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METHODS

Why Graduate Programs Still Matter

CATHY FLEISCHER

A few weeks ago in a graduate class I teach, a group of 12 teacher-students—some middle and high school teachers, some university first-year writing instructors—immersed themselves in the question *what counts as writing*. We had read some complicated research articles: from Todd DeStigter’s careful historical analysis of “the ascendance of argument” as the dominant form of school writing (that served as a basis for his ethnographic study of that form’s negative impact on struggling students in one urban Chicago school), to Applebee and Langer’s striking report on how writing is taught (and not taught) in public schools, to Brannon and her colleagues’ indictment of the five-paragraph essay and how the use of it promotes a deficit model of education (DeStigter, 2015; Applebee & Langer, 2001; Brannon et. al., 2008). We read as well a number of national reports such as the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First Year Writing* and NCTE’s *Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing* and a selection of pedagogy-based articles that demonstrated a variety of approaches to and movements in the teaching of writing: writing about writing (Wardle & Downs, 2014), teaching for transfer (Wells, 2011), the unfamiliar genre project (Andrew-Vaughan and Fleischer, 2006), blogging research writing (Costello, 2016), and multimodal writing (Shipka, 2013).

As we talked about these texts and their implications not only for what counts as writing but also for how we teach writing, the teacher-students began to place their own experiences up against some ideas that truly tested their comfort zones. We asked each other hard questions as we struggled through some of the ideas presented. What counts as argument? What’s the difference between modes and genres? How does multimodality fit in? How do we in school build upon the writing that students do outside school? How do we prepare students for test writing but honor a complicated vision of what writing really entails?

The teacher-students identified what counted for writing in their professional, civic, and home lives; wrote and talked about their reactions to the readings; shared stories about their own teaching; tested out new ideas; challenged each other’s thinking; and ultimately wondered how they might teach a little differently—more imaginatively and more in keeping with some of the ideas we posited in class. These teacher-students bravely admitted concerns about their own pedagogy, revealing to these almost-strangers their worries about teaching writing, especially the discrepancies that keep them up at night, the gaps between what they believe and what they teach. And as the subsequent weeks passed and we took on new issues and new concerns, these teacher-students began to talk with greater authority about the complexities we all face as writing teachers, immersed and knowledgeable in their new-found understandings of the research and pedagogy of the discipline of composition studies.

As I write this essay, the teacher-students in this class are at the point in the semester in which they pursue their own burning issue about the teaching of writing, one that arises from their individual concern and local circumstance: this semester’s concerns range from how to give meaningful feedback timely and effectively, to how to engage African-American boys in writing, to how to teach research writing in ways that move beyond the traditional research paper. As they read published studies and pedagogical approaches, they aim to identify specific teaching strategies that might work in their own local contexts in order to make changes that will better serve the students in their classrooms.

By the time the course ends, they will have read dozens of studies conducted by researchers in composition studies and English education (sometimes with conflicting conclusions) and dozens of pedagogical essays written by practicing teachers. They will have had Skype conversations with seven prominent researchers across the country as well as in-person conversations with the variety of teachers in the class. And they will have written quick writes, narratives, elevator

speeches, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, and essays about what they discovered.

I begin this essay about why graduate programs still matter with such a detailed description of this particular class not to suggest that I am the hero instructor who helps these teacher-students see the light, but rather as a depiction of what most graduate classrooms in composition and English education look like—at my institution for sure, but also across the state and country. As instructors of graduate classes for teachers, we strive to present multiple perspectives and to respond encouragingly over time as these teacher-students write and speak with passion, sometimes change their minds, and often struggle to figure out how to implement the new approaches that are beginning to inform their way of thinking. We realize that it takes time to make sense of new ideas, especially those ideas that make us a bit uncomfortable, and we try to help teacher-students navigate and negotiate conversation that can push all of us a little bit further in our thinking. By the end of the term (in my case, 150 minutes each week for 14 weeks), students and faculty alike are often exhausted—this kind of thinking and re-thinking is indeed hard work.

