

Transforming the Literacy Lives of Postsecondary Students: A Preliminary Study of Writing Workshops at the University Level

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Abstract

This study aimed to address the growing need for postsecondary students to become better writers. The researchers implemented a writing workshop, which is typically designed for many elementary classrooms, in a university. Twenty-one postsecondary students participated in the writing workshops that provided students with opportunities to learn about academic writing through the use of mini-lessons. Students were also able to conference with their peers and the facilitators. Overall, the writing workshops provided a positive effect on students' perceptions about their writing. In addition, the students felt that the writing workshops had a positive effect on their overall learning of a specific academic writing skill.

Keywords: *writing, writing workshops, postsecondary students, self-perceptions*

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Learning to write is a critical tool needed to be a successful citizen in today's world. Whether one is going to college or entering the workforce, writing is necessary to complete most assignments in college and in the workforce. Effective writing, for example, is needed to write an email, technical reports, case studies, business plans, and financial reports. Without the necessary tools needed to write

proficiently, one can be at a disadvantage when applying to college and/or a job. Although many people receive twelve years of formal education, a writing problem still exists because a portion of these people have difficulty writing in college or advancing in their careers.

The Writing Problem

Writing is a difficult task for many students (Graham & Harris, 2009). This is especially true for postsecondary students. Many postsecondary students are not armed with the tools needed to meet the demands of college and/or the workforce. Thirty-five percent of high school graduates in college and 38% of high school graduates in the workforce feel their writing does not meet expectations for quality (Achieve, Inc., 2005).

Many students have problems putting thoughts down onto paper, while others have problems organizing their thoughts. Many students, also, may have problems with the mechanics of writing (punctuation, capitalization, and spelling) and with American Psychological Association (APA) style writing errors (Jorgensen & Marek, 2013). Each of these elements are critical for students to be proficient writers in postsecondary schools and in the workforce.

The Nation's Report Card's results show that only 27% of twelfth-grade students can write at the proficient or advanced level. Therefore, 73% of twelfth-graders in their last academic year of formal schooling cannot write at a level of proficiency

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Even so, college instructors estimate that 50% of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level writing (Achieve, Inc., 2005).

The National Commission on Writing report (2003) suggests that writing is the neglected R. Based upon the National Commission on Writing report (2004), it costs private-sector companies \$3.1 billion to provide writing training to employees. The dollar amount presented does not represent government or retail employees, which could possibly raise the dollar amount if such employees were included.

Given the aforementioned statistics, what can colleges and universities do to ensure that college students succeed –in and –after college? The purpose of this article seeks to address the writing problem and show one method, writing workshops, as a way of addressing writing problems among postsecondary students.

Writing Workshops

Writing workshops can be defined as an instructional approach that originated with Calkins (1986) and Atwell (1987) to nurture lifelong writers. Writing workshops can be used with any grade level and are mostly seen in K-12 educational settings. A typical writing workshop for students consists of:

- a mini-lesson of a direct skill taught by the teacher,
- a teacher led small-group or one-on-one conference about the students' writing with the included mini-lesson skill, and
- a sharing time, which allows students to share their work with their peers.

Although the Writing Workshop model was originally designed for K-12 students, the success of this method in multiple grade levels suggested to the authors that this form of workshop could also benefit postsecondary students. Therefore, our research question was what impact would a writing workshop have on university students' self-

perception of their writing and expected achievement on writing assignments.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study included 21 students, 20 undergraduate students and one graduate student. Sixteen students were in the College of Education and Kinesiology, three students were in the College of Arts and Sciences, and two students were in the College of Business. The following show the number of students seeking various degrees and/or certifications:

- 9 students seeking EC-6 Certification with a Bilingual supplement (Texas)
- 5 students seeking EC-6 Certification (Texas)
- 1 student seeking 4-8 Certification with a Bilingual supplement (Texas)
- 1 student seeking Bachelor of Arts and Applied Sciences Degree
- 1 student seeking a Bachelor's of Science Degree in Kinesiology
- 2 students seeking a Bachelor's of Science Degree in Psychology
- 1 student seeking a Bachelor's of Business Administration in Accounting and Management
- 1 students seeking a Master's of Business Administration

The gender of the participants included 19 females and 2 males, with 19 students identifying themselves as Hispanic and two identifying themselves as Caucasian. Ten students were between the ages of 18-24, five were 25-30, two were 31-40, three were 41-50, and one student was in the 61-70 category.

