Chapter 6

Dual Writing Pedagogies during COVID-19: Preparing Technologically- and Highly-Qualified Writing Teachers

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Many colleges and universities require all students, regardless of major, to take courses focused on writing in general and writing in their specific discipline. This focus on integrating writing into the college curriculum started in the 1990s with the “writing across the curriculum movement” (Farris & Smith, 1992; Grauerholz, 1999). Most college curricula require a certain number of courses with this writing designation, though the courses do not have to focus specifically on teaching writing, but rather, encourage students to practice and learn writing as it relates to their future career. The requirements for what constitute writing also differ based on major. For example, an engineering writing-intensive course may focus on developing plans for city buildings with a written component, whereas an English writing-intensive course may focus on literary analysis. Most writing-intensive courses are used as a means for teaching foundational writing skills such as conventions, syntax, and formatting guides along with content knowledge to help reduce the number of courses students must take to complete their undergraduate degrees (Grauerholz, 1999).

In preservice teacher education specifically, there is an additional layer of writing methods courses, which are courses devoted to training teachers to instruct on writing, as opposed to the general courses that improve one’s writing abilities. However, in many cases, the writing methods courses are tasked with both providing instruction on how to teach writing and providing instruction about improving the writing abilities of future teachers. While these courses seem as if they would be a requirement of all teacher preparation programs, they are in fact still largely a novelty (Myers et al., 2016; Scales et al., 2019). According to a recent study, only 28% of teacher preparation programs offer a course devoted entirely to the pedagogy of writing in K-12 classrooms (Myers et al., 2016). An additional 72% of preparation programs indicate that writing is integrated into the general literacy courses; however, upon closer inspection, the time spent teaching writing instruction was lacking in comparison to the time spent on reading instruction (Myers et al., 2016).

Because many states, to date, do not require writing methods courses for teacher certification, the small doses of writing provided in writing-intensive courses are paramount to helping preservice teachers develop their skills for writing and teaching writing (Martin & Dismuke, 2015; Morgan, 2010; National Commission on Writing, 2003). Therefore, writing-intensive courses in education programs have the added layer of also preparing preservice teachers to teach writing. The specific learning objectives of these courses differ; however, they
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are intended to provide future teachers with tailored, authentic practice in writing that both inform their knowledge of the content and allow them to practice effective teaching writing effectively.

While these findings suggest that writing methods courses are still a novelty within many teacher education programs, they do not capture the complexities of preparing preservice teachers to be future teachers of writing (Street, 2003; Wahleithner, 2018). In teacher education, dual pedagogies are at work. Future teachers are learning to improve their own writing and writing skills, as they will need these to communicate with education stakeholders in the future, but they are also learning to teach writing effectively. Many individuals believe they can accomplish a task, such as writing, however, they may not feel they have the skills to teach someone else to do this task (Hodges, 2015; Tchannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011).

These dual pedagogies, defined as increasing teacher knowledge of instructing writing and improving their writing abilities, add more content and require more expertise in teacher education writing-intensive courses. Scales and colleagues (2019) studied expert writing instructors regarding their sequence and inclusion of topics, writing assignments, writing pedagogy, and other elements of their writing instruction. Many of these experts (54 out of 63) indicated that their primary training for writing came from research and/or self-study.

From the large national surveys and questionnaires shared above, writing instruction within teacher education programs may have already been experiencing some challenges before the added pressures of sudden and swift remote teaching expectations. For those and many reasons that will be explored in the proposed chapter, the dual pedagogies of learning to teach writing and improving one’s own writing now must also engage with virtual writing instruction and learning to teach writing in new ways.

The challenges to teaching writing before the pandemic reveal that several barriers and concerns may be present in teaching writing and meeting the dual pedagogies in a pre-COVID-19 setting such as teaching writing in virtual settings and limitations about providing in-the-moment feedback during remote instruction. Likely, the ramifications of the worldwide pandemic exacerbate these concerns. Anecdotally, teachers are reporting that writing instruction occurs less during COVID-19 because the limitations of technology and lack of explicit instruction required to teach writing well lead to decreases in motivation and engagement in writing.

In this chapter, I share the dual writing pedagogies as: (1) teaching preservice teachers about writing methods and pedagogy; and (2) improving future teacher’s own writing abilities. Additionally, this chapter will explore how to successfully integrate both pedagogies in virtual instruction settings. The first pedagogy in response to COVID-19 relates to shifting course content, design, and delivery in a short amount of time to continue developing preservice teacher competencies about teaching writing effectively. The second pedagogy relates to improving one’s own writing abilities through virtual learning, which could translate to future teaching. Finally, I will provide ways that future teachers can support current teachers who are battling the same dual pedagogies, likely with less support.

