Practice-Based Instruction in English Teacher Education: Teaching Novice Teachers to Lead Class Discussions

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Abstract: This article describes a yearlong investigation of how explicit, focused instruction in facilitating classroom discussion, combined with approximations of (and peer/instructor feedback on) this practice, impact the way(s) preservice English teachers learn to discuss literature with secondary students.

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Leading classroom discussions about literature is a touchstone activity of many English Language Arts teachers; talking about texts with students is one way to situate students as producers of literary meaning rather than consumers (Blau, 2003). Dialogue in the English classroom is needed now more than ever because "it supports students' literacy achievement learning and classroom engagement, but it also prepares students for active participation in democratic life" (Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013, p. 1). However, research also shows that discussions are not taking place as much as they should (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003). One potential reason is, as one novice teacher articulated, "I have to rely on the students during a discussion. It's hard to plan activities where you can't be sure they will come prepared, or where it's hard to know what they will find interesting and what they won't. What if they just decide not to do it? If it's not going well, you can't hide it" (Williamson, 2013, p. 34). The unpredictability of a class discussion can be intimidating, and novice teachers tend to underestimate the amount of planning that goes into facilitating a class discussion and instead rely on a few predetermined questions to keep the discussion moving.

As an English teacher educator, I routinely see pre-service teachers (PSTs) who leave the comforts of their upper-level English classes in which literary discussions are a mainstay; in their college years, they become accustomed to the ease with which class discussions often take place. As one recently recognized,

> I think I have always led good discussions in my English and education classes, but I usually attributed that to the fact that those classes were full of English/teaching majors. Facilitating a discussion in a classroom full of 11th graders is a different story—most of them don't love the content like we do, so they might not feel the need to participate.

As McCann (2014) rightly points out in *Transforming Talk into Text,* "Inquiry and discussion do not just happen" (p. 109). Encouraging PSTs to recognize the need for planning discussions is an important tool that education professors can impact. Not wanting literary discussions to completely fall by the wayside has led me to consider the ways I can help PSTs make the transition from being students in a senior seminar in Shakespeare where the discussions seem to magically propel themselves, to being the teachers in 11th grade classrooms where reluctance to participate in a class discussion may be common. I've identified and implemented four strategies to prepare PSTs with skills and confidence in leading class discussions about literature. Those strategies are as follows:

1. Introducing PSTs to and explicitly demonstrating pre-discussion, during-discussion, and post-discussion strategies during my methods class (Blau, 2003; Bomer, 2011; Williamson, 2013).

2. Allowing time in my methods class for an approximation of this practice, or an opportunity to rehearse and enact discrete components of complex practice in settings of reduced complexity (Grossman, 2011). PSTs practice using these discussion strategies as they lead a class discussion on a young adult novel.

3. PSTs are then given feedback on their approximations in three specific areas of classroom discussion: using one another's ideas as resources, building collective knowledge, and learning from others' contributions (Ball & Forzani, 2009).

4. The final step has PSTs record themselves leading a discussion with the students in their secondary classroom placements. The same language (described above in III) is used to evaluate these classroom discussions and is used in our methods course to show connections or lack thereof between the practices we discuss in class and the application in their secondary classrooms.

Typically, in methods courses, discussion strategies may be read about, discussed, and even modeled, but PSTs are rarely given an opportunity to practice the strategies before their intern teaching experience begins. This is because, traditionally, English teaching methods courses use a theoretical approach to investigating pedagogy, rather than a practice-based approach (Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). Little research has been conducted into the benefits of providing practice-based instruction in methods courses, especially in terms of facilitating classroom discussion about literature. However, a recent movement in teacher education suggests an actual benefit to including more practice-based instruction (*TeachingWorks*). More needs to be understood about the ways PSTs learn to facilitate discussions and about how the opportunity to practice leading classroom discussions in methods courses might influence the PSTs' intern teaching experiences. Currently, PSTs perceive the benefits of partaking in classroom experience as paramount to learning the specific skills necessary to teach (Whitney, Olan, & Fredricksen, 2013). Can these perceptions be challenged when there is explicit instruction in leading classroom discussion where PSTs are given the opportunity to practice these skills in an approximation of practice (Grossman, 2011)?

In this article, I will first describe the observations that led me to incorporate more practice-based instruction in my methods courses. Next, I will depict the four strategies, including practice-based activities that I incorporated into my methods courses in an effort to improve PSTs' discussion leading skills. Finally, I will provide a record of the discoveries made during this pedagogical investigation and analyzed anecdotal evidence

from the PSTs' approximations and intern teaching experiences.

