Teaching the Teacher: What I Learned from Teaching a Content Literacy Methods Class

When junior high school teacher Ingrid Spence was approached to teach a class at the local university on reading and writing in the content areas, she was excited and enthusiastic. She soon learned that these were feelings some of her students did not share.

**Ingrid Spence**

How long does it have to be?”
“Do I have to do a rough draft?”
“Can we change the due date? I had a game last night.”

“Sorry I missed class. I just spaced that I was supposed to be here.”

Sounds like typical ninth grade students from any of my English classes, but these comments were coming from the mouths of the college students I was teaching for the first time.

Having taught for twelve years, primarily seventh and ninth grade English, I recently had the opportunity to teach a university-level content literacy class, a requirement for every secondary education candidate at our university. This class would focus on literacy strategies that teachers from all fields could use to make reading and writing relevant to their classrooms. Education students from such diverse areas of preparation as science, art, industrial technology, social studies, music, physical education, math, and English would be expected to bring reading and writing into their curricula. Always up for a new challenge, I jumped at the chance to teach these adult students. For the last few years, I had focused on my role as a mentor to preservice teachers, supervising several student teachers and practicum students as well as serving on the College of Education redesign committee. I saw the college-level course as a logical way to broaden my professional impact, planning to connect what I was already doing in my English classroom with what I would include in this course for future teachers. For years, I had been incorporating strategies with my ninth-graders that I now realized I could share with the content literacy class, one where prospective teachers would consider how and what their students would be reading and writing in their subject area classes. Eager for the experience, I anticipated a class filled with interested learners, but I was in for a shock at the first meeting.

After a brief introduction of myself and the class expectations, I began to answer students’ questions: why they needed to purchase the expensive textbook, why the class had to be so long (three hours, one evening a week), and why the class was required at all (wasn’t teaching reading and writing the English teacher’s job?). These were valid questions when posed and answered, but they leaned toward—I’ll come right out and say it—whining when repeated . . . and repeated. I quickly found myself on the defensive. Where were the enthusiastic learners who appreciated the value of reading? What happened to the future teachers who would be willing to work long, hard hours? Some of these students began to pack up their materials twenty minutes before the end of class—when I still had one more activity planned. What was going on here?

I returned to my ninth grade classroom the next day a little deflated. As I launched into my lesson, the disappointment from the night before echoed through my day. These junior high kids were the ones I
expected to give me a hard time. Ninth-graders complain about everything; it's the whine factor in their hormones. But I expected better from the college students who'll be out teaching them in a few months.

By the next class session, I had realized that I was obligated to address the concerns of my class. I reasoned that much of their "whining" was motivated by their feeling that they didn't want to be in the class in the first place. Apparently, the reason they did not want to be there was that they, excepting the English teachers, did not see the teaching of reading and writing as their responsibility. I recognized that I not only needed to teach the literacy techniques, but I had to demonstrate their validity with actual use, emphasizing the connection between what and how I was teaching in class with how they could apply such strategies to their own classrooms in the future. I realized that my experience as an English teacher would not be enough to convince these prospective teachers of the importance of reading and writing in all subjects. Seeking help from my colleagues, I gathered materials from those in other disciplines at the junior high and high school, scrounging handouts right and left. I asked a math teacher how she'd used the jigsaw discussion method with her geometry students and learned she'd broken them into small groups, each responsible for working on one problem and then gathering together for each group to teach "their" problem-solving method to the rest of the class. I watched a science teacher practice a K-W-L (What do I Know already? What do I Want to know? What did I Learn?) before launching into a lab on mineral studies. I conferred with the choir teacher to see how she'd taught sight-reading techniques by using context clues and vocabulary practice. By finding real examples of these strategies in practice and incorporating them into my lessons, I grew more confident that I was able to justify what I was asking of my college students.

As a beginning teacher of prospective teachers, I was faced with another huge and unanticipated problem. Many of my adult students seemed not to understand the fundamentals of professionalism. Several had trouble following guidelines, remembering to check for assignments on the syllabus, and even showing up for class. Two chronically absent students managed to forget the date they were to present a practice lesson—one of them hadn't even come to class that night. These two had also managed to team up on another assignment, not meant to be collaborative, and turned in identical papers with a change of title, typos intact on both papers. Somehow, I now found myself complaining as much as my students.

"These cheaters are going to be teachers!" I ranted to my husband, to my colleagues at the junior high, even to my student-teacher who knew some of these adult students and had taken classes alongside them. At home late at night, I'd sort through stacks of final drafts from both ninth-graders and college seniors, marveling at the similarities in sloppy proofreading and lack of effort. Stepping back, however, I realized my perceptions were skewed by the misbehavior of a few. There was, in fact, a silent majority of diligent students. That did not stop me, however, from launching into the entire class one evening.

