

**INQUIRIES IN  
LITERACY LEARNING  
AND INSTRUCTION**

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## **Activities for Restructuring Reading Education Courses for Preservice Teachers**

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Increasingly, teacher educators are scrutinizing how they prepare undergraduate education majors to become teachers of reading (see Alvermann, 1990). A focal point of this attention has been the reading methods course typically required of preservice teachers. Teacher educators have expressed dissatisfaction with conventional models for teaching such courses because these models do not seem to effect notable, long-term improvements in reading instruction (e.g., Reinking, Mealey, & Ridgeway, 1993). Conventional models may reinforce the perception that reading professors hold the key to solving the riddle of literacy instruction, which works against empowering teachers as decision makers (Duffy, 1991). Likewise, conventional models of teacher education tend to emphasize content knowledge and thus do not address directly the different perceptions of novice and expert teachers (Roehler, Duffy, Hermann, Conley, & Johnson, 1988; Sabers, Cushing, & Berliner, 1991).

Concerns about the limitations of conventional reading methods courses have generated interest in an inquiry model of teaching that is often supported by a social constructivist view of learning. An inquiry model of teaching is characterized by terms such as "reflective practice," "reflection-in-action," and "teacher as decision maker" (Calderhead, 1989; Schon, 1987). The social constructivist view asserts that instruction must be a process of social interaction in which teachers and learners interpret the meaning of classroom discourse differently (Gavalek, 1986). Teaching in this view is a process by which a teacher facilitates the interplay of different meanings so that

cognitive understandings may undergo change (Newman, Cole, & Griffin, 1989). Learning in this view is an intensely personal construction of meaning and understanding.

Several educators and researchers have begun to experiment with ways to implement an inquiry model into the teaching of reading methods courses, in most cases by increasing students' involvement in and analysis of actual or simulated teaching experiences. For example, Hermann and Sarrachino (1991) extended the length of a reading methods course, provided graduate student mentors, and created a literacy tutoring program; Hollingsworth (1988) paired student teachers and demonstrated lessons in classrooms; and Risko, Yount, and Towell (1991) used video tapes to involve students in shared learning contexts to analyze the problems facing teachers.

However, beyond increasing preservice teachers' opportunities for experiencing and analyzing classroom teaching, there has been little attention to developing ways to foster inquiry and social constructivist goals when instructors meet with preservice teachers in the college classroom. Reading professors who wish to change the way they approach teaching reading methods courses face many challenges, not the least of which is determining what might replace or supplement conventional practices such as required reading from a single textbook, lectures, assignments, exams, and so forth. How can a course be designed to encourage students to become more reflective about their own learning, to integrate productive social interaction into learning, to counter students' perception that instructors wear the mantle of all-knowing authority, and to present content in a way that recognizes a multiplicity of meanings? Or, more practically, how can changes be implemented in a way that meets the instructor's obligation to conform to the institution's and students' expectations (Duffy, 1991) in assigning grades? Instructors who wish to deviate significantly from conventional approaches to college teaching may risk alienating administrators, colleagues, and their students. Thus, given a lack of concrete ideas for restructuring their courses and the attendant risks of deviating from convention, instructors may be hesitant to alter radically their approach to teaching reading methods courses.

To address these problems, in this paper we outline several activities and course adaptations that we have found to be useful in our efforts to implement an inquiry model and a social constructivist perspective into our reading methods courses. For this paper (i.e., post hoc to our development and use of these activities) we have grouped these activities into categories, although their purposes often cut across several of the categories listed. The fact that we are able to group them suggests to us that these may be critical areas of concern for restructuring reading education courses for preservice teachers. Thus, we offer them as documentation for those interested in how college teachers attempt to have a greater effect on preservice teacher education and as suggestions for those interested in ideas to use in their own teaching.

## CATEGORIES OF ACTIVITIES

Each of the following categories represents a focus or issue emerging from our attempts to implement a social constructivist view in our respective sections of an undergraduate reading methods course. We wish to note that the course in which we implemented these activities is the first in a two-course sequence on reading methods required of all elementary education majors. A field-based experience is part of the second course but not the first. Thus, the activities outlined below are limited to those that can occur in a course based entirely in the college classroom.