Instructor Perspectives: Shifting Writing Instruction during a Pandemic

I teach a writing methods course for preservice teachers, those who are in a teacher preparation program with hopes of entering the teaching profession upon graduation. In this course, I teach students the theory, research, and practice behind writing instruction, while also working to improve the preservice teachers’ writing skills. Teachers spend more and more time daily preparing reports to help students receive individualized education benefits, communicate
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With the sudden onset of COVID-19, I am more aware of the need to prepare my future teachers for a new reality: virtual, remote, and distance education. While I need to ensure that my future teachers can teach writing well in an in-person classroom situation, I feel called to prepare them to teach in a myriad of settings simultaneously. For example, some local schools that I partner with to allow my teachers to practice their writing pedagogies have shifted to fully online while others are engaging in remote instruction by sending physical work to students that is void of technology. Therefore, I must prepare my future teachers to instruct using technology in new ways but to also be prepared to create materials that can be sent to students physically and worked on independently of the teacher. Even after the pandemic has reached some sort of conclusion, education stakeholders may still want to include virtual, remote, and distance options to include all students.

Historically, I have always provided technological resources to my students and encouraged ways to augment classroom instruction with these tools. In 2020, that is not enough. Now, I and other teacher educators are preparing future teachers to move all instruction to and between multiple platforms. The goal is not just to prepare highly-qualified teachers of writing, but technologically- and highly-qualified teachers of writing.

Teaching Preservice Teachers about Writing Methods and Pedagogy

In preparing future teachers for writing instruction, there are three primary perspectives, based in theory, research, and practice: (a) cognitive; (b) motivational; and (c) sociocultural. First, I’ll briefly discuss these three perspectives related to in-person education settings, then will share how they inform virtual, distance, and remote learning.

Cognitive Perspectives for Writing Instruction

In the 1980s, the Cognitive Processes Theory of Writing by Flower and Hayes (1981) explained how children think about writing and how they proceed through the writing process. This theory dominates writing instruction research and is still widely used to explain the brain functions and cognitive processing required to write. In preparing future teachers, this theory and research base provides support for using the writing process, considering writing in a recursive manner, and planning for writing-to-learn activities, in which students use writing to learn new content (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004; Hodges, 2017). Many teachers use graphic organizers or other infographics to help children visually represent writing, which is also supported through cognitive perspectives (Hodges, 2017).

In remote instruction, the visual aspect of learning is heightened. Teachers must adapt their writing-to-learn practices, infographics, and other media to digital, virtual, and other remote formats. In these settings, if children have access to technology, they can create graphics using online forums and can practice writing-to-learn activities through Google Docs or Blogs. One of the primary opportunities of these methods is that children are exposed to potential audiences outside their classroom. These media can be shared with family members, friends across grade levels, or community members who could provide added engagement for students.

In the shift to virtual instruction, I continued to help my preservice teachers learn about the Cognitive Processes Approach to Writing by asking them to create video-based lessons about writing. These lessons were filmed by the students and included the students teaching one aspect of the writing process. The videos were intended to be watched asynchronously so
that teachers could use them to supplement lessons, students could watch them to learn content, or parents or care providers could use them to help the children.

**Motivational Perspectives for Writing Instruction**

While less researched in writing instruction, motivational perspectives describe the reasons that students engage in or avoid writing tasks, as well as why teachers may integrate writing or not in their classrooms (Hodges, 2015). From the teacher perspective, research has indicated that prior negative experiences with writing or lack of training may lead teachers to not feel confident in teaching writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Pajares, 2003). Moreover, when teachers do not feel confident or prepared to teach writing, they often avoid it or do not spend as much time on writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Unfortunately, other research shows that the consequences of these negative beliefs mean that writing occurs less than 30 minutes per day in many classrooms, which is not nearly enough to improve writing outcomes (Coker et al., 2016). From the student perspective, writing motivation includes students’ beliefs about themselves as writers, beliefs about writing, and attitudes toward writing tasks (Wright et al., 2019). These beliefs can be harnessed by teachers but are more likely to increase if the teachers also have positive views of writing. Future teachers need to learn to cultivate these skills and embed their instruction with motivational components such as choice of writing topic, variability in writing products, and a focus on the writing process over product.

Motivation becomes additionally important in remote settings as some children may face Internet fatigue. Internet fatigue comes from spending too much time engaged in activities online or via screens. Young children’s brains can be negatively impacted by too much screen time and their motivation toward content, including writing, may diminish. Cultivating motivation requires teachers to consider the emotions, social situations, and cultural implications of remote and virtual teaching. More specifically, children may become frustrated or overwhelmed by the change in routine and instructional expectations. At the same time, students may feel stressed by not seeing their friends or may notice a change in their learning as they are not engaged in as much collaboration with peers. Finally, from the cultural viewpoint, students will have different norms in their homes that may contradict what the norms were of the school day. All of these factors may influence how students engage in virtual instruction. Teachers need to continue to provide engaging, interactive activities, along with choice and autonomy to nurture motivation.