"Your work represents you, the professional," I exclaimed. "You must proofread your work diligently so that others don't question the quality of your education."

"But I can't spell," came the reply from several corners. One of the quiet majority caught my eye and shrugged in chagrin, and I remembered those who had turned in quality work.

"Then you'll need to find someone very close to you who is willing to proofread every single thing you generate in class or anything you send home to parents or write to your colleagues," I replied unsympathetically. Even as I said this, I began to wonder if my nagging was productive, so when some of these same students stood up to teach their practice lessons with gum in their mouths and baseball caps on their heads, instead of chastising them, I made a point to acknowledge those who had demonstrated professionalism in their demeanor as they presented their lessons. Professionalism was a topic I brought up again and again.

In fact, as the semester continued, I began to feel that raising issues of professional responsibility needed to take front stage. I would do this in the context of the course's purpose: to introduce these teaching candidates to strategies they could use to incorporate reading and writing in all subjects. Each week, I looked for opportunities for students to apply the content reading and writing skills we were investigating together. I found appropriate study guides, graphic organizers, and much more. But I also was aware of how easy it would be for content area teachers to ignore these techniques and teach these subjects the way most of them had been taught, perpetuating the misconception that teaching reading and writing is solely the English teacher's job.

I wanted these teachers to understand
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that, even in those subjects like physical education, industrial technology, music and art, where the importance of reading and writing might seem less obvious, attention to these skills could add depth and zest to the curriculum. Teams of students were soon demonstrating lessons they had created. Art majors taught lessons on how to write "unsent letters" to Picasso and Renoir. Physical education majors designed study guides for a health unit, and music majors created vocabulary lessons derived from a study of jazz.

Now that they were into their projects, getting their hands dirty, I noticed a change in the tone of the learning-log entries they had been keeping since the beginning of the course. While the initial entries echoed complaints similar to those voiced in class, students now began commenting that my practice minilessons and their own efforts at developing literacy-based lessons were helping them understand the strategies available to them. They were ready to look for resources other than the assigned textbook for their students; they were considering what they might do for students who could not read at grade level; and they were searching for ways to incorporate relevant writing assignments into the subject matter of the courses they would be teaching.

Naturally enough, not everyone was a convert. By the end of the course, I still had a few diehards who continued to question how they could apply content literacy methods to their own subjects. One industrial technology student swore, "I'll quit teaching the day someone tells me I need to have my students write poetry." Of course, no one would be likely to tell him that. All semester long, I had tried to make the point that not all the techniques we were investigating would work in all content areas, and teachers were not required to use all of them even if they would work. These strategies were suggestions for consideration. Most students understood that, and even this particular student in his final reflection essay admitted grudgingly, "Believe it or not, I think I got something out of this class, perhaps a little broader view, perhaps a few helpful techniques. In the end, I am a more rounded person for having taken it. Thanks."

Then there was the comment of another industrial tech student who, like most students on a tight budget, usually participated in the end-of-semester rush to unload texts at the campus bookstore. On the first day of this class, the student had joined in the complaints about purchasing the textbook. In his final reflection paper, he stated: "This is a very relevant class in a student's path to becoming a teacher, and this will be one book I don't sell back."

In teaching junior high students, I have found ways to learn from them. Their unique perspectives often jar me into realizing about learning I would never have come up with on my own. However, it took me a while to begin learning from my adult students. Once I did, I understood that student complaints, rather than wearing me down, could instead force me to clarify my objectives and hone my methods. I discovered that learning logs were an invaluable tool for communicating with students and tracking both their progress and mine. And it was my students who pushed me to turn to my colleagues for support when I needed help finding strategies to share with their wide variety of teaching specialties.

I also learned some less positive lessons. We understand that, with our kindergarten through high school students, we teach more than subject matter. For a while I wasn't applying this understanding to my adult students. I became aware that not all students of education strive to be model educators, and that professional behavior needs to be pointed out, reinforced, modeled, and expected by all of us who work with aspiring teachers. I learned, too, that in a course intended to change behavior, not everyone will change. I believe, however, that all my students left this class with at least one new perception etched on their psyches: that instruction and practice in reading and writing is not solely the English teacher's responsibility.

The following fall, I once again taught the content literacy class. I could now reasonably anticipate some of the difficulties I would face. Knowing what to expect, I was more patient with the students' initial uneasiness because I realized that, as they learned about and had more experience with the possibilities for writing and reading in their disciplines, the more comfortable and less defensive they would be.

Also, I now understood that, from the beginning of the course, I needed to help these preservice teachers better understand their responsibility to their profession. Adult students are still students after all, and it is my job to help them become teachers who are proud of themselves and proud of their work.

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