Connecting the Classroom and the University

The decision to include more practice-based instruction for classroom discussions in my methods course began with the sentiment that our students complain there is no connectivity between our methods courses and their field placements. This comment was the basis of an early conversation with my colleagues in the School of Education (my position is housed in the Department of English, within the College of Arts and Sciences) when I began my career at my current university. During intern teaching, our PSTs concurrently take two methods courses, one of which is my course for English majors. This method of organizing intern teaching situates methods instructors to engage students in strategies that help connect methods courses and the classroom, as instructors have access to PSTs while they are beginning their intern teaching. In typical intern teaching situations, PSTs leave the university setting completely. Leaving the university (wherein PSTs have hitherto performed in the role of *student*) and simultaneously entering the teaching field fulltime (where PSTs' role is changing to that of teacher) can lead students to feel a disconnect between the theory they read in methods courses and the "real experience" of the secondary classroom. Whether this disconnect actually occurs (if PSTs actually translate little to none of what they learn in methods courses into their teaching), or whether the disconnect is a misperception of the PSTs (if PSTs actually translate much of what they learn in methods courses without realizing it; therefore, the disconnect is only a perception, not a reality) is unclear. However, the tension between theory and experience has been reported on by others, such as Whitney, Olan, and Fredricksen (2013):

> Anyone who has worked with PSTs has occasionally felt the vehemence of their desire for more practical material and less (or, sometimes, no) material they deem theory. By *theory* they seem to mean not only theory in the classic sense but also any evidence from research, discussion of ethics or socioeconomic issues or policy, or other aspects of the context for

teaching. By *practical* they seem to mean concrete activities that they can use in the classroom the next day with little or no modification or reflection. Tensions between theory and practice permeate the work of English teacher education, reaching into every area of our work all the way down to course organization and the methods texts we choose (p. 184).

Valuing the practical experience of teaching over studying pedagogical theory seems to be one aspect of the disconnect that PSTs report, which leads to asking about the purpose that theory serves in our methods courses. Wanting our PSTs to be able to do more than just go through the actions of teaching, we put forth foundational readings in our courses that provide PSTs with an understanding of student learning and literacy. Professors' intentions "for preservice students are that they develop ways of articulating their emerging practice as teachers, develop productive ways of sharing those in professional conversation with colleagues, and through such conversations develop sets of principles that can guide their ongoing thinking about teaching into the future" (Whitney, Olan, & Fredricksen, 2013, p. 185). We encourage our PSTs to be thinking, reflective practitioners who make intentional pedagogical decisions. We encourage them to become stance-takers in their professions rather than reactive in their teaching.

Difficulty in recognizing the influence of theoretical readings, ideas, and philosophies on classroom practice may influence PSTs' disconnect. Regardless of how real, or actual, the disconnect between theory and the novice teachers' practices, though, the fact that many of them report its existence means that it exists. How, then, to bridge the (perceived) gap between methods courses and intern teaching becomes a question of emphasis; it has also been the topic of many conversations in which my Department of Education colleagues and I have engaged. This question, coupled with my interest in improving PSTs' discussion leading skills, led to my investigation into how I can help PSTs see that what we study in our methods courses can directly translate into leading classroom discussions in the field.

Practice-Based Instruction: A Move toward Bridging the Gap

The intersection of the perceived disconnect between methods courses/theory and intern teaching, and the difficulties English PSTs face with leading classroom discussions, is the impetus for this work. I set out to investigate how explicit, focused, practice-based instruction in facilitating classroom discussion may impact novice English teachers' abilities to discuss literature with secondary students, and whether attention to more practice-based instruction in teacher education can help bridge the theory/practice gap for English PSTs. The research questions guiding this experience follow:

1. How can methods instructors use practice-based instruction to prepare their English PSTs to facilitate classroom discussions about literature?

2. Does concentrated instruction on how to lead class discussions about literature influence the ways English PSTs lead discussions (according to their personal perceptions about what influences their teaching)?

3. How does an approximation of the practice of leading a class discussion about literature, and subsequent feedback on those approximations, help shape PSTs' practices when they engage in class discussions during intern teaching?

4. Will explicit focus on leading classroom discussions help PSTs see the connectivity between their methods courses and their teaching experiences?

There were four strategies incorporated during this investigation: (1) Introduction and study of pedagogical theory/practices in leading discussions, (2) Approximations of this practice (i.e. opportunities to practices leading discussions), (3) Feedback on approximations, and (3) Recorded classroom experience. Within each strategy, PSTs wrote reflections and were asked to consider both what was learned from each experience and how their coursework may have influenced their pedagogy. Making cognitive, written connections between the pedagogical theory and the classroom practice is important for building PSTs' belief in methods courses and in helping novice teachers recognize the importance of pedagogical readings in sustaining professional

growth throughout their careers. Teacher educators interested in moving toward more practice-based instruction may find the following section of interest as it details the four strategies implemented during this work.

Strategy One: Studying Discussion Strategies. The first stage involved introducing PSTs to discussion leading strategies and pedagogical theory. Two texts PSTs read in our class that were instrumental to our work with literature discussions were Blau's *The Literature Workshop* (2003) and Bomer's *Building Adolescent Literacy in Today's English Classrooms* (2011). In particular, Blau's text, based largely on Rosenblatt's theories of transactional reading, helped build the foundation on which our class formed its goals about class discussions. We discussed in detail the difference between situating students, as Blau calls it, as "consumers" of literature versus "producers" of meaning in literature. Inherent in this theory is the belief that there is not one correct answer to the question "what does it mean?" The chapters include defined ways to invite students into the literature, make it accessible for secondary students, and help novice teachers find ways to connect writing activities to building meaning in literature. Blau offers transcripts from his literature workshops so readers can see how discussions unfold. In this way, his chapters do more than explain the strategies he's writing about, but they also provide pedagogical modeling for PSTs.

