

Thinking Like a Reader, Thinking Like a Writer: Shifting Stances in Digital Picture Book Creating

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Abstract: This study highlights a cross-course collaboration around children’s literature and grammar in one teacher preparation program. Pre-service teachers created digital picture books and video feedback for their peers in which they ultimately adopted shifting stances in thinking like readers and writers throughout their process. By situating reading and writing as reciprocal acts, pre-service teachers developed more nuanced understandings of authorship, audience, and language. Implications for this work suggest the power of creating learning opportunities for students and pre-service teachers that integrate—rather than silo—the varying strands of English language arts.

Introduction

“I really learned that having repetition, a rhyme, or a common tone is really important in keeping the children’s attention. Things like different types of sentences and punctuation like ellipses can create suspense or other tones to make books more engaging,” (Sam, a pre-service teacher in a children’s literature course.)

“I learned how I can hold writers’ conferences with my future students and how to look for the hidden gems in writing. It took work to really select one or two issues within writing rather than correcting every grammar mistake,” (Abby, a pre-service teacher in a grammar course.)

Reflections like these from Sam and Abby (all names used are pseudonyms) were the result of a cross-course collaboration in the elementary and middle grades teacher preparation programs at our university. The courses, Children’s Literature and Teaching Grammar and Punctuation, existed, as is often typical, isolated courses. As the instructors of these courses, we were drawn to work together to ensure that the separate courses were not so siloed and to provide pre-service teachers (PSTs) with a well-rounded and deep understanding of how reading, writing, and grammar are inextricably linked. In essence, we wanted our PSTs to benefit from the literacy connections possible within each course to mirror how reading, writing, and grammar are inherently linked in reality.

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To maximize PST learning, application, and extension of concepts, we sought to create learning opportunities for PSTs to engage in thinking like readers and writers across both courses. PSTs needed to do more than read in the literature course, and not only identify grammar structures in the grammar course. As the excerpts above highlight, our collaboration ensured that the children's literature PSTs like Sam learned about grammar and writing, while the grammar PSTs like Abby, learned about embedding grammar into writing and reading. PSTs needed these opportunities to think through the application and relevance of course assignments beyond the confines of that single course. As such, the cross-course connections extended PSTs' learning by shifting their perspectives about the nature and connectedness of each skill.

Background

Conceptions of teaching reading typically include the "big five" practices: phonics, phonological awareness, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary, with some researchers focusing largely on the first two, while others include spelling in this list. The act of writing is rarely considered in the teaching of reading comprehension. The same argument can be made for advocating for effective writing practices: reading instruction has been consistently left off the list. Instead, the list has typically included only topics such as teaching vocabulary, handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, etc. (Graham, 2020). The reciprocal relationship between the two acts has been well documented (Harste & Short, 1988; Shanahan, 1980), but they often still exist as separate acts, assignments, and courses in schooling.

Mentor texts have long been touted as an effective pedagogical tool for teaching writing (Gallagher, 2011; Kittle, 2008), and text analysis strategies like close reading have certainly been long-standing approaches towards ELA instruction that have experienced a more recent resurgence with the release of the Common Core State Standards (Fisher & Frey, 2012). But neither of these trends is really about the mutual benefits of reading and writing. To teach both reading and writing more mutually beneficial ways, we must integrate them. Writing in ELA classrooms is often centered around writing in response to a text (Beach, 1998). While there is merit in this work in that writing can serve as a tool for processing information and generating new thinking, opportunities should also exist for students to write as standalone, creative acts. When students have the opportunity to write creatively about topics unrelated to an assigned text, their ability to analyze and engage with other texts is enhanced (Glenn, 2007; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2009).

While reading and writing have often been framed as separate endeavors, of the two, the focus on writing in both research and practice has especially lacked. While there has been increased attention on writing in standardized assessments, classroom instruction often does not mirror this trend. With regards to teacher preparation programs, there is a stark scarcity of stand-alone courses on writing instruction. Writing is usually embedded in reading courses, which occupy a significant portion of teacher preparation. ELA teacher educators also feel more confident in teaching reading than writing (Myers et al., 2016). Yet research strongly supports the notion that PSTs need opportunities in their preparation programs to "make visible and accessible the disciplinary processes, thinking, and decision-making involved in writing so that they might begin to frame, decompose, and represent writing in ways that are accessible to K-12 students" (Alston & Danielson,

2020, p. 2). To teach writing well, one must write for real audiences, talk about writing with others, and evaluate others' writing.