Unfortunately, this experience of attending graduate level classes is something that an increasing number of teachers in Michigan (and across the country) will not have. Rather than being immersed in the complex study of issues of writing and writing pedagogy that occurs in classes like these, practicing Michigan teachers may go their whole career after initial certification with only one additional university-based graduate course—a required course in reading. Otherwise, teachers *can* fulfill their continuing certification solely with State Continuing Education Clock Hours (SCECHs): those professional development experiences that generally are offered at the school, district, or regional level and that are increasingly tied to specific programs and mandated pedagogical strategies. (See Appendix A for the language that describes the confusing and labyrinth-like levels of continuing certification for Michigan teachers.) Because our state no longer requires graduate course work and because fewer and fewer districts offer a pay bump for teachers who complete master's degrees, the continuing education of increasing numbers of teachers rests in the hands of local sites.

Let me be clear: I am not blaming teachers for their choices to pursue their professional commitments through SCECHs rather than through graduate courses. Graduate courses are expensive, to be sure, and require a huge time commitment on the part of teachers (especially if these

courses are, like my courses, offered in a face-to-face rather than online format). Teachers who get up at 5 am to start their very long work day are understandingly hesitant about driving an hour in Michigan winters to attend a graduate level class. Teachers who are underpaid and overworked think twice about spending thousands of dollars for graduate level courses.

I am also not against high quality professional development that results in state clock hours. As the co-director of a National Writing Project site, I know the value that hundreds of teachers across the state have found in sustained professional development opportunities that help them reimagine their pedagogies and approaches. My work with several stellar Intermediate School Districts and local schools around the state shows me what thoughtful, locally-based professional development can be, and what my teacher friends have gained from a variety of other sorts of PD (from Edcamps to Critical Friends Groups) points to valuable opportunities beyond just graduate classes.

Still, I see a difference between these opportunities and graduate level classes, a difference that is clear to me as someone who continues to be both a PD facilitator and a university professor and who has been a participant in a wide variety of other local and district sessions. Clearly, those teachers who populate my classes see this difference, too. I began to wonder what it is about graduate classes that appeals to these teachers and why they choose to go the graduate school route, given all the logical reasons why many of their peers have chosen not to (reasons that range from “it’s not required” to “it’s too expensive” to “it’s so much more work”). Why do they opt to spend one night a week for a fourteen-week semester in my class with hours of reading and writing in between class sessions? I decided to ask current and recently graduated teacher-students to share their thinking, in hopes of learning from them. From their passionate conversation and emails, here’s what I discovered.

Teachers Know That One Size Does Not Fit All

Overwhelmingly, teachers noted that the content of the local PD that counts for SCECHs in their districts was mandated with little or no teacher input—and as such failed to meet some of their most urgent needs. As one teacher articulated, “Much of the PD that teachers are granted SCECHs for is district mandated, one-size-fits-all and inauthentic.” Specifically, this means that in many districts all teachers—regardless of department or experience level—

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must sit through the same PD, even if it seems irrelevant to their teaching. Another teacher explained how this took shape in her school:

[M]ost of the “PD” that our school has had for the last 5 years has been one-size-fits-all. In our building, there has been no differentiation. Whether you’re a first-year teacher or 25-year teacher, whether you’re music, physics, or Spanish, when the district buys pre-packaged curriculum, pacing guides, tests, or “engagement strategies,” teachers have been made to do things that don’t fit with their teaching style, don’t fit with their curricula, and don’t provide for their students’ needs.

One teacher spoke of the contrast between that kind of PD and what she’s experienced as a graduate student, explaining that taking graduate classes allowed her to identify what she most needs to learn. “Teachers are very good at identifying the areas in which they want to improve their practice,” she explained, and graduate studies allowed her to make that choice. Another teacher said it this way: “Grad offerings. . . meet me where I am and help me develop in the way that is right for my skill set, interests, passions, and most importantly—what’s right for my students.”