Additionally, Bomer's text provides PSTs with insight into how secondary students can be prompted to go deeper with their thinking about literature. Bomer focuses on the actions a teacher can take in order to "build habits of talk and dispositions toward inquiring conversations that students can carry over into their educated, literate lives" (p.140). The chapter "Teaching Toward Great Conversations" provided a basis on which to focus our efforts during discussion; the specific responses a teacher makes to encourage students' critical thinking and participation in literature discussions include eliminating evaluative responses ("That's good" or "That's right"), making trouble, asking why, opening with a broad invitation, and pointing out connections between responses. As we read both Blau and Bomer's texts, the novice PSTs in my course and I

would take turns modeling the strategies discussed, breaking down the practice of discussion leading into pre-, during-, and post-discussion (see Figure 1). In previous semesters of teaching methods courses, I had never explicitly broken the act of leading discussion into component parts. Attention was paid to the broader implications of classroom discussion (i.e., making sure every student participates, building "student-centered," open-ended questions), but never before had I asked PSTs to consider in detail the different ways to respond to student comments (i.e. "making trouble" or "asking why"). However, drawing attention to the intricacies of leading classroom discussions was just the first step.

Strategy Two: Approximations of Practice. Our investigation of discussion-leading strategies did not end with studying the scholarship. We went beyond reading about, talking about, and modeling the discussion strategies. The next strategy employed was to have PSTs plan and carry out their own 20-minute class discussions about a YA novel, Green's *Looking for Alaska*. We repeated this process with *Divergent, Thirteen Reasons Why*, and *Uglies* the following fall semester when students were also submersed half-time in their field placements. Figure 1 outlines the process and illustrates how we broke whole-class discussions into smaller component parts: pre-discussion, during-discussion, and post-discussion strategies.

Discussion Leading Practice
Looking for Alaska

Learning how to conduct successful classroom discussion about literature takes practice. In this course, you will practice this skill as the class engages in reading John Green's *Looking for Alaska*. The class will be divided in half. You will be responsible for leading half of the class in a discussion of your assigned section of the novel. If you bring handouts, this means nine people (including me). The discussion will last for 20 minutes; if you plan a writing activity it should take no longer than five of those minutes.

Throughout the semester, we have discussed different methods and strategies for ensuring classroom discussions are as productive as possible. Here is a comprehensive list of the strategies discussed; keep these in mind as you prepare for your class discussion of *Looking for Alaska*.

Pre-reading strategies:

- Writing, reflection drawing on students' preconceived notions
- Writing to think through what students want to say
- Think, Pair, Share
- Relaying a relatable story to students
- Divide class into smaller groups/partners to discuss before whole class discussion

During reading strategies:

- Open with a broad invitation
- Maintain awareness of students' point-of-view; reflect that view back to them
- Summarize, restate, clarify
- Ask for examples from the text
- ASK WHY!
- Argue a point
- Restart the conversation with a new question
- Make connections to other texts, other comments, pop culture, etc.
- Eliminate evaluation part of responding ("That's right" or "That's wrong")
- Ask for comments or reactions
- Analyze the text, a comment, or the discussion itself
- Point out differences in opinion and analyze those differences
- "Make trouble" and get students comfortable with it

Post reading strategies:

- Writing: reflection on what was learned
- Determine what students may still have questions about
- Summarize the discussion's findings
- Create a usable document (i.e. list on the board) from the discussion
- Exit slip to determine students' understanding of the topic
- Have students respond in letter form to determine what the next discussion should address

Figure 1: Directions for Discussion Leading Practice

This list was both instructor and student-generated and remained flexible throughout the semester. Its final version included many more strategies than listed here, all added by students directly from Bomer and Blau.

In both semesters, students wrote reflections (see Figure 2) on their own discussions, and peers gave feedback on their performances. The reflections served as a metacognitive act to encourage PSTs to consider how planning for activities on which typical teacher education courses focus efforts is only part of the teaching challenge; carrying out those plans is the other, often overlooked, aspect.

Discussion of *Looking for Alaska*
Reflection

In a few paragraphs, reflect on the discussion you led for your section of *Looking for Alaska*. Use the following questions to guide your reflection:

- How do you think your overall discussion went?
- What were some of the strengths of the discussion?
- What could have gone better?
- What did you try to accomplish (i.e. what were your goals)?
- What were the strategies for successful discussion you attempted to employ, and how successful were those strategies?
- Where did you learn the strategies mentioned above? (From observing other teachers, from textbooks we've read in class, from discussions in methods courses, from participating in discussions? Try and be specific.)
- Discuss what you took away from this experience of leading a discussion.