Theoretical Framework

We draw on several theoretical perspectives to inform our work. As literacy educators, we both situate our research and teaching within a sociocultural theoretical framework. We seek to understand literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984) in that we try to understand our PSTs' reading and writing as literacy events (Heath, 1983), which are observable acts involving print and written text. We narrow our efforts in this project more specifically to focus on the interconnected relationship of reading and writing. Tierney and Shanahan (1991) claim "reading and writing support a complex and coordinated constellation of reasoning operations that varies in accordance with a learner's purposes, styles, and use of different reading and writing activities" (p. 265). We view our project through two theoretical perspectives: shared knowledge and rhetorical relations.

According to Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000), shared knowledge theory explains the connectedness and reciprocal nature of reading and writing acts. An individual draws upon four knowledge sources as they read and write: general, meta, pragmatic, and procedural. These types of knowledge explain the reciprocal nature of reading and writing when an individual reads and collects ideas for their writing, as well as understanding the function and purposes of a text.

Specific to our project is the idea of pragmatic knowledge, which according to Graham (2020), is an understanding of "text features, words, syntax, and usage that students draw on to decode, and encode words and comprehend and construct text" (p. S37). Reading and writing support each other through a shared communicative purpose through the rhetorical relations theoretical lens. Graham (2020) claims, "Each of these processes involves a conversation between readers and writers: readers with the absent author, and writers with the assumed readers" (p. S37). It is through this conversation that new perspectives about reading and writing may develop, such as writing devices or creating something for aesthetically pleasing purposes.

One of the goals in our teacher education program is to engage our PSTs in curricular opportunities where their attention is elevated to how they act and think like readers and writers during a specific task. Through these specific tasks, we believe our PSTs will ultimately develop a foundation and repertoire of pedagogical and literacy understandings that will support them as they become teachers of reading and writing themselves. Grounded in research and theory supporting the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing and the benefits of creative writing, modeling, and formative feedback, our study is guided by the following question: What are the opportunities for thinking like both readers and writers when composing and evaluating digital picture books?

Methodology

As literacy educators and colleagues, we saw potential for a unique learning experience in engaging our grammar and literature PSTs in a project that would integrate both reading and writing. Author 1, a former 2nd grade teacher and current literacy professor, taught Children's Literature. Author 2, a former 8th grade ELA teacher and current literacy professor, taught Teaching Grammar and Punctuation. In Children's Literature, Author 1 facilitated PSTs' understanding of children and young adult (YA) literature as instructional and cultural tools, engaged PSTs with literature via digital tools, and highlighted the importance of reading aloud to young children. In Teaching Grammar and Punctuation, Author 2 taught mechanics and usage of Standard American English while also modeling how to explore language and teach writing in ways that honor students' linguistic diversity and strengths as writers.

Consequently, we designed a collaborative project in which literature PSTs designed a digital picture book on a web platform called BookCreator (bookcreator.com). At the beginning of the project, literature PSTs created a list of topics and features they would include in their picture books. They designed and composed their books in and out of class over a few weeks. Once literature PSTs drafted their picture books on BookCreator, grammar PSTs viewed their picture books and created Flipgrid videos with feedback. Drawing on course concepts of Standard American English and conducting writing conferences with students, the grammar PSTs were expected to respond to their literature peers' writing in two ways: (1) reinforcing 1-2 positive aspects of the writing and describing the effect that the language had on them as reader, and (2) providing opportunities for growth in the writing related to the language use and describing the effect that these changes would have on the writing. They were expected to use mentor texts available to them in the classroom as examples to support their revision suggestions and aid in their peers' understanding of the grammar concepts. Finally, literature PSTs had the opportunity to revise their picture books after receiving feedback from grammar PSTs.

Data for the study were collected across both courses and in numerous forms, as outlined in Table 1. At the culmination of the semester, we transcribed the Flipgrid videos, which were between 2-5 minutes in length each, and we grouped reflection responses and transcription content by themes. We then engaged in an open round of coding (Saldaña, 2013) and each wrote analytic memos detailing reflections and themes during a shared writing time. Examples of our codes included selecting impactful revision opportunities, identifying positive features of the writing, striking a balance between teaching lessons and joyful reading, and stating difficulties of composing picture books.

