

2020

New Possibilities for Field Experiences: Learning in Practice in a University Writing Center

Michelle Fowler-Amato
Old Dominion University, mfowlera@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs



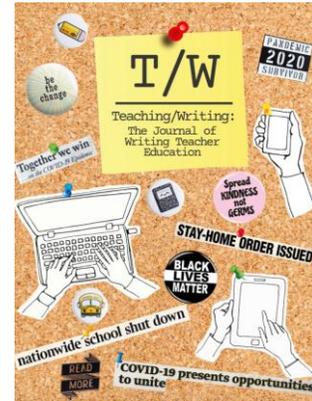
Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Fowler-Amato, M. (2020). New possibilities for field experiences: Learning in practice in a university writing center. *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*, 9(1), 5 pp., Article 22. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol9/iss1/22/>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

New Possibilities for Field Experiences: Learning In Practice in a University Writing Center



Michelle Fowler-Amato, *Old Dominion University*

I am a believer in field-based teacher education. I have witnessed the moment in which a preservice teacher embraces what we learned in a methods course, only after working side by side a young writer, engaging in meaningful reflection in response to this interaction. Because of this, I have thought quite a bit about what field-based teaching and learning might look like in my own Teaching Composition, Grades 6-12 course, taught in an English Department in a large, diverse, public university in Virginia. While most students who take this course participate in an initial teacher education program, Teaching Composition, Grades 6-12 also serves graduate students who teach English in secondary schools as well as those interested in teaching at the post-secondary level. As a result, when considering possibilities that invite students to “learn in practice” (Hallman, 2012, p. 242), I understood the need to think beyond the traditional field experience in a K-12 school.

Arguing for an expanded definition of field experience, Hallman (2012) and Hallman and Burdick (2011) demonstrate that preservice English language arts (ELA) teachers have the potential to come to new understandings about what it means to teach and to learn in the 21st century through participation in field experiences outside of the K-12 ELA classroom. This might include service learning initiatives, after-school activities, electives etc. It was my hope that planning for a field experience in a university writing center would encourage students not only to understand but also to internalize that “everyone has the capacity to write; writing can be taught; and teachers can help students become better writers” in addition to the other professional principles highlighted in NCTE’s (2016) “Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing.”

In this paper, I share the plans for this field experience facilitated during the spring 2020 semester. I also discuss how I modified these plans upon learning that we would transition to an online teaching and learning environment in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. I conclude this piece by encouraging teacher educators to reconsider Hallman (2012) and Hallman and Burdick’s (2011) recommendation to explore new possibilities for field-based teaching and learning in teacher education.

Conferring with Writers in a Writing Center: The Planned Curriculum

Over the past year, faculty involved in English teacher education came together to plan for a field experience in our university writing center. It was our hope that this initiative would support students taking the Teaching Composition, Grades 6-12 course in their growth as

writing teachers while simultaneously inviting graduate student tutors to come to new understandings about their practice, much the way that cooperating teachers grow through interactions with preservice teachers (Wetzel, Hoffman & Maloch, 2017).

Early in the semester, students in the Teaching Composition, Grades 6-12 course participated in an orientation in the writing center in which they met the writing center director and tutors who would serve as cooperating teachers in this alternative classroom. At this orientation, students learned that they would work with undergraduate and graduate writers at all stages of a writing process. Instead of serving as editors, they would teach strategies. Rather than taking on the role of expert, they would position themselves as thinking partners, embracing a stance that they were encouraged to take on when conferring with writers in their own classrooms.

Throughout the semester, students would observe two tutoring sessions, thinking with the tutor about their decision-making. In addition, students would facilitate two tutoring sessions, drawing on the support of the writing center tutor. It was our hope that this experience would positively impact the choices that the students made in their future work with writers, more broadly. However, we also made an explicit connection between these tutoring sessions and the practice of conferring, introducing students to Ray and Laminack's (2001) process for engaging in this work.

When conferring with writers, Ray and Laminack (2001) invite teachers to research (making efforts to understand writers' intentions), decide (determining whether to build on these intentions or to suggest a different path forward), teach (modeling, introducing a strategy, recommending a resource etc.), and record (documenting the interaction) throughout a writing conference. Prior to participating in tutoring sessions, students watched videos of conferences to better understand what the components of a conference might look like in practice. After each tutoring session, students documented these components. In addition, they made connections and disconnections to our course readings and noted how these interactions impacted their beliefs, as teachers of writers.

Across the course, I invited students to explore not only research and theory that informed the work we were doing but also related blog posts featured on The ELATE Commission on Writing Teacher Education's blog, *Teachers, Profs, Parents: Writers Who Care* (writerswhocare.wordpress.com). During the last few weeks of the course, students would have the opportunity to revisit their conference notes, highlighting one take-away from this experience in a blog post that they would compose for our learning community. Students were also encouraged to submit this blog post to *Teachers, Profs, Parents: Writers Who Care* (writerswhocare.wordpress.com), after receiving feedback from their peers and instructor. It was my hope that students would come to see writing teachers not only as consumers of knowledge, but makers of knowledge, as well.