Figure 2: Discussion Reflection Questions for PSTs

The reflection that PSTs wrote after leading a discussion in our methods course (as described in Figure 2) encouraged them to consider how that discussion may or may not have gone as planned and what could be learned from the experience. Additionally, PSTs were urged to consider *how* and *why* they chose to lead the discussion the way they did in order to recognize connections between theory and practice. The specific

research question these reflections aimed to answer was whether concentrated instruction on how to lead class discussions about literature influence the ways PSTs lead discussions according to their personal perceptions about what influences their teaching.

Strategy Three: Feedback on Approximations. Determining how to give helpful, constructive feedback on teaching practice has been a noted struggle for teacher educators (Ball & Forzani, 2009). Going beyond comments on "student engagement," our hope was to build a universal language that PSTs and methods instructors, field supervisors, and mentor teachers could use to have more nuanced discussions about what teaching practice does, can, and should look like. My colleagues and I have begun using universal language to ground these conversations. Rather than reproduce work that has already been done to identify meaningful teaching practices and accompanying language, we chose to use pedagogical language already established by Ball and Forzani (2009) and the University of Michigan's *TeachingWorks* organization. The goal of *TeachingWorks* is to create "beginning teachers who are skillful at connecting with and helping their students develop. Our signature is a set of high-leverage instructional practices. Skillful teaching requires sensitive enactment of these with different content, students, and contexts." *TeachingWorks* has identified 19 high leverage practices, from which our teacher education program focuses instruction and enactment of five. One of those five practices is Leading a Whole-Class Discussion, and I use the *TeachingWorks* description of this practice during my pedagogical work with PSTs:

> In a whole-class discussion, the teacher and all of the students work on specific content together, using one another's ideas as resources. The purposes of a discussion are to build collective knowledge and capability in relation to specific instructional goals and to allow students to practice listening, speaking, and interpreting. In instructionally productive discussions, the teacher and a wide range of students contribute orally, listen actively, and respond to and learn from others' contributions.

For the purposes of using common language to provide feedback on teaching, I broke this description into three components for PSTs to consider as they observed each other leading class discussion (see Figure 3).

Discussion Leading Peer Review

What did you observe as **strengths** of this discussion? Try and name specific practices that the teacher employed, which made the discussion meaningful or successful.

How well did the teacher do the following aspects of **Leading a whole-class discussion?** Again, use specific examples to back up your statements. (teachingworks.org)

I. Teacher and all of the students worked on specific content together, using one another's ideas as resources.

II. Used discussion to build collective knowledge and capability in relation to specific instructional goals and to allow students to practice listening, speaking, and interpreting.

III. Teacher and students contributed orally, listened actively, and responded to and learned from others' contributions.

Figure 3: Peer Review Questions for Discussion Leading

To consider what effect peer and instructor feedback may have on teaching practice suggests space for revisions of practice and improvement to occur. Opportunity for observable improvement in this practice took place twice: in a second approximation in the fall semester and in a recorded classroom discussion from their intern teaching placement.

Strategy Four: Recorded Classroom Discussions. During intern teaching, PSTs were required to record their teaching a number of times throughout the year, including during a classroom discussion they led. PSTs were then asked to review their recorded teaching and to reflect on their performances (see Figure 4).

> Leading a Whole-Class Discussion
> Final Reflection
>
> In a few paragraphs, reflect on your work with Leading a Whole-Class Dsicussion. Use the following qustions to guide your reflection:
> - Discuss your overall ability to lead a classroom discussion about literature at this point. Compare your ability to lead discussion now versus before the semester began.
> - What do you believe has attributed to any improvement you have made in your ability to lead discussions about literature this semester?
> - What do you believe you still need to improve upon in facilitating discussions about literature? How do you plan to make these improvements?
> - Include at least one anecdote from a discussion you led which you feel highlights a strength in your discussion leading skills. Include at least one anecdote from a discussion you led which you feel highlights a weakness in your discussion leading skills.

Figure 4: Final PST Reflection Questions on Leading a Discussion

The questions in the reflection aimed to answer the following research questions: How might an approximation of the practice of leading a class discussion about literature, and subsequent feedback on those approximations, influence the practices of PSTs when they engage in class discussions during intern teaching? Will explicit focus on leading classroom discussions help PSTs see the connectivity between their methods courses and their classroom teaching?

Improving Future Practice

Regarding the above research questions about approximations and practice, there are four important discoveries this investigation suggests: (1) Approximations can potentially predict future classroom practices; (2) Going off-script can be a difficult move for PSTs as they learn to lead class discussions (achieving "flow" in a discussion is a practiced skill); (3) Approximations can increase PSTs' confidence in enacting specific teaching moves; (4) Universal language can help PSTs and instructors communicate more productively about teaching practices.

Preparing to Discuss: Approximations May Predict Classroom Practices. In the first semester we were together, five of the seven PSTs focused on a 3-5 minute synopsis of the reading. Their argument for this pedagogical move was that it reminded students what the reading was about and could prepare the class to have a more in-depth discussion to follow. This finding supports what Williamson (2013) found in his own work, that PSTs tended to attend to their discussion-related instruction of how to prepare students to involve in the discussion they seek to enact and to be ready for the content of discussions. This preparation focused less on facilitating student discussion and practicing students' roles as discussants. My repeated critique was that the refreshers relied mostly on superficial, plot-driven questions, many that could be answered via a close-reading of *Sparknotes*. Immediately I realized that even approximations of practice are useful for seeing how applying theory-driven methods is a difficult move for PSTs. My students had engaged in thoughtful, philosophical conversations all semester about what types of questions can best elicit deep thinking about the texts they read in class, followed by approximations that showed a reluctance to go beyond summarizing with students.