University

The university was established in 2009 and serves non-traditional students. It is an upper level (juniors and seniors) and graduate level university. According to the university's fact book (2011), 65% of students were of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity,

with 30% being other races, and roughly 6% choosing to not answer the question.

Facilitators

The writing workshops were facilitated by two instructors. The instructors co-taught the course. One instructor is a tenured faculty in the Reading program in the Department of Educator and Leadership Preparation. The second instructor is the librarian for the College of Education and Human Development.

Writing Workshop

Writing workshops have widely been used across all grade levels (Scarborough & Allen, 2014). Writing workshops in the K-12 schools can be easily incorporated into classes. However, in the university environment, class time is at a premium and most professors cannot afford to devote part of their scheduled lecture period to writing development. To address this issue, the authors conceived the workshops to be an extracurricular activity that faculty could support by offering extra credit or similar incentives for student participation. Ten sessions, each lasting two hours, were scheduled. The workshops alternated between the main campus, which houses the majority of programs in the Colleges of Education and Human Development and Arts & Sciences, and a second campus, which houses the College of Business and programs such as Kinesiology and Communications.

At the beginning of each workshop, students filled out a pre-workshop assessment survey. Then the sessions followed a traditional writing workshop format. The facilitators presented a 15-20 minute mini-lesson. Each week had a different mini-lesson theme: How to get started/ Prewriting, Organization and Structure, Academic Voice and Revising, Summarizing and Paraphrasing, and Integrating Citations and Editing. During this part of the workshop, the facilitators provided the students with direct, explicit instruction and

examples. After the mini-lesson, the participants were to read through their drafts to make any changes based upon the mini-lesson skill. The facilitators met one-on-one and in small groups with students for conferencing. The participants, also, peer edited with a partner. At the end of the session, participants could share their writing with peers or the facilitators. Students then filled out a post-workshop survey and received a certificate of attendance.

RESULTS

In this study, we provided writing workshops for postsecondary students to determine if their self-perception about their writing would improve after attending a writing workshop. Pre- and post- workshop surveys were used to measure these attitudes. The results are reported below.

Pre-Survey

The results of the pre-survey indicate that 16 of the students attending a workshop because their instructor recommended them for the workshop. Four people were self-motivated to attend the writing workshop on their own, while one participant stated that a friend recommended the workshop. While most participants attended for individual reasons, 62% stated their reason for participation was to get information on how to start a paper, while 33% stated they needed help with revising and/or editing. The remaining percentage of participants needed help with American Psychological Association (APA) sixth edition formatting.

The participants had various goals for attending a writing workshop. These goals included:

- getting help with brainstorming ideas to write
- understanding how to respond to the topic
- understanding APA, 6th edition

- writing a thesis statement
- developing writing skills
- organizing
- editing
- spelling
- revising
- learning more about academic writing

These goals correspond to the pre-selected topics that were covered in the mini-lessons.

Ninety-percent of students reported having a rubric given to them by the instructor. A rubric includes the terms or benchmarks for which the paper should be written. A rubric is essential for grading a writing paper. It lets the students know what is expected in their paper. It also helps the writing facilitator best help the participants.

Overall, students attending these sessions had not utilized their professors' offers to review drafts of their papers. Only 14% of students attending the writing workshop had previously submitted their paper to their instructor for feedback. For these students, however, the feedback that was given was useful, and included writing problems such as: no organization, grammar errors, and punctuation errors. Most students who attending the writing workshop had not submitted their paper before, and the paper they brought to the workshop was their first draft.