Teachers also spoke about the implications of this kind of PD for how they are viewed by their districts: as employees who are acted upon rather than as professionals capable of making choices. Mandated PD, in other words, both reflects and contributes to teachers’ lack of control of their own circumstances. As one teacher eloquently explained, “Graduate programs still matter because, in a world of decreasing teacher autonomy, it is the one place where teachers still have voice and choice.”

Teachers Want Current, Applicable Research

A second concern expressed by teachers was that local and district PD too often relies on commercial and programmed materials that represent a specific and single point of view. They saw this as problematic for multiple reasons:

First, they worried that they aren’t being offered the most current knowledge that comes from research studies in the fields of composition and English education, but rather “just one of the many fads your district will push on you over the course of your career.” Too often, they said, these fads turn into programmatic instruction that supports the most recent commercial product to which their district had aligned itself. As one teacher remarked, too much of their “professional development has become product placement.”

Second, they explained that through local and district PD they were too often being told what to do and think rather than immersing themselves in multiple (and sometimes conflicting) sources in order to figure out with their colleagues the best ways to work with their particular students. Again, this approach reflected a stance toward teachers that they found problematic: a stance that failed to see the teachers as professionals capable of making decisions about what and how to teach.

This stance seemed in opposition to what they had experienced in graduate courses that were “taught by professionals” who have no vested interest in one program over another. “In sharp contrast [to local PD],” said one teacher, “when I attended classes for my grad program, I was never offered a product, I never saw a pre-packaged

Iris, Vincent van Gogh

curriculum, and I NEVER got the message that there is ONE way to teach ELA.” This distinction between a single mandated approach and multiple possible approaches which require teachers to think carefully about their local contexts was raised by a number of teachers—especially in terms of its impact on students. One teacher talked about this in terms of the intellectual conversation he’s been able to enter as a graduate student. He put it this way:

Having been a teacher for some years now, it has become apparent that there are obvious flaws in the way our curriculum or the way the standards influence our practices. I made the decision [to attend graduate school] to become more informed so that I may become a leader for my building or district to offer up new potential practices that would best

serve our students. I wanted to join the conversation of what is happening in the field, so that I might be able to provide insight to my colleagues, administration, and above.

Teachers Value Collaboration, Depth, and Breadth

For many teachers local PD is too limiting: limited to a stand-and-deliver format, to one-shot offerings, and to individual departments or schools. Thus, teachers reported, they are not able to do the kind of thoughtful, deep digs into particular pedagogical issues because they don't have the time, space, or breadth of collaborators to make that possible. They report that they worry about honestly sharing their questions and struggles when the PD takes place with the teachers they see every day. In addition, they resent the reduction of complex issues into simple charts and how-to steps that merely offer a Band-Aid to some of the deeper concerns they have about teaching, assessment, and literacy learning.

This lack of breadth, depth, and collaboration differs from their experiences in graduate courses. Several mentioned the impact of meeting teachers from other districts in their courses who approached the teaching of literacy in ways that are not only different from what they have done but that offered them a new way of thinking. One teacher expressed how important this was for her, naming it, "the ultimate form of collaboration." In this safe space of a university classroom—outside the sometimes overly familiar space of a school or district—teachers felt free to admit what they don't know and to learn from others what possibilities might exist. Many also recognized that the knowledge gained over the course of a term allows for both slow and deep study. "Unlike other PD opportunities," one teacher remarked, "I can get weeks of knowledge/information from professionals in the field" in graduate courses. This kind of slow study gives teachers a chance to immerse themselves over time, to give themselves the luxury of thinking and re-thinking, and to sometimes change their minds.

So what does this tell us? This sample of teacher responses echoes much of what I've heard from casual conversations with teachers over the past few years. Teachers desire more than anything else to be treated like the professionals they are: professionals who already have a great deal of expertise but who understand the need to continue their life-long path of learning. Teachers, like all professionals, have knowledge to share, a desire to learn, and the capacity to be

in charge of their own learning. Like all professionals, they look forward to the opportunity to immerse themselves in research under the careful curation of knowledgeable, experienced guides. And, given time and space, they are able to use that research to make their own decisions, to be selective and thoughtful about how research enters their classroom doors.