To their credit, they were not incorporating the refreshers without thinking through why they were doing so. As one student reflected, "In the previous class discussion, things did not go so well, not by any fault of the discussion director, but because everyone had pretty much forgotten what happened in those sections of the book. That made me think, "What can I do in my discussion to make sure this doesn't happen?" Then I came up with the idea of a refresher activity." Like this PST, the others who employed refreshers did so in response to the first approximated discussion led by one of their peers wherein her classmates had indeed forgotten much of the material and needed some reminding. It was not the fact that a refresher was needed at the beginning of the discussions that I continued to question throughout the semester, but rather the ways in which the discussion leaders chose to "refresh" the students. These same PSTs also went on to conduct refresher-type activities with their secondary students, suggesting that the practices exhibited during the approximations often endured.

As an additional example of the enduring power of some approximated practices, the PSTs in this review prepared their secondary students to discuss with pre-discussion writing activities. This reflected the Blau and Bomer readings, which emphasized the importance of writing to think through what students like to talk about. During the approximations, all seven of the PSTs used some sort of writing activity to spark their class discussions, usually taking 2-4 minutes. Five of the seven went on to use this strategy in their intern teaching placements. During one PST's approximation, Kayla coupled her pre-discussion writing activity with a personal story to prompt further personal connections to the book. In this particular case, she relayed a story about a suicidal friend in our class discussion of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. This tactic garnered positive responses in both the peer and instructor feedback on her approximation. Kayla went on to incorporate personal stories as a writing prompt in her recorded intern teaching, as she reflects here:

> We are now reading *Hamlet*, so in class, we looked at Polonius's advice that he gives to his son, Laertes, before he sails off to France. I then gave them a writing assignment about what kind of advice they think their parents will give them when they graduate. However, before having them begin, I first shared a few paragraphs of a letter that my mom gave to me on my high school graduation day, May 31 of 2009. My students—who are usually extremely talkative—were silent as I read the letter. When I was done, they had a ton of questions and seemed genuinely interested in my life. For the first time in forever, they didn't have any complaints as they began their writing assignment. For this reason, I think that one of my strengths is my ability to connect content to my personal life. It not only makes the content more interesting to students, but gives them some insight as to who I am as a person. As a result, they give me the same insight into their own lives through their writing [...] We ended up having a great discussion, and I think it's because I started it with a personal story. I have been told by my peers that they enjoy when I connect my own life to my lessons, so I was excited to see my Utica kids respond the same way.

In this case, the affirming feedback she received on her approximation seemed to influence her decision to include this practice in her intern teaching as well. What both of these examples suggest is that an approximation can predict the strategies a novice teacher might employ, regardless of the feedback (either critiquing or affirming).

Going "Off-Script" and Reevaluating the "Questions Themselves". The PSTs in this investigation demonstrated the tendency, especially at first, to rely on their prescribed, prepared questions. Going "off-script" can be intimidating, as it requires the ability to reflect and respond quickly. As one PST revealed, "Last semester in ENG 398, when I led a discussion, I wrote down so many questions where I had an idea of where the discussion would go. I was flustered when questions took longer or shorter to answer than I anticipated. Many of the questions I came up with were interesting, but didn't have a learning goal."

Interestingly, this particular PST was given the following feedback on her in-class approximation: "Sometimes you ask too many questions at once. Sometimes the questions aren't clear." As her instructor, I suggested that she be cognizant about the number of questions she asked in order to build collective knowledge, that she check for clarity in the questions she asks, and that she be careful not to ask leading questions (or questions where she was looking for a specific answer in order to forward the discussion in the direction she wanted). In her recorded teaching, filmed about three months after the in-class approximation, she exhibited improvement in two areas: limiting the number of questions asked at once and making sure her questions were clearly articulated. At one point, she asks her students to consider the connections between a nonfiction article on atoms to their ongoing topic of the Holocaust, and to make personal connections to the article as well. Here she focuses in on the personal connections they may have made, and encourages students to see the difference between generic, universal connections and personal connections:

Melissa: Did anyone have some trouble coming up with their connection to the Holocaust? What did you have trouble with?

Student 1: I had trouble just connecting it because, like, they don't have anything in common.

Melissa: They have nothing in common, yeah. (In agreement, confirms.)

Student 2: I don't know, like, one cell is trillions of atoms. So, like, when they (Jews) were beaten and they lost blood, like those blood cells have trillions of atoms so they lost trillions of atoms.

Melissa: You have two connections?

Student 2: Well, in the article it discusses that we are all atoms. This relates to me because, like, I started off as one cell and trillions of atoms too.

Melissa: So, try, does that connect to you personally? Because everyone started off as a cell, right?

Student 2: Yeah.

Melissa: So how does it connect to you personally? Individually connects to you?