### **Focusing on Inquiry, Diverse Perspectives, and the Relativity of Meaning**

In our courses we adopt an inquiry model, which we believe encourages students to see teaching as managing dilemmas rather than solving problems. This point of view implies that there are no single right answers for all the questions about teaching literacy, that knowledgeable professionals may disagree, that underlying principles are more important than isolated facts, that knowing why precedes knowing how, and that reflection and analysis are synonymous with good teaching. We encourage students not to look to us for authoritative answers but to use us as resources for locating information relevant to an open-ended quest for knowledge and understanding. The following activities are aimed at establishing and maintaining this perspective.

**Multiple texts.** Instead of using a single text with assigned readings, we have made available a library of methods texts for preservice teachers to use in a variety of activities throughout the course (academic departments and individual faculty typically accumulate a library of such texts). For example, at the beginning of the course we distribute a different methods text to each student. Before the next class, students are asked to browse through the text they were given while noting major topics and themes. They are encouraged to read a chapter on a topic they found interesting. In class, students are invited to compare their respective texts in small groups, to discuss the chapter they read, and to provide reasons for choosing the chapter. A subsequent larger group discussion can reveal much about the differing perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs students bring to the course. The library of texts can be used throughout the course as well. For example, students may want to compare how two authors cover the same topic. Or a student who makes a comment about an issue might be advised by another student to read a good chapter on the issue in a particular text. As students become more familiar with texts, they could be asked to explain which one they would recommend using in a course with a single text.

**Identifying good questions.** An activity we have used for evaluation is to have students generate a list of good questions about a particular topic or issue. This activity can be extended by creating a bibliography of readings that provides thought-provoking but divergent responses to these questions.

**Good quotes.** An activity that engages preservice teachers in divergent thinking about complex issues is to collect interesting quotes that pertain to different aspects of education (and maybe even a few that don't directly relate to education). Quotes can be printed on small strips of paper. The strips are shuffled and each student is given three. Students move freely around the room comparing quotes, trading when they find one that is more personally meaningful. The discussion that follows also provides rich opportunities for social interaction.

#### **Selecting and Covering Content That Is Personally Meaningful**

In a social constructivist view, learning is an intensely personal construction of meaning and understanding. This perspective has made us more consciously aware that, as instructors, we have different agendas than do many of our students. We believe it is necessary to externalize students' and instructors' agendas in order to explore ways of personalizing meaning and thus to present content in a way that is likely to have immediate and long-term effects on learning and teaching performance. Topical outlines on a conventional course syllabus that is covered in lockstep fashion impose our priorities and logic on students who may suppress their own views and meanings. We offer the following two activities as alternatives designed to address these issues.

**Special interest groups.** Small groups of three to five class members with mutual interests are formed to explore a topic. These groups work independently to identify a set of good questions and to compile sources of information. We meet for several consultations with the group to give them guidance and help clarify the questions about the topic and to guide them towards sources of information. We have also had each of these Special Interest Groups report their work to other class members in a variety of ways.

**Student-centered prioritizing of content.** Instead of the instructor passing out a syllabus with an outline of major topics and the order in which they will be considered, we have asked students to generate and prioritize topics for the instructor to address in class. This approach works much better if the students have had an opportunity to investigate what seems to be the major topics associated with teaching reading (e.g., see the ideas under multiple texts). It can be implemented by brainstorming topics that might be considered and then having students prioritize the list. Instead of dealing with less popular topics separately at the end of the course, we weave them into discussions of topics students have identified as more important.

#### **Social Interaction**

In the social constructivist view, learning takes place through social interaction because it provides an opportunity for different meanings to become apparent (Gavalek, 1986). We found the following activities to facilitate constructive social interaction in our courses.

**Focus groups.** Regular meetings between the instructor and small groups of students can serve an important function when instructors radically restructure reading education courses. These groups may be selected in a variety of ways and can meet for a variety of purposes. For example, we have used them to provide an opportunity for students to react to their own learning in the course and to discuss how the course is or isn't meeting their needs. These sessions foster the positive interpersonal relations and sense of openness that help sustain students' tolerance of approaches that may make them feel uncomfortable and anxious.

**Class legacy of readings.** Through a variety of activities, students in our classes are encouraged to read broadly about topics and issues pertaining to the development of literacy in children. At the end of the course, each student was asked to contribute his or her favorite reading (usually an article or chapter from a book) to a class legacy of readings. Each student contributes a copy of the reading and a brief explanation of why she or he believes the reading was important. The articles and explanations are bound and put on reserve for students in future semesters to use as a resource. We have found that activities such as this help create a community of readers and writers among our students. By sharing our own readings and interests, we have also been pleased to note that our undergraduates include us in that community by giving us readings they believe will interest us.