Table 1. Sources of Data

Course	Coursework	Reflection Responses
Children's Literature	BookCreator books (31 total)	What have you learned about creating picture books? How did Mem Fox's ideas inform your thinking about making your book? What did you learn from the feedback you received from your grammar peers? (31 total)
Teaching Grammar and Punctuation	Flipgrid Videos (31 total)	What was hard about this work? What was enjoyable about this work? What did you learn? Other thoughts? (15 total)

Opportunities for PSTs to Shift Thinking as Readers and Writers

Our findings illuminate opportunities that PSTs had during this collaboration to shift their perspectives as readers or writers, thereby contributing to their learning. We constitute a shift in perspective as a position that PSTs had to adopt to meet a course assignment that drew on reading or writing in a way that situated them as reciprocal acts. For example, in evaluating literature PSTs' picture books, grammar PSTs were naturally inclined to respond from a reader response stance (Rosenblatt, 1978), but they were compelled to evaluate the texts from a grammar stance based on the assignment requirements. Considering the effect of the grammar choices on them as readers is where these two approaches were brought together. Similarly, the literature PSTs initially approached their text composition based on what children wanted or needed to read rather than how to craft a written product. They were also compelled to shift their stance from a reader to a writer after receiving feedback from grammar PSTs, which contributed to their learning outside the typical scope of the literature course.

We discuss findings in both the literature and grammar classes in moments we call "thinking like a reader" and "thinking like a writer." These findings illustrate moments of literacy learning for PSTs that required them to draw on the interconnectedness of reading and writing. We recognize these moments cannot be tucked neatly under "reading" or "writing" processes, but we attempt to discern where our PSTs were taking up a particular stance in order to meet an assignment goal or purpose (Tierney &

Shanahan, 1991). We believe that these literacy learning moments are critical for our PSTs as they form nuanced and integrative understandings about teaching reading and writing in their future classrooms.

Thinking Like a Reader and Writer with Children's Literature

Author 1 introduced the BookCreator project to PSTs in the literature course at the end of March in the spring semester. At the time the collaborative project was introduced, PSTs were reading Fox's (2008) *Reading Magic*, reading aloud to other classmates for practice and receiving feedback. On BookCreator, PSTs created a variety of books across genres, including fiction, informational, and fantasy. They used topics around families, social emotional and mental health, and academic concepts like the alphabet, colors, solar system, the United States, and the seasons in their final products.

PSTs in the literature course first approached the BookCreator project from the stance of "thinking like a reader." Their general knowledge of picture books had been shaped from their understandings garnered across the semester via course assignments and readings. PSTs also revealed pragmatic and procedural knowledge about reading and writing children's books as one PST reflected: "Books can be difficult to make especially when looking for age appropriate words and illustrations for it. You have to put a lot of thought into one page and that is even more difficult to do if you don't [know] what you're trying to say."

One PST's thinking revealed her procedural knowledge and metaknowledge, where she reflected on the steps for engaging in the writing process and what the function of a text, in this case a children's book, should have — a message. "Even the short picture books we created, there was a process to it and you had to think about the layout of your book and what you wanted to say and how you wanted to say it. It's important to have a message for the picture book."

Additionally, PST survey responses conveyed their understanding that an absent young child would be reading their writing product. Reflections revealed new perspectives about writing and creating an artifact a reader could appreciate (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991, as cited in Graham, 2020, p. S37.) PSTs explained how Fox's ideas about reading aloud shaped their understanding that a picture book would need to engage and keep the attention of young children. Another PST reflected on employing various writing devices—referenced at the opening of the article and also discussed in Fox's text—to achieve a particular effect with young children, by reflecting, "I really learned that having repetition, a rhyme, or a common tone is really important in keeping the children's attention." Importantly, these statements reveal the interconnectedness of reading and writing in this project as PSTs also considered how their writing as authors would affect children's emotions and attention as readers, as one example.