(Class is silent.)

Melissa: That only connects to you?

(Class is still silent.)

Melissa: That's the challenge, right?

Student 2: I have atoms.

Melissa: Exactly, but so does everyone else! (Melissa then redirects the discussion and considers the connections the students made between the article and the Holocaust.)

This exchange shows Melissa's dedication to asking only one question at a time (although phrased differently), even when that question is initially met with hesitation. She is careful not to move on from this line of questioning without getting the students to think about the connections between the article and themselves. She is also careful to address a critique she received on her approximation feedback, that her wording must be clear. Yet, the questions she asks still seem to suggest there is a particular answer she is seeking in order to propel the discussion in a particular direction: a tendency she revealed during her approximations as well. Rather than following the students' lead, Melissa maintained control by redirecting students' comments back to the original focus of her prepared questions, which perhaps missed a rich discussion and was instead met with some reluctance to answer.

Much of the focused feedback I gave students reflected this sentiment: "depth is better than breadth in leading discussions about literature." PST Danielle's response to this feedback illustrates a learned recognition that the number of questions covered in a discussion does not suggest a successful discussion:

> At the start of the semester, leading a class discussion was a bit intimidating. For instance, the first discussion I led in my Language Arts 9 class ended up being a 15-minute question and answer session where I, the instructor, asked a question and one student would answer. This formula continued for the remainder of the discussion. After a bit of self-reflection, I realized my weakness was in the questions themselves. My initial question was not open-ended "enough." While the question was not a yes or no answer, it still lacked the ability to provide deep, intellectual thought for the students. There was no necessity for the students to back up their answer or even disagree with the question; it was just too simple.

Here, Danielle is recognizing the need to rely less on the prepared discussion questions and more on improving her ability to respond to students in the varied ways discussed in our methods course: backing up their answers and disagreeing (i.e., "making trouble"). Although the terminology she uses to describe these during-discussion teaching moves is not exactly what we used in our methods course, the end goal is the same: to deepen students' responses during discussions.

Review of Danielle's later teaching recordings confirms her increased attention to this pedagogical move but also to her penchant for moving students toward certain objective answers. In an introduction to *The Odyssey*, Danielle asks her class to create a list of heroes and gods and what constitutes each: an open-ended launch to discussing these differences. She considers her students' different ideas and occasionally pushes them to explain their stances by asking follow-up questions. However, midway through the discussion, her questions lead students from their open-ended answers and toward a specific answer she was looking for: "A hero could more likely be an everyday sort of person whereas a God is an elevated or supernatural being." As written in her pre-teaching notes, she wanted to "push students towards these differences: A hero is brave, hard-working, courageous. A God is almighty, powerful, spiritual." These unambiguous learning goals she had for her students in this lesson run contrary to some degree with her teaching goal of allowing for more open-ended responses during discussions about literature. While she begins the lesson balancing these two goals, she ends the lesson in the mode described in her self- reflection: questions that had yes/no answers. While Danielle makes efforts here to allow the discussion to go off-script, this example points toward the tendency of novice teachers to adhere to their prepared scripts. A more expert teaching move may have been to use the students' examples to lead toward the conclusions she wanted students to draw about gods and heroes; however, this would have required reactive responses rather than prepared notes, arguably a more advanced discussion-leading skill. Instead, Danielle made space for open-ended answers at first but ultimately reverted back to her set of prescribed answers and responses to conclude.

Practicing the Practice = Increased Confidence. Is it possible to get better at a reactive teaching move like response during facilitating discussions than to practice it? Because the practice is dependent on reacting and processing what others have said, it is difficult to improve upon this skill without actually practicing it. This is a strong argument in favor of making space in teacher education courses for more approximations of practice. The opposing argument, however, suggests that because approximations are only partially representative of an actual teaching scenario, their value is limited. According to PST Steve:

> Being in the classroom twenty hours a week has helped me improve immensely, and the multiple times that I had to generate a discussion with my peers has instilled me with confidence. After being in my classroom with my own students for so many hours, I have learned what they respond to and what they do not, and I know their different interests and knowledge. This helps me better gauge their expected understanding of a text.

Steve's response points to the continued tension between the spaces that approximations hold in relation to classroom experiences. He acknowledges that the approximations during methods classes titled *discussion with my peers* increased his confidence leading classroom discussions; however, he makes the distinction between this experience and discussions with his "own students." Regardless of this important distinction, engaging PSTs in the motions of teaching practices is a step toward mastering these practices, and having confidence in one's performance is foundational.

Of the seven PSTs in this analysis, four cited approximations as a source of increased confidence in leading class discussions and/or public speaking. Madison, for example, predicted that

> When leading a discussion in the future, until I am seasoned, I will probably always use guided discussion handouts. I found these helpful when witnessing my colleagues' discussions as well. I think that having something concrete is very critical, at least for my discussion. Overall, I

think that it went very well, and I am now a bit more confident.

Although adjustments must always be made to fit a teacher's own students, the potential for increased confidence should trump the shortcomings that approximations pose in relation to an actual secondary classroom, namely the unpredictability of secondary students, the likelihood of peers (in this case, English majors discussing literature) to provide more robust responses in comparison to secondary students, and literary discourse expectations already established in a college setting.