Students attending the workshops mainly identified as having good grades in their course. Thirty-eight percent of participants attending the writing workshop said they had an *A* average in their course, while 38% of students attending the writing workshop claimed a *B* average. Only 4% of students had a *C* average, while 4% had a *D* average while attending the writing workshop. Fourteen percent of participants did not respond to this question. Students were also optimistic about their expected final grade: 67% of participants expect to make an *A* in the course, while 19% of participants anticipate making a *B* in their course. Ten percent of students are anticipating making a *C* in their course.

Post-Survey

The post-survey was administered at the end of each workshop session. The participants were asked questions such as:

- “Was the writing workshop helpful?”
- “Was the peer feedback helpful?”
- “Were the facilitators helpful?”
- “What was the best/worst part of the writing workshop?”
- “How likely are you to attend again?”
- “How likely are you to recommend the writing workshop to a friend?”

Each of these questions was structured to allow students to comment in their own words.

When asked “Was the writing workshop helpful?”, participants made the following statements:

- The writing workshop taught me how to set up my writing and how to prewrite so that it can be easier.
- It was actually beneficial. It helped to better understand ways to revise and edit papers.
- It helped me a lot. I learned how I can edit and check for errors.
- I learned about brainstorming, organization, and structuring thoughts. I found the class interesting because it was all new information.
- The use of color coding paper helped me reflect on my mistakes.
- I received personal attention. They (facilitators) were nice and not judging me.
- It helped in setting guidelines in my writing and distinguishing first, second, and third, etc. It emphasized voice and writing voice.
- It helped me realize certain things I can improve in my writing that I did not realize I was doing wrong.

These comments suggest that students appreciated both the content of the mini-lessons as well as the overall structure of the workshops.

When asked about the feedback they received from their peers, some students also expressed a general appreciation of the process:

- It was much help to have peer feedback. It is a way to have more word options and see our sentences in different ways.
- It is good to let someone else look at your paper. She found errors that I did not see.
- It is good to gather ideas from different perspectives.
- An open format with peer feedback is a positive approach.

Twenty-four percent of participants did not answer this question, and 10% did say that peer review was not beneficial and/or they did not participate in peer review.

The participants were also asked if the facilitators were helpful. The following statements are a selection of participants' responses.

- They told us what words to use less to get to the point of paper and to prewrite.
- They explained everything and answered all questions.
- It was an awesome presentation on the subject.
- I loved the examples, and they helped me understand the material better.
- They were very helpful and explained everything in detail.

Thirty-eight percent of participants did not answer this question; however all students that did answer the question had positive responses.

When asked, "What did you like most about the writing workshop?" Twenty-nine percent of participants did not answer this question. From the participants who did answer this question, some selected responses are included below:

- We get to hear from a professor about what it is they want from our papers.
- Having the opportunity to learn and actually being able to put it into practice by revising our papers.
- I will definitely use this workshop again. This was extremely helpful and motivating to start writing on the right track.
- The handouts. . .
- I liked the interactive discussion among the instructors and students.

In contrast, one participant suggested that the worst part of the writing workshop was the time (two hours). Another participant felt that there were too few participants his/her session, while another participant felt that it was too short, and the university needs more workshops offered.

In answer to the question "How likely are you to attend again?", 61% stated that they were *Very Likely* to attend another session of the writing workshop, while 17% stated that they were *Likely* to attend another session of the writing workshop. Six percent of participants stated that they were *Not Likely* to attend another writing workshop. However, 39% of participants did not answer this question.

Lastly, when participants were asked, "How likely are you to recommend the writing workshop to a friend?", 67% stated that they were *Very Likely* to recommend the writing workshop to a friend, while 17% stated that they were *Likely* to recommend the writing workshop to a friend. Thirty-nine percent did not answer this question.

DISCUSSION

The participants' pre-survey data suggest that students attending the workshops have problems with writing. Based upon the preselected

topics for the mini-lessons, it appears that the mini-lessons addressed the topics participants were most concerned about with their writing. For example, 62% of the participants stated that they needed help with starting a paper; the writing workshop provided the mini-lesson *How to get started/Prewriting*. In these sessions, participants were shown various ways of brainstorming to generate ideas, such as creating a web of ideas, making an outline, using graphic organizers to compare/contrast ideas, sequence events, and show advantages and disadvantages of a topic. In addition, participants were shown how to write a thesis statement and provide supporting details prior to writing, which helps them to organize the paper before beginning.