Conferring with Writers in a Writing Center: The Enacted Curriculum

When classes moved online in March of 2020, most students had participated in conferences, although some had only taken on the role of observer. While it was my hope that we could continue our work in the writing center through the use of digital tools, I

recognized how difficult this would have been, not only for students, who were negotiating new expectations across their coursework while adjusting to a new reality outside of the classroom, but also for the writing center staff, who were tasked with moving tutoring sessions online. As a result, I made the difficult decision to cancel our remaining tutoring sessions, inviting our learning community to, instead, focus our attention on what we learned through the sessions students participated in prior to the transition to online teaching and learning.

Because I saw this field experience as an opportunity for writing teachers to learn with and from other writers and teachers of writers, I re-positioned the conference notes that individual students took as community artifacts. Originally, students were asked to record these interactions for themselves, as this allowed them to develop a practice of documenting students' strengths and areas for improvement, allowing them to recall the instruction that was provided during these writer-to-writer conversations.

In repositioning the conference notes as community artifacts, those who did not have an opportunity to take on the role of tutor and collaborator were invited to explore their classmates' notes in order to think through interactions that they might have experienced, if their time in the writing center had not been cut short. These conference notes now functioned as cases of writers and writing teachers working together to negotiate a variety of rhetorical situations. Recognizing the value of positioning conference notes as community artifacts, I am now considering the possibility of teaching students how to take ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) during future semesters, highlighting what a rich description of these interactions might offer a community of writing teachers who want to grow in their practice while simultaneously teaching students that teachers can and should see themselves as researchers in their own classrooms.

While exploring these cases did not offer the same experience as taking on the role of observer, tutor and collaborator, students were still able to link research and theory to practice and reflect on their own developing beliefs about teaching writers as they engaged with their classmates' conference notes. In addition, the revised assignment offered an opportunity to think through the different ways that a writing teacher might respond to a writer, reminding students that writers' and writing teachers' journeys will not all look the same. Reviewing and reflecting on the conference notes allowed students to better understand the in-the-moment decision-making of the writing teachers who engaged in this work, considering how these choices served writers and recommending different ways to meet writers' needs.

Because we lost time in the writing center and in the classroom during the spring of 2020, I made the decision to cut the blog post that I originally invited students to compose. While I still see the value in positioning these novice teachers as knowledge-makers, sharing their developing understandings beyond our learning community, I decided it was more important to support each other, ensuring that we all grew as a result of our time in the writing center, even though not everyone had the same opportunities to learn in this space.

To make up for this missed opportunity, I invited students who were interested in revisiting our work in the writing center to join me in composing a collaborative blog post. It is our

plan to return to what we learned next fall, considering what other teachers of writers, parents, and community members might benefit from understanding, as we reflect on our experiences learning in the writing center as well as from each other.

New Possibilities for Field-Based Teaching and Learning

Though our time in the writing center was cut short, our learning community came to important understandings about teaching writers through reflecting on the interactions that took place prior to our campus' transition to online teaching and learning. Through our collective experiences, students developed an awareness of the different kinds of support writers might need across a writing process. They began to consider how the choices they made, as teachers, had the potential to strengthen or limit writers' independence. They recognized the importance of remaining flexible, building on writers' agendas, whenever possible.

As of today, our writing center tutors only offer digital tutoring sessions. As a result, it is possible that students participating in this field experience in the future will engage in this work in a digital space or facilitate both face-to-face and digital conferences, allowing them to consider what adjustments might need to be made in order to support writers participating in both learning environments. In fact, this field experience might better prepare preservice teachers for the digital interactions that will likely become more common in K-12 schools, as a result of what we have negotiated in the spring of 2020. I share our experiences planning for and re-envisioning this field experience not only to highlight what students learned through engaging in this work but also to encourage teacher educators to see the challenges that we are currently facing as opportunities to consider new possibilities for spaces in which students might "learn in practice" (Hallman, 2012, p. 242).

Recently, teacher educators at my university have come together to reflect on the support we are providing preservice teachers who, like us, are concerned about the ramifications of re-envisioned practicums and internships during the spring 2020 semester. Because preservice teachers' experiences participating in traditional K-12 field experiences varied, we have discussed multiple opportunities for continued professional learning. As we have engaged in these conversations, we have also considered how to prepare for the 2020-2021 academic year. What will our work look like in K-12 schools, during a time in which visitors will likely be discouraged? Certainly, we can support the efforts of teachers and school communities, providing opportunities for preservice teachers to interact with learners through the use of digital tools. This being said, we have a responsibility to prepare preservice teachers and cooperating teachers for these new ways of interacting. Like Hallman (2012) and Hallman and Burdick (2011) argue, now is also a time to consider the possibility of new spaces that have the potential to teach future educators important lessons that they will draw on across their careers. In fact, it is possible that these alternative spaces to "learn in practice" (Hallman, 2012, p. 242) might better prepare our students to re-think what teaching and learning should look like in this changing world.

References

- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hallman, H. L. (2012). Community-based field experiences in teacher education: Possibilities for a pedagogical third space. *Teaching Education*, 23(3), 241-263.
- Hallman, H. L., & Burdick, M. N. (2011). Service learning and the preparation of English teachers. *English Education*, 43(4), 341-368.
- National Conference of Teachers of English. (2016). Professional knowledge for the teaching of writing. Retrieved from: <https://ncte.org/statement/teaching-writing/>.
- Ray, K., with Laminack, L. (2001). *The writer's workshop: Working through the hard parts (and they're all hard parts)*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Wetzel, M. M., Hoffman, J. V. & Maloch, B. (2017). *Coaching with CARE: A model of reflective teacher development*. New York, NY: Routledge.