This inquiry set out to investigate whether explicit focus on teaching practices and approximations of practice could help bridge the perceived gap between the classroom and methods courses. As the above quote suggests, there is still much work to be done in helping teacher candidates see connections between theory, practice, and the classroom. As the above quotes suggest, the PSTs all made some sort of distinction between the approximations and their classroom experiences. As novice teacher Kayla put it, "Of course, I did not make it through even half of the bullet points that I had prepared for the discussion. I planned my lesson with a high school class in mind, so it was no surprise that our group of college-aged English majors spent a lot more time on the prompts than most students would." Although approximations do seem to have an effect on the preservice teachers' confidence levels, this does not necessarily translate into a direct recognition of connectivity between methods courses and the classroom.

Teaching Language and Articulation Improved. As a teacher educator for the past seven years, I can say without hesitancy that the level of specificity used in discussions of teaching practice with my PSTs has deepened since incorporating universal language. Prior to this focused work on leading class discussions about literature, reflections and feedback about practice was usually limited to (1) student engagement (i.e., how many students participated in the discussion), and (2) keeping questions open-ended. Take for example Josh's reflection of his in-class approximation:

I was definitely focusing on eliciting "student" thinking. The way I did this most of the time was just asking people why they think the things they think. This is a simple, basic way to elicit student thinking. This was important to my discussion because, as I stated earlier, I wanted to get people thinking about the novel in new ways. I had to elicit that thinking to make my goal happen!

In the instructor feedback I provided to Josh, I suggested that he make more connections between the questions he was asking and the overall meaning of the text because, at times, his discussion seemed to focus solely on the individual thoughts of his students. For example, "Say more in your follow-up responses. Go beyond just eliciting student thinking, but also make connections between what they're saying or make deeper meaning of their responses." Because Josh and I already had pedagogical language established, we were able to discuss his teaching with specificity, which allowed two things to happen: (1) our attention was drawn to a high-level practice (eliciting individual students' responses during discussions), so we were able to look deeper than "engaging all students," and (2) although we did not necessarily agree on the success of the discussion overall, we could both acknowledge his success with eliciting student thinking.

The final category of our feedback sheet, *Teacher and students contributed orally, listened actively, and responded to and learned from others' contributions*, points to places of success in his discussion. In previous semesters, my constructive feedback would have ended there. However, the first two categories of our feedback sheet, *Teacher and all of the students worked on specific content together, using one another's ideas as resources* and *Used discussion to build collective knowledge and capability in relation to specific instructional goals and to allow students to practice listening, speaking, and interpreting* are places where his discussion lacked substance. Without a common pedagogical language in place, though, it would have been difficult to communicate effectively about these subtle teaching moves. His attention to his own practice was refined, and my ability to provide feedback about practice has sharpened.

The following revelation, made during Kayla's review of her teaching video, illustrates the kinds of detailed, self-diagnostic observations typical during these reflections:

> A couple of weeks ago, I led a classroom debate about the themes in Hamlet. As usual, my students impressed me with their arguments and enthusiasm. They were (for the most part) respectful and persuasive. When I went back and watched my video, I decided that I loved what they were saying, but not exactly how they were saying it. Rather than debating directly with students, they often went through me. Although they were addressing another student's point, they would make eye contact with me instead of that student. This is one thing that I really want to work on as a teacher. I want my students to be able to go back and forth, debating without any interjections from me. To do this, I plan on explicitly saying things like, "Baseel, what questions do you have for Jessica about her argument?" or "Joe, tell Ashley why you think her argument is flawed." If I ask specific leading questions such as these, students will be forced to look at their peers, rather than their teacher.

Kayla discusses her teaching practice using specific examples of a component part of discussions: responding to and learning from others' contributions. She is able to point to the language she should use in order to encourage more independent responses and discussion between the students in her classroom. Her response reflects a shift away from the belief that discussions about literature happen only by chance or by creating a fixed list of prepared questions.

Kayla instead shows here an understanding that there are component parts of leading discussions and has begun to realize that there are therefore skills she will need to teach her students about the act of discussing literature. This confirms a similar sentiment in Barker's 2015 study "Under Discussion: Teaching Speaking and Listening": "While the end goal may be for students to be able to enact independently and flexibly a set of discussion moves, we must be strategic about our role in scaffolding their mastery along the way" (Barker, 2015, p. 92). The end goal I formerly focused on with students, a

classroom wherein the majority of ELA students contribute to the discussion, is the result of many smaller, teachable components taking shape. In short, discussion leading is a teaching skill that is decomposable and practicable.