PSTs engaged with the project from the stance of "thinking like a writer" at multiple times throughout the project, including the crafting of the picture book and when they received feedback from their grammar peers. PSTs engaged in the writing process of brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, as well as participated in a writing community of reviewing others' writing products, reviewing mentor texts (children's literature), and engaging in feedback opportunities with other writers and readers in a writing community.

Literature PSTs reflected on how grammar PSTs' feedback helped them see how their writing—not their topic selection or the lesson learned, but the actual craft—could achieve a particular effect on their reader. Literature PSTs reflected on the FlipGrid feedback: “It was very helpful. I learned how to use ellipsis as a way to make children's books more engaging!” “The feedback that I received talked mostly about punctuation and how I could elevate the text by including exclamation points or question marks for variety.” Ultimately, literature PSTs gained critical pedagogical and literacy insights as they shifted stances to accommodate the demands of the assignment to think like a reader and think like a writer.

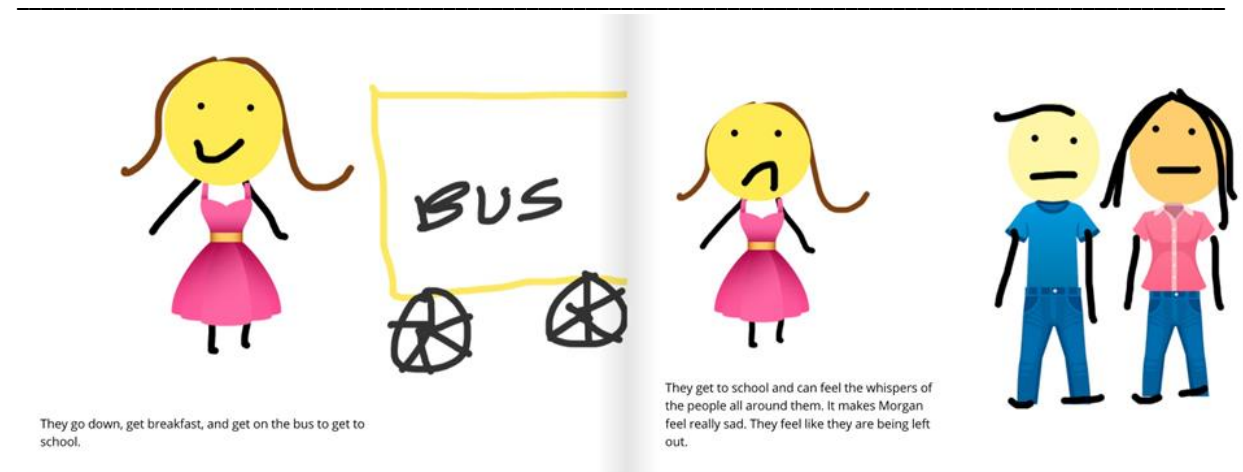
Thinking Like a Reader and a Writer with Grammar

Throughout the cross-course collaboration, PSTs in the grammar course also had varying opportunities to assume the role of both reader and writer. By reading a plethora of mentor texts and evaluating numerous types of writing throughout the course, PSTs were preparing themselves for the ultimate collaboration with the children's literature PSTs towards the end of the semester. The moments when PSTs had to shift their perspective as readers or writers and develop a more nuanced understanding of what each of these skills really includes contributed to their learning and transfer of skills across assignments.

To provide grammar instruction embedded within reading and writing, Author 2 modeled and facilitated class discussions regarding the language and craft choices apparent in varying texts on a nearly-daily basis throughout the course. Guided by the question “What do you notice?”, Author 2 and the PSTs examined articles from issues of *Sports Illustrated* and *Vanity Fair*, published picture books, and their peers' writing. When teaching specific grammatical conventions, Author 2 used mentor texts with strong and numerous examples of a given convention. For example, the picture book *Because* (Willems, 2019) is bursting with dependent clauses; nearly every sentence in the book begins with one. After repeated exposure within individual books like *Because* and across other mentor texts throughout the semester, the PSTs were more successful in trying out the conventions in their own writing (Shanahan, 2021), and also noticed and named many of these same conventions in the feedback provided to the literature PSTs.