What has become clear to me is this: In a time in which many outside forces contribute to teachers being treated as less-than-professional, graduate education provides an important space. Complex study of complex issues celebrates teachers as decision-makers and invites them into professional conversations about pedagogy that are not easily reduced to five easy steps or a slogan or a singular "right way." Complex study recognizes teachers' commitment and ability to be thoughtful users of existing research and to be potential researchers themselves. (See, for example, Fleischer, et.al., 2014.) Graduate study welcomes teachers into the collaborative venture that is reimagining and remaking education and treats teachers as vital partners.

A few years ago, the members of the Michigan Conference on English Education (MCEE) thought carefully about the factors that contribute to a teacher's life-long journey toward professionalism. As we charted what this journey might look like, we named several steps that teachers should consider taking. Early in their careers, for example, teachers might join a professional organization, like NCTE or MCTE, in order to be part of the state and national conversation surrounding

literacy education. As teachers continue in their jobs, we suggest they start a graduate program as a way to connect their continuing questions and concerns about their teaching to scholarship in the field and to see how such research intersects with their own practice. Along the way, teachers should also choose good professional development, but must do so carefully, seeking high quality PD that matches their interests and concerns. A fourth step is to connect with other teachers in order to create long-term relationships that nurture and sustain growth, such as becoming a part of groups like their local National Writing Project sites. All these steps lead to the final suggestion: to become a teacher leader who mentors others, who becomes a teacher researcher, or who serves on decision-making committees. (See Appendix A.)

"In sharp contrast [to local PD]," said one teacher, "when I attended classes for my grad program, I was never offered a product, I never saw a pre-packaged curriculum, and I NEVER got the message that there is ONE way to teach ELA."

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All these steps contribute to a teacher's growth, and as I look around at the teachers I most admire, I see how each step has impacted their development toward becoming truly knowledgeable educators and professionals. But it saddens me that graduate classes are increasingly omitted from this journey, legislatively replaced by professional development that ironically does not always view teachers as professionals. I fear this reductive approach, which I believe alienates teachers and ultimately will do a great disservice to the children and teens who are in our charge. Teachers, I believe, must be treated as professionals...and graduate education remains an important component toward that end.

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Appendix A. Michigan Requirements for Continuing Certification

Provisional Certificate Renewal (as of September 1, 2013)

(Each renewal is valid for up to three years)

First renewal requires completion of ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- 6 semester hours in a planned course of study at an approved EPI or 6 semester credit hours of academic credit appropriate to the grade level and content endorsement(s) of the certificate at any regionally accredited college or university earned within the three years preceding the date of application; or
- 150 State Continuing Education Clock Hours (SCECHs) appropriate to the grade level and content endorsement(s) of the certificate earned within the three years preceding the date of application; or
- Combination of semester credit hours and SCECHs (25 SCECHs equate to 1 semester credit hour) equivalent to 150 hours earned within the three years preceding the date of application; or
- Completion of an approved Master's Degree or higher at any time.

Second renewal requires completion of ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- 6 semester hours in a planned course of study at an approved EPI or 6 semester credit hours of academic credit appropriate to the grade level and content endorsement(s) of the certificate at any regionally accredited college or university earned since the issue date of the FIRST Provisional Certificate renewal AND within the three years preceding the date of application; or
- 150 State Continuing Education Clock Hours (SCECHs) appropriate to the grade level and content endorsement(s) of the certificate earned since the issue date of the FIRST Provisional Certificate renewal AND within the three years preceding the date of application; or
- Combination of semester credit hours and SCECHs (25 SCECHs equate to 1 semester credit hour) equivalent to 150 hours earned since the issue date of the FIRST Provisional Certificate renewal AND within the three years preceding the date of application; or
- Completion of an approved Master's Degree or higher at any time.

from Facts on Educator Certification, Michigan Department of Education, Office of Professional Preparation Services.
http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Facts_About_Teacher_Certification_In_Michigan_230612_7.pdf

Appendix A. Steps to Professional Growth (MCEE)