may not serve

their future students. However, teacher beliefs are notoriously resistant to change. Cabaraglu and Roberts (2000) have identified eleven belief development processes found in their work with preservice teachers. Of the eleven, only five involve the actual change of belief—the other six involve reframing and justifying existing ones. It appears that teachers (and human being for that matter) spend a lot of time preserving and protecting their beliefs.

Experience plus reflection seems to be the most promising agent for helping teachers examine their existing beliefs and move toward new ones. Since the original beliefs of teachers were developed through experience, it follows that experience can be a powerful agent for change. Science education researchers Vaino, Holbrook, and Rannikmaa (2013) found that when chemistry teachers conducted action research as they implemented new teaching practices, their foundational beliefs about inquiry changed. Additional work undertaken by Tam and Fung (2015) indicates that Professional Learning Communities with a coherent structure, a collaborative culture, and effective learning activities show promise in creating lasting change.

It appears that my students will be more likely to move from a focus on reading for surface features to reading as a meaning-making activity if I revise the course to include more emphasis on readers' experiences and include more opportunities for reflection, experience and collaboration. Asking students to reflect on previous literacy experiences and to make explicit their own beliefs about reading and writing may help them consider this in adolescent readers as well. Instead of having students focus primarily on the content of their choice books when they share them with the class, the assignment could be revised to require additional information about their experiences as readers of each

particular book I already use book groups in the course, so increasing the emphasis on collaborative examination of the reading process could yield positive results as well.

“Exploring questions about life and humanity” could become a stronger theme in my classroom and in the classrooms of my students as a result of this work. Revisions like this, based on good information, could lead to my students becoming more aware of their beliefs and more focused on making meaning. In turn, this could help their future students make meaning in their own reading.

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