Moreover, 33% stated they needed help with revising and editing. During the mini-lessons *Integrating Citations and Editing, Organization and Structure, Academic Voice and Revising* participants were shown techniques on how to revise their paper,. The facilitators continued to draw participants back to graphic organizers to show how writing can be organized during the prewriting, drafting, and revising phase. In addition, participants were shown how to edit their papers using a Ratiocination activity. The activity involved the use of color pencils. The activity requires using different color pencils to circle and change “to be” verbs, punctuation, spelling, and grammar errors, and providing sentence variety. Based upon the feedback on the post-survey, participants found the activity to be helpful in teaching them to edit.

Although only 14% of participants had submitted their paper to their instructor, the vast majority had not submitted their paper. Yet, they knew what their weaknesses were as a writer. They perceived the idea of starting a paper to be difficult, as 62% had problems with starting a paper.

Even though the participants are university students who are required to use APA, 6th edition in their assignments, many participants have not been taught how to use the APA manual. Some students, therefore, stated that their goal for attending the

writing workshop was to learn how to write using APA, 6th edition. A mini-lesson was dedicated to helping students integrate APA citations into their writing.

Although only 38% of participants had an A average in their course, 67% expected their ending grade would be an A. Although the authors cannot say that the students attended the writing workshop so that they can improve to an A, participants attending the writing workshop found it to be beneficial. In their quest to make an A in their course, 61% stated that they are *Very Likely* to attend another writing workshop in the future. In addition, the 67% stated that they would tell their friends about the writing workshop.

For many participants, they felt that they were able to receive feedback from their peers and/or the facilitators in a non-threatening way. When writing, it is best to let someone else view your paper. It can be difficult for one to catch his or her mistakes. Many of the students participated in the workshops because their instructor recommended it. The participants were eager to ask for help from their peers and the facilitators, when those same participants may or may not ask writing-based questions from their own instructor.

Overall, the writing workshops had a positive effect. The comments were positive from the participants. Based upon the feedback, the participants felt the topics covered in the mini-lessons and the overall structure of the workshop was beneficial in helping them to start their paper, organize their paper, revise and edit their paper, and format it according to APA, 6th edition.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to see if a writer’s workshop would work in a university setting. The results of this study have many educational implications. Many students enter college without having mastered writing in their K-12 education. College classes require students to write critically while using academic language. This type of writing may differ from the writing that was required of students in high school English classes.

For example, in high school courses, students are sometimes taught to use many forms of grammar (adjectives, adverbs, etc.) in their writing as a method for enhancing the writing. In academic writing, students should be specific in what they are writing and simply get to the point. These workshops, therefore, were to assist students in understanding academic writing.

The results of the student surveys suggest that although writing workshops are generally used in K-12 classrooms, they can be beneficial to university students as well. Offering these workshops across disciplines may actually increase students' abilities to write for an academic audience. This can be beneficial because a business student may be able to ask questions of an education student's paper that another education student may not catch. When writing academically, the writer must assume the reader knows nothing. For example, across many fields of study, the use of acronyms is abundant. The reader from the same discipline may peer edit the paper and quickly pass over an acronym because he or she knows what the acronym means. When a student from another discipline reads it, however, he can ask the pertinent questions that will allow the writer to go back and edit her paper so that the paper will be clear to all readers.

Next, writing workshops at the university level allows instructors to make a recommendation to their students to receive writing assistance. Many instructors do not have the dedicated time to teach writing in their courses due to the demand of covering their course content. In addition, many faculty members may feel that students should have learned how to write in high school. Yet, many students are exiting high school without the necessary writing skills to be successful in college and/or the workforce. Writing workshops provide students the opportunity to receive individualized academic writing help from a professor and a librarian who's well-versed in helping students locate resources and citing those resources appropriately in their paper to avoid plagiarism. The co-teaching between the professor and librarian allows for each to assist students with her expertise.

