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Social Foundations as a Foundation for Literacy Instruction: An Effort in Collaboration

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Our Instructional Contexts

The literacy block of courses we describe in this chapter is taught within the unique context of Northern Arizona—a vast rural region that includes a large portion of the Navajo Nation as well as the entire Hopi Reservation. Northern Arizona University (NAU), the primary teacher education institution in the state, serves many Native communities (Apache, Zuni, Navajo, Hopi) through statewide distance education programs. We have the privilege to work with Native students as well as Anglo students in our elementary education programs. Consequently we teach our literacy course to preservice education students who are markedly different from one another in their life experiences and cultural backgrounds.

Due to our unique geographical context, Northern Arizona University offers a wide variety of teacher education options including: (1) several school-based programs that emphasize content-area themes; (2) programs on the Navajo Reservation that combine special education and elementary education degrees and allow students to continue their work as instructional aids in reservation schools; (3) programs on the main Flagstaff campus for returning students who need scheduling flexibility because they have jobs and families; (4) cohort
classes on the main campus for students in a small group who complete their program together; and (5) programs at statewide sites where students can get their education classes via Interactive Instructional Television, with statewide faculty. These programs each draw a fairly predictable collection of students. We teach this block of literacy courses to students in three of the programs: (1) the Piñon Preparation Program on the Navajo Reservation; (2) the campus-based “traditional” or flexible schedule program; and (3) the campus-based cohort program. Our course outline is used in whole or part by other NAU literacy instructors in these various programs.

Our classes range in size from 10 to 32 students. Our instruction is designed to weave theory, current research, reflection, and teaching so that our students experience best practice as both teachers and learners. Because we believe in an integrated curriculum