For the grammar PSTs, the essence of the cross-collaboration came in the form of creating Flipgrid videos with feedback for the authors of the picture books. As the children's literature PSTs completed their picture books, the grammar PSTs viewed the books on BookCreator and prepared oral responses in pairs. Similar to the children's literature PSTs, the grammar PSTs were also first naturally inclined to engage in this work as *readers* of children's literature rather than writers. For example, when presented with a text, the PSTs initially responded to the issues within the text like the topic of the text, use of images, and how children might feel when reading the book. In response to a book titled *Morgan's Day In The Life* (Figure 1), Sierra and Chloe first said in their feedback video, “We really liked your book! We enjoyed the use of gender neutral pronouns like they and them. It helped to make the book inclusive.” We interpret the initial response as a normal, reader response-oriented reaction to narratives that they have been apprenticed into doing throughout their schooling.

Figure 1. Excerpt from *Morgan's Day in the Life*



However, as had been emphasized and modeled in class, the PSTs were also expected to describe how a grammar shift would impact the text from the stance of a reader. We feel this bridge between a reader's response and adopting the stance of a writer created especially strong learning opportunities for the grammar PSTs. So not only did the PSTs provide explicit suggestions about the grammatical conventions used, but they were also expected to explain to their peers how that revision would impact the text in its tone, clarity, or overall meaning. For example, after Sierra and Chloe's initial response about the gender inclusivity of *Morgan's Day in the Life*, they shifted to say:

The use of dialogue made the story really engaging, and especially for younger readers, it makes them more invested in the story and more invested in the characters. We also like the use of ellipses here at the end of the page because it makes the reader want to keep reading on.

PSTs were considering how the writing impacted a text's readability and overall meaning, as evidenced in thinking about how words shape students' investment in stories. In essence, the content of their peer feedback videos gradually transitioned to focus on the writing craft, with particular emphasis on grammatical conventions, and an articulation of how craft shapes readers' responses. Other groups mentioned things like: "A strong trend is beginning sentences with dependent clauses and using them as introductions. This creates an expected repetition throughout the book." "There were some times when repeating sentence structure was too much. You could have maybe combined some sentences to eliminate redundancy."

Within the focus on grammar conventions, another shift occurred as the PSTs moved away from correcting errors generally housed within the editing phase of writing. (i.e., "On page four, I think you're missing the word *are* after the word differences.") Instead, they began to center their feedback on craft choices that impacted the quality of the writing on a broader scale, while simultaneously teaching their peers about the rhetorical impact that such moves could have. For example, Devan, the same PST who

corrected a missing word, later said to her peer: “something to consider would be to use some interrogative sentences and exclamation marks to spruce it up. Different sentence types can add variety and make it exciting to read.” Rather than providing a laundry list of issues to correct, the grammar PSTs had to think through the text as a whole and narrow in on the most impactful areas for growth. In essence, the reading and writing connection was fostered through this assignment and provided the PSTs opportunities for adopting the stance of thinking like both readers and writers in a given assignment.

Discussion and Implications

This work responds to calls for more research and classroom instruction surrounding the integration of reading and writing (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Graham, 2020). PSTs engaged with their peers in a collaborative reading and writing community where audience and authorship were prominently emphasized. In doing so, our PSTs shifted stances between “thinking like a reader” and “thinking like a writer” to reveal varied understandings about the reading and writing tasks involved in the project, including writing mechanics and conventions, responses to reading, text features, and the function and purpose of a text — a children’s book. These conceptualizations integrate into and shape PSTs’ existing repertoire of reading and writing knowledge and skills and enhance their ability to teach reading and writing in their future classrooms. PSTs may design curricular opportunities like the BookCreator project in their own classrooms in an effort to use reading and writing together in a particular classroom learning task, for example.

Moving forward, our future literacy teaching and research involve investigating the mutually supportive impact on the interconnectedness of reading and writing in the same instructional space. We seek to design more learning opportunities for PSTs’ reading and writing learning and in peer collaborative spaces. Specifically, we plan to leverage reading and writing connections in our courses when one skill is specifically emphasized, like planning for more writing tasks in a literature course. We understand the challenges of our work, especially due to the reality of the lack of available teaching writing opportunities in teacher education. The scarcity of writing teaching constrains the ability to bring reading and writing tasks together for PSTs, but we believe designing curricular tasks such as the BookCreator project is a critical pedagogical and foundational learning experience for teachers of reading and writing in future elementary and middle grade classrooms to use with their students.

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