**Dialogue journals.** Dialogue journals are aimed at increasing communication between instructors and students and we have found them to be useful in our efforts to restructure our courses. Entries may provide topics for discussion, reactions to readings or class discussions, and questions that need to be addressed. We have also had students exchange dialogue journals with each other in addition to the instructor.

### **Evaluation and Grading**

Students' concerns for grades present a barrier to implementing an inquiry model of instruction and to accomplishing social constructivist goals for learning (Duffy, 1991). Most students are consciously aware that grades are ultimately secondary to their learning, but a concern for grades is frequently too visceral to be treated lightly by the instructor. And, in most instances, instructors may not have the option to dispense with assigning letter grades. We addressed these issues in the following ways.

**Topics-in-literacy fair.** This idea might be used as an extension of the special interest groups activity described previously. Small groups of students work together to plan and develop an information booth for a topics-in-literacy fair. The fair could be coordinated with other course sections or content areas. Each visitor to a booth at the fair might complete an evaluation form, and the cumulative results of these forms could figure in students' course evaluations.

**Peer-reviewed portfolios.** One of us has used a student-generated portfolio with broad guidelines for its creation and evaluation as the sole source of determining grades. This approach gives students great freedom but may result in anxiety about the course grade. It also creates a dilemma for instructors who must rely on relatively subjective arguments for justifying a grade. One way to address this dilemma is to use a combination of peer and expert evaluation. For example, in the course using the portfolio as the sole source for a grade, portfolios were evaluated independently by one peer evaluator, one graduate student evaluator, and the instructor, all of whom used a class-generated evaluation form.

#### **Increasing Students' Morale and Commitment**

Restructuring reading courses for preservice teachers may significantly challenge their schema and expectations. Students may be leery of a course that does not have a conventional outline, midterm and final exams, and so forth. Many students will be anxious about their grades and the degree to which they are being prepared to teach reading. We have used the following activities to increase students' morale and their commitment to the course.

**Instructor's portfolio.** When asking students to generate a portfolio for assessment, instructors may gain credibility with students by creating their own portfolio to document their learning. Instructors can share their thoughts about the construction of their portfolio and seek suggestions for students. When one of us tried this, it was interesting to note that students began to be on the lookout for readings and other sources of information for his portfolio. That portfolio focused on his learning about teaching preservice teachers through the course and through outside reading and experience.

**Providing answers to test items.** It is likely that experienced instructors will have a bank of items that can be used on traditional tests. In shifting to a more constructivist viewpoint, it is unlikely that these items will be useful, even if the instructor wishes to continue giving written exams. However, we have found that when conventional exams are not used and the presentation of course content is less structured, many students become worried that they are not learning important information, which will put them at a disadvantage when they begin teaching. One way we countered this concern is by putting a test item bank with a separate answer key on reserve. Students could try to answer the items, check their own responses, research items that puzzle them, and bring up items for discussion in class.

**Ask the Professor.** Preservice teachers may become frustrated and anxious when instructors routinely pose questions rather than dispense information and when they resist answering students' questions definitively and authoritatively. Students (and instructors) may need occasional relief from this frustration and anxiety. One way we accomplished this aim was to periodically have a specific time period that we identified as "Ask the Professor." This activity is



like a press conference during which students pose questions and the professor responds directly. Identifying this activity as a special category deviating from the norm serves to highlight differences between conventional and constructivist approaches to teaching. It is interesting to note that this idea came out of a focus group discussion with students.

#### FINAL WORDS OF CAUTION AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Instructors who wish to restructure reading education courses must take risks and they must be prepared to deal with the inevitable stress that arises from making changes. Instructors who restructure their courses along the lines we have outlined may need to tolerate student ambivalence, confusion, and antagonism. Although these reactions are not uncommon in any approach to college teaching, we have found that they are more intense when we restructure our courses. On the other hand, we have been sustained through trials and tribulations by many students who thrive when liberated to direct their own learning and who become intimately involved with the issues surrounding the development of literacy. We see evidence that we are making a difference in the professional development of many of our students in a way that we had not seen previously.

Restructuring reading education courses for preservice teachers as described in this paper can be exciting and rewarding, but it is not for the timid. In exploring what for us is uncharted territory, we, along with our students, have experienced more intensely the highs and lows that inevitably accompany teaching and learning. We have also learned much about our own professional competence, insecurities, and beliefs. Nonetheless, exploring this new territory has rejuvenated our efforts to counter the unacceptable premise that our undergraduate reading methods courses have no lasting effect on improving instruction in schools.

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