

Silencing the Whispers: Experiential Learning as a Strategy to Empower Pre-Service Teachers and Elementary Writers

Jennifer K. Allen
University of West Georgia

Author Biography

Dr. Jennifer K. Allen has a B.S.Ed. in Early Childhood Education from the University of Georgia and a M.Ed. in Reading Instruction from the University of West Georgia. She holds an endorsement for Gifted Education, ESOL, and Reading Instruction. She earned a PhD in Language and Literacy Education from the University of Georgia and is now an Assistant Professor at the University of West Georgia in the Department of Literacy and Special Education where she enjoys teaching site-based literacy courses as part of the Professional Development School model.

While the rewards of teaching future educators are numerous, the tension in reconciling the aims of higher education with the demands of P–12 settings is ever present. Sometimes, the whispers of “Well, this approach *sounds* great, but how will it *actually* play out in the classroom?” sound more like sirens. I have found that answering these whispers of reluctance with *actual classroom experience* is one of the most successful teaching practices I can employ with pre-service educators. In this article, I elaborate on a specific literacy experience I designed to give my students an opportunity to gain hands-on experience facilitating writing lessons with elementary students.

Purposeful Partnerships

Professional Development School (PDS) partnerships between universities and P–12 schools provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to facilitate developmentally appropriate instruction in authentic contexts while university faculty and in-service teachers provide collaborative guidance, feedback, and support (National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2008). Further, these partnerships allow P–12 students to benefit from lower teacher-student ratios while also gaining access to innovative teaching practices. As a PDS site-based instructor, I have the opportunity to teach some of my literacy courses at local elementary schools instead of on the university campus. Thus, I am able to witness first-hand the advantages of mutually beneficial university-school partnerships as the PDS students (pre-service educators) I teach at the local elementary schools have the unique advantage of *applying* their literacy learning in authentic contexts.

WIN Writing Time

The PDS site-based literacy course I teach focuses on writing pedagogy. Many of the students I teach report that they once loved to write as young children but lost their joy of writing as they progressed through school because it felt more like a meaningless chore than a meaningful, powerful experience. Because I want to lead my students into the teaching profession possessing a passion for writing and a confidence in themselves as teachers of writing, I designed an approach to writing instruction that I hoped would boost their confidence both as writers and as teachers of writing as well as provide elementary students with a way to connect with writing through high-impact, low-stakes experiences with writing (Fletcher, 2017).

The applied literacy learning experience I designed in partnership with teachers at the local elementary schools is called WIN Writing Time. This initiative involves Tall Teachers (pre-service teachers)

collaborating in pairs to facilitate writing activities that are Worthwhile, Interest-based, and No-stress (WIN) with Small Teachers (elementary school students).¹

Meaningful and Effective Writing Experiences

To set WIN Writing Time in motion, Tall Teachers administer a writing interest inventory to determine their Small Teachers' strengths, interests, and habits as writers. Based on those results, Tall Teachers plan and implement weekly writing activities that foster engagement in high-impact, low-stakes writing experiences for their Small Teachers (Fletcher, 2017). This means that the writing opportunities they plan are fun, student-centered experiences that bring joy and meaning to the writing process. These weekly WIN Writing sessions last about forty-five minutes each and take place over the duration of the semester. The meaningful writing experiences my students plan include a consideration of many of the concepts we learn and discuss in our course, such as the following:

- developing a teacher-as-writer mindset, so that Tall Teachers can be seen as credible teachers of writing because *they write themselves* (Whitney et al., 2014);
- allowing for student choice in writing topics and formats so Small Teachers have opportunities to explore writing in a way that connects to their lives (Fletcher, 2017);
- utilizing mini-lessons, where Tall Teachers offer chunks of curriculum that help Small Teachers understand and meet grade-level writing expectations (Calkins, 2003; Ray & Laminack, 2001);
- modeling, where Tall Teachers write in front of their Small Teachers to coach them on writing craft, genre elements, and create a community of supportive writers (Graves, 1983; Zumbrunn et al., 2017);
- having conversations about writing, so that Tall Teachers can provide specific and timely feedback to small teachers (Calkins, 1994; Calkins, 2003; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Ray & Laminack, 2001);
- leaning on mentor texts to spark ideas for writing and helping students learn to read like writers to envision possibilities for writing structures and craft (Ray, 1999; Shubitz, 2016);
- and empowering students to share their writing, which helps to build confident writers as well as a community of writers (Calkins, 1994; Ray & Laminack, 2001).



Figure 3: Tall Teachers engage Small Teachers in a form of Rebus Writing, where words and syllables are represented by stickers.

WIN Writing Time encourages informational, persuasive, and narrative writing, all genres that elementary writers are expected to master. This past semester, for instance, one group worked on designing a sports

¹ I borrowed this terminology from faculty at the University of South Carolina; it reflects Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional approach to teaching and learning, as both groups are continuously teaching and learning from one another.

magazine that featured a brief biography of the Small Teacher, football-related riddles, an advertisement page for sports-themed bandanas, and a narrative about how a young boy finds his confidence by scoring the winning touchdown for his team. Another group wrote small moment stories based on personal experiences, and the Tall Teachers used mentor texts, graphic organizers, and modeling to help their Small Teachers zoom in and capture the sensory details and concrete language to create mind movies for their readers. Still another group designed a graphic novel that focused on using visuals and text to share the fictional adventures kids experience when they explore an amusement park.

Impact of WIN Writing Time

During WIN Writing Time, I have observed growth in both Tall and Small Teachers who come to see that writing can be a powerful, meaningful, and enjoyable form of communication and expression. Each week, when my students enter the classroom to meet with their Small Teachers, they are welcomed with bright smiles and enthusiastic attitudes, revealing their excitement about having some choice in their writing experiences. Small Teachers also gain confidence as writers, developing their writing skills through low-stakes practice and gaining the courage to share their writing, both in the small- and whole-group settings. Tall Teachers learn about the role student choice plays in motivating young writers and realize how creating a stress-free, non-judgmental writing zone yields writers who feel free to take risks with writing. Additionally, Tall Teachers experience an increased level of buy-in and engagement from the Small Teachers because the Small Teachers feel a sense of empowerment when they are valued for what they bring to the writing experience. Most importantly, Tall and Small Teachers discover that writing promotes connections with one another as they learn about common interests, unique life experiences, and shared thoughts and feelings.

Grounded in the need to shift understandings of writing instruction, which are often prescriptive and formulaic, these writing partnerships allow my students to investigate ways we as teachers may unintentionally contribute to the fact that writing is often viewed as an empty and meaningless exercise instead of an engaging and purposeful experience. WIN Writing Time helps my students see the possibilities of meeting grade-level curricular expectations *while still making learning meaningful and engaging for students*. Thus, the whispers of disbelief that once clouded their vision and caused them to wonder if meaningful writing in the classroom is possible are replaced with exclamations of assurance that authentic engagement with writing can be fostered by creating supportive writing environments that celebrate choice, interest, creativity, and collaboration.



Figure 4: Tall Teachers create comic style writing pieces alongside Small Teachers, using frames with images and text to tell a story.

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