The writing workshops are two-fold: 1) Students are able to learn or review a skill through a mini-lesson; and 2) Students are able to receive feedback on their own writing. At universities, most writing centers offer writing labs. Writing labs, however, are one-on-one with a graduate student helping a student write. Although writing labs are beneficial, they do not have the mini-lesson that allows the student to learn a new skill or review a skill. Writing workshops also allow writers to receive feedback from their peers. This is beneficial for students to talk through their paper with another student, while the facilitators provide guidance and feedback as well. As one student stated, "We get to hear from a professor about what it is they want from our papers."

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are several limitations to this study. First, with the exception of two students, the majority of the students only attended one session of the writing workshops. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the overall significance of the study. Second, this study was a preliminary study to gathering data in hopes of offering frequent writing workshops throughout the academic year. Most of the data that was collected was demographic data and responses that cannot be quantified by statistics to determine if the study from pre- to post-survey produced statistically significant results. Although it is not a fully quantitative study, the students' responses warrant further examinations as the responses are essential to understanding how students perceived the writing workshops. The third limitation is the small amount of participants. Although the workshops were announced in various venues and with flyers, many students do not seek writing help until or unless they have a paper that is due. Then, students may not still seek writing assistance on their own. In this study, however, five students, or 19% of total participants, did seek writing assistance on their own.

CONCLUSION

Although quality writing skills are necessary in the academic and business worlds, many students enter into college without proficient writing skills. It

is, therefore, critical for universities to assist students with writing so that students can be successful in their classes and beyond college. Writing workshops can help students become better writers. When students become better writers, it will assist them in successfully completing their courses. In addition, it will help them to advance in their careers. In this pilot program, students had positive feedback for the writing workshop's format, themes, and instructors. The comments show that the majority of students attending workshops would like to participate in future sessions and would recommend these to their friends. The preliminary findings of this research suggest that writing workshops should continue to be offered. With the continuation of the program, a more robust study of these workshops should be conducted to determine the long-term effects of a writing workshop with postsecondary students and to determine how many writing workshops are needed to make a statistically significant improvement in students' writings.

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Column

Return to the Trenches

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I returned to teaching in a high school English classroom for one year to experience for myself the changes that had taken place in the last two decades. At the conclusion of the year away from higher education, I resumed my teaching at the university to share my experiences with teacher candidates. There was another motive for my return to the high school classroom. During the previous years, I had been instructing teacher candidates' pedagogy designed to help them engage adolescents in the candidates' literacy classrooms. Other than supervising candidates in the field, I had not been in the high school teaching field in over twenty years, and I wanted to take the opportunity to practice the different instructional strategies I was teaching my university students. The strategies utilized in my high school classroom created an experience for students to connect with the content by creating an environment of critical thinking with a specific focus on the students' interests by providing the students with choices.

The challenges set before me were overwhelming yet exhilarating as I taught six classes of English—two classes of freshmen boys and four of junior boys. It was time for me to discover what inspired and motivated 120 high school boys. My goal was to motivate and inspire students to read, research, ask questions, and think critically. An additional challenge was to ascertain how to ignite their curiosity and motivate them. How could I help these students to connect with and think beyond the words on the page and have a transactional experience with the literature and content? These were the goals I had as I returned to the trenches.

Motivating high school boys was initially difficult because of my large classes. Just as Dewey stated, "Everything is arranged for handling as large numbers of children as possible; for dealing with children en masse, as an aggregate of units; involving, again, that they be treated passively" (1900, p. 49). It seemed more like a banking system—deposit information, withdraw information when asked, and assess the withdrawal. Passive learning was not my style of teaching because students were not ATM machines. They were not engaging and connecting with the material, yet I wanted the students to be actively engaged in their own learning. The system that was in place created an instructional challenge, but I decided my first step was to work to understand the students' experiences and interests to help them make connections to what they already knew. In this way, students could restructure and reformulate their new knowledge by creating a positive, trusting, encouraging environment through conversation. My approach contrasted sharply with the banking system analogy. Discussion is a "free-flowing, open-ended, ungoverned, often chaotic exchange of whatever passes for thought in the minds of the participants" (Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007, p.47). True conversations with our learners need to take place because it nurtures and encourages critical thinking.