Self-Evaluation Is Key for Further Improvement

This experience suggests that when discussion-leading strategies are explicitly taught in methods courses, English PSTs understand that successful classroom discussions do not happen by chance. They are actually the result of careful planning on the part of the teacher, careful planning that goes beyond creating discussion questions. Specific factors of a discussion that can be controlled/directed by the teacher to ensure better participation of students, depth of responses, and collective knowledge building include many pre-discussion, during-discussion, and post-discussion strategies. Deconstructing the practice of whole-class discussions into observable, manageable components allows for classroom discussions to become less unpredictable and therefore less intimidating for novice teachers (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman, 2011). This investigation also suggests that approximations of practice are not a perfect gateway for improved classroom practice or for bridging the gap between methods courses and the classroom. PSTs may see value in practicing their teaching strategies in a methods class, but they still recognize the two situations are not interchangeable experiences.

Further Improvement Comes From Self-Reflection and Practice. The PSTs in this investigation exhibited an increased ability to articulate their understanding of their pedagogical decisions, the theory driving those decisions, and the specific areas of leading discussions in which they need to improve (replacing the vague language used in the beginning). Steve summarizes this tension perfectly:

I know that I still need to work on forming my initial questions and creating journal prompts to start discussion. I tend to just begin with asking questions, but I need to let students think before they speak. They need time to process the question and get their ideas written down and organized. I plan to change this just by practicing. Later on in the year we will have more opportunities for discussion, and I plan on looking at each one in depth to see how I have and still can improve.

Steve demonstrates the ability to identify the specific aspects of his discussions that need work: a pre-discussion strategy like writing prompts to introduce topics, identifying the event that will allow him to improve (i.e. classroom practice), and articulating his plan to examine these discussions via recordings in order to evaluate places for further improvement. While few of the PSTs cited the approximations of practice as having a direct impact on their later classroom instruction, they did exhibit many of the teaching strategies taught in our methods course and, perhaps more importantly, they had adopted habits of decomposition and reflection modeled and reinforced in their methods course.

It should be noted that when I say further improvement comes from practice, I mean both applicable definitions of the word: approximations and classroom experiences. In-class approximations can increase PSTs' confidence levels and provide a foundation of teaching moves. Danielle puts it this way:

I know, however, there is always room for further improvement. I believe my teaching ability would benefit greatly with more practice. Specifically, I could use practice with not adding my two cents. I get so involved in the amazing interaction and insights from my students that I constantly want to jump in and let them know how awesome they are. I know this is a bad practice and takes away from their spotlight, but I will try my hardest to butt out! I believe this will make their discussion much more free and open as some students tend to shut down when they worry about whether their

addition is right, wrong, or what the teacher is looking for. I want my students to know that their responses can never be right or wrong in a discussion; as long as they are insightful, appropriate, and on topic, they are all welcomed responses.

Danielle articulates the understanding here that discussions should be student-centered, focus on open-ended questions that situate students as producers of literary knowledge, and be accessible for all students to participate (as emphasized in our Blau and Bomer texts). She also articulates through self-diagnosis that she is not always good at allowing these things to happen. For this to happen she needs practice. Explicit focus on leading discussions is just the first step toward successful classroom discussions. Allowing space in our methods classes for approximations of this teaching skill is an important second step in helping PSTs practice so they have experience from which to draw.

Furthermore, approximations can potentially serve as a predictor of future classroom practices. In the limited capacity that these novice teachers were studied as they engaged in approximations, reflection, and recorded classroom teaching, one observation stands out: certain practices the PSTs demonstrated in their approximations, regardless of the peer/instructor feedback received, were again present in their recorded field placement teaching. This was true whether the practice was studied in the methods course (as with the pre-discussion writing activities), or whether it was advised against to some degree (as with the superficial refresher activities). Although PSTs may not enter the field as masters of all aspects of these teaching practices, they have an increased self-awareness that will hopefully lead to improvement in the component parts of their teaching.

Improving Novice Teacher Quality. This investigation also suggests that there are three teaching strategies instructors might consider as they plan how to best prepare English teachers for the classroom: (1) Deconstructing teaching practices is important in helping PSTs identify the controllable aspects of the classroom, (2) Approximations of practice allow for PSTs to build confidence with their teaching and provides a safe place (the

methods classroom) to try different strategies, and (3) Providing peer/instructor feedback on PSTs' practices is an important way them to recognize ways to improve. Incorporating practice-based approximations need not replace or supersede the pedagogical theory that has traditionally been found in methods classrooms. Without a solid foundation of pedagogical understanding, reflection on practice is not effective.

Additionally, recording ones' teaching is not only a necessary tool for self- reflection, but it is becoming a requirement of many school districts. Our PSTs reported feeling better prepared than many of the classroom teachers they worked with to handle the different requirements of teacher evaluations. This is the one pedagogical change I have taken from this investigation to improve my own teaching: my future method courses will do more whole-class analyzing of the PSTs' recorded teaching. I will have the PSTs take turns playing their recordings for the class, and we will use peer feedback sheets during the approximations. Aside from potentially bridging the gap between methods courses and the secondary classroom, recording teaching practices and analyzing those practices is the wave of the future in teacher evaluations. Recording and reviewing PSTs' teaching is one means of moving toward practice-based instruction in methods courses, and it is applicable to other teaching practices aside from leading classroom discussions. Future studies into how methods instructors can continue to include explicit, practice-based instruction are needed in order to understand how this current trend in teacher - education can help improve the quality of teaching in the graduates of our teacher education programs.

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