In my writing methods course, I modeled practices that increase student motivation for my future teachers. My approach to teaching is structured on meta-approaches, so I engage my future teachers to think about why I make instructional decisions and how they can modify those practices for their future classrooms, which will be at the elementary level. For example, I continued to foster motivation by providing my students choice in their writing activities. They were allowed choice in topics, formats, and media used (video versus audio, for instance). Additionally, I engaged with students in a weekly video chat that was structured as an open discussion and question-and-answer session. During these times, students could discuss course content, life events, or ask questions. After completing assignments, we met as a group for a live Zoom chat in which we could further discuss content and could analyze the practices that would be most beneficial to K-12 students’ writing success.

**Sociocultural Perspectives for Writing Instruction**

In recent years, sociocultural theories have dominated writing instruction. Sociocultural perspectives emphasize motivation, affect, and social influences and examine how students learn from each other and more knowledgeable others (Prior, 2006; Vygotsky, 1980). From these perspectives, students’ unique experiences, social interactions, and cultural influences
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strongly impact their writing and writing instruction. Within teacher education programs, future teachers learn to integrate these perspectives into their instruction by focusing on student collaboration, peer-editing and revising activities, or conferencing as formative assessment.

While some aspects of writing such as motivation may be diminished in virtual settings, other aspects such as collaboration are increased. In virtual settings students can collaborate in new ways. One example would be sharing a Google Doc with a collaborative writing activity and asking students to work simultaneously on the document. A second example could include asking students to write a script for a short video reflection or demonstration and then using that script to create the video with classmates.

Finally, in my virtual writing pivot, I shifted the focus in the moment to using digital tools. Students collaborated with their peers to create strategy demonstration videos. In these videos the students taught their classmates about important content related to writing strategies and content. These videos were posted, and their classmates were given the opportunity to watch them and then ask follow-up questions or share their own use of the different strategies.

**Shifting Perspectives to Virtual, Remote, and Distance Learning**

While all these perspectives are relevant in teaching future teachers about writing instruction, COVID-19 added the challenge of embedding these perspectives in virtual, remote, and distance learning settings (Fisher et al., 2020). Future teachers must be prepared to help all students succeed despite their access to technology (Hodges et al., 2020). One way to accomplish these goals is to integrate virtual, remote, and distance learning into all teacher education methods courses. Preservice teachers can complete learning modules and readings related to teaching writing instruction with technology and can complete assignments such as teaching virtual, video-recorded writing lessons and preparing websites with writing-based resources.

In my own experiences shifting my writing methods course during COVID-19, I infused instruction with virtual writing components. Future teachers researched and studied methods for teaching writing effectively in virtual, remote, or distance settings. Then, they applied this knowledge to create virtual lessons that could be used by teachers to augment their instruction or used by parents to teach students about writing. The goal of these videos was to create options for young students to work through with guidance or alone to learn writing strategies, skills, and processes. Through these activities, the preservice teachers learned the dual pedagogies of how to teach writing and how to teach writing. They also had the added focus of doing learning how in virtual settings.

**Preparing, Curating, and Developing Materials to Teach Writing to K-12 Children**

When COVID-19 reached the United States and school buildings closed, resulting in virtual and remote learning, teachers asked for resources to help them navigate the new demands. As a third aspect of the dual pedagogies, the need of teachers, parents, and other education stakeholders for resources to teach in virtual settings became a call for universities (Hodges et al., 2020). Specifically, teacher educators and future teachers began curating, preparing, and developing materials to teach writing and provided those resources to teachers.

Video-recorded writing lesson plans created by preservice teachers were shared through social media groups and password-protected websites for teachers. Additionally, preservice teachers assisted teachers in the field in building online learning platforms, even teaching lessons to students in real-time through video conferencing platforms. Finally, preservice
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teachers used their experiences in their teacher education program to conduct research and provide informal professional development to teachers. Through these events, future teachers shared research on best practices in virtual learning and created infographics with additional resources for parents and teachers. These infographics provided resources, games, and interactive activities to enhance students’ learning.

Implications and Conclusions

Writing instruction is commonly viewed as a difficult topic and one that brings teachers some anxiety. Many teachers report feeling unprepared to teach writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008) while most would appreciate more training and time to devote to writing in the classroom. Adding virtual, distance, and remote options to that already challenging task makes writing instruction even more complex. Teachers may now face competing anxieties based on their experience with technology, as well as their self-efficacy and confidence in teaching writing. These anxieties can be present even for future teachers, many of whom are digital natives, as they grapple with how to use technology and effective writing pedagogy to increase student motivation and achievement. Teacher educators have an opportunity to step in and help those future teachers become equipped with the skills they need for the current and future times.

Teacher education is facing a time of great change in response to COVID-19, and that change is likely to stay. The key is for teacher educators to determine what lasting changes, such as including virtual and distance learning instruction in their course content, are necessary to improve education. For those teacher educators who focus on writing, the task is now to prepare technologically- and highly-qualified writing teachers who can meet the needs of all learners, regardless of access to technology or resources.

References