"Education, therefore, must begin with psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, and habits..." (Dewey, 1897, p. 78) Connecting to the individual student's interests was an obstacle, and the students initially remained quiet and drew away from conversation. In addition, they lacked interest in English class; however, I

discovered that risk taking in front of their peers engaged and interested them if they worked in small groups. As they worked collaboratively, I uncovered their interests and abilities based on dialogue within the groups. Conversations erupted, engagement ensued, and the discussions pushed their thinking as they questioned one another. A transformation in my students was taking place as they immersed themselves in the content, connecting it to their own experiences. The type of learners in my classes and their interests quickly became evident through the discussions and projects.

Creating a social community that connects students' experiences and interests is interactive and engaging and promotes educative growth. For example, when we studied myths and legends in class, the students created visual adaptations of the myths—the one stipulation was that everyone in the group had to appear in their presentation—all students had to be active participants. Before students began, they had to research the origin and contexts of the myths to uncover the ancient origin and the universal truths they would represent, but the visual representation was their choice. Some students wrote scripts and performed them in class; others used pantomime; and those who did not want to act in front of class used technology to represent the myths. Some students developed an iMovie with their groups while reflecting the myth's truths; others created video projects using still and motion pictures creating current versions of the myths. The projects exhibited students' critical thinking and understanding of the content, and the students stated in their post-project evaluations that they enjoyed both the options and collaborating with classmates for the presentation. Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster, and McCormick (2010) reported that "giving choices and using online resources may...help improve the understanding of content area reading" (p. 643).

According to the student evaluations, the majority of the students stated that the presentations were engaging, and they put in more effort than they normally did with traditional reports. They had positive memories of the experience and still remembered the truths of the myths six months

later. High-interest literacy activities and instruction are integral to readers' success in literacy programs because adolescents learn literacy skills from their own daily literacy experiences (Rogers, 2004).

The myth project created a transactional literacy experience. Students could recall the content, and their understanding of the material created both an efferent and aesthetic response. Rosenblatt (2005) discussed readers having a transactional experience by finding literature that is personally relevant and connects with readers' lives. In this way, the literature will engage them and help them reflect and respond to the text, linking the ideas in the text to their own personal lives thus increasing its meaning and purpose. At the end of the year, the students continued to reflect on the experience and shared how it enhanced their learning of the material because they could connect it to their own lives and choose how to represent the myths. The experience was authentic, and their collaboration helped them uncover the truths in order to make the connections.

We, as educators, are to create an educative experience that "arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense" (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 3). My students reported that they enjoyed demonstrating their understanding of materials through the creation of PowerPoint presentations, videos, drama, written compositions, and projects of their choosing that stimulated their creativity and comprehension. They had to make connections with their learning experience by utilizing their own interests and applying the concepts to their own lives. In their evaluations, they stated that they had not connected to their own thinking or collaborated to challenge peers' thinking previously in their classes, and these high interest strategies transformed their thinking and made an indelible impression.

To create a literacy experience, educators must connect their content to students' interests and experiences to help them find meaning and purpose in their learning. Another example utilized in my classroom, took place when we were beginning Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Students engaged in inquiry as they researched the Salem Witch Trials.

Reading should be “related to the ongoing stream of his own life” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 64). With this in mind, students conducted research on their iPads, took notes, and participated in classroom discussions that demonstrated their understanding of this moment in our history and connected it to their own experiences and our more current history. Our conversations were fluid and followed the topics students uncovered through their research. Students connected Salem to other events and experiences that paralleled the occurrences of the Salem Witch Trials. Kitsis (2008) states, “students enjoy the chance to develop critical skills and knowledge in collaboration with their peers, while their instructors reap the side benefit of being able to use their finite teaching time more effectively” (p. 36). In addition to finding other historical connections, students chose books of various genres and reading levels that were inspired by the trials and presented these to their peers. The genres varied based on students’ interests. Students read nonfiction, fiction, biographies, graphic novels, and were able to find examples that reflected the Salem Witch Trials while reading books that interested them. “The adolescent reader needs to encounter literature for which he possesses emotional and experiential ‘readiness.’ ...that world must be fitted into the context of his own understanding and interests” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 65).

The theoretical research of Rosenblatt and Dewey inspired my pedagogy in the high school classroom. The literature generated the opportunity to lead the students into richer and more challenging literary experiences. The transactional response is key to the “personal nourishment that literature can give” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 68). Only looking at the author’s point of view or the information about the literature such as the facts of the story, the author’s background, or the literary elements ignores students’ responses and interaction with the literature. Because growth is active not passive, my goal was to stimulate deeper responses and connections to the content by inspiring, engaging, and challenging my students’ thinking. Literature should not only be an object to be described or manipulated, but also it should be a “live circuit between readers and books” (p. 66).

While reading the novels *Night*, *Farewell to Arms*, and *Great Gatsby*, students researched the era and the events surrounding the period of the novels in order to make connections. They created digital projects, videos, and re-enactments that both engaged and challenged their thinking. According to Ryan (2008), authentic learning experiences should be community-based, cross-curricular and connected to students’ complex textual lives. Not only does this engage the learner, but also it builds their comprehension skills. Not all students achieve the same outcomes in the same way because of the diverse needs of students. Using authentic projects help students build on their strengths and achieve outcomes because it utilizes key academic skills. All of these conditions matter if we are to engage students as successful, interested, and motivated learners.

Based upon the student evaluations, by providing students a choice to research and discuss an aspect of a specific period in history that interested them, their curiosity was ignited, and they were inspired and motivated to work. Being able to have a choice of presentation modalities also encouraged their creativity. Allowing for choice and connection, students took responsibility for their learning. Through this connective research, they became aware of the world around them. Ryan (2008) stated that students need to “be engaged through connectedness to the world, intellectual stimulation” (p. 191).

Intellectual stimulation emerged through research and discussions as students reflected and thought critically about history and related it back to the literature reflecting on the impact the events have had on the world around them. Teachers can still teach basics, but “they must be part of the new “basics” of multimodal texts, multiliteracies, technologies, collaboration, new ways of knowing, innovation, problem solving, and creativity” (Ryan, 2008, p. 191).

Thinking is the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two

become continuous. Their isolation, and consequently their purely arbitrary going together, is canceled; a unified developing situation takes its place. The occurrence is now understood; it is explained; it is reasonable, as we say, that the thing should happen as it does. (Dewey, 1916, p. 83)

To have a reflective experience, every step and every phase must be connected to the whole. Students “must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come” (Dewey, 1934, p. 56). If students move too quickly, without thought and reflection, the actions lose their meaning; otherwise the actions become mere routines and arrest development, movement, and growth, and there is no consistency. A reflective experience forces us to “analyze to see just what lies between so as to bind together cause and effect, activity and consequence” (Dewey, 1916, p. 82).

At the end of the school year, my students were intellectually challenged and made to take risks that they did not realize they were capable of making. Their learning was active, reflective, and transactional. Their self-efficacy was strengthened, and they believed in their own learning. They understood the literature at a more critical level and made unexpected connections to their own lives. Many students read more than they ever had, and they felt safe in their learning environment as encouraging, supporting peers surrounded them.

One of the challenges to the literature curriculum at both the middle and high school levels is how to help students...develop conceptual understanding of all these knowledge sources to help them learn to appreciate and develop a disposition to read complex literary works across the lifespan. (Lee & Spratley, 2010, p. 10)

Returning to the trenches and seeing my students both excited about their own learning and believing in themselves made my journey to the trenches an experience I can never replace. I put theory into practice and witnessed how my students were

inspired, encouraged, and motivated based upon the pedagogy I utilized. Not only was my experience transformational for me, but also it was transformational for my students. I am excited to share my experience with my teacher candidates. In one year, I learned how to ignite the curiosity of adolescent boys. They need to have active, engaging instruction that allows them to make choices in their exhibition of understanding while connecting content to their lives. There are so many opportunities to offer students choices across all content areas to strengthen their literacy, and this one- year proved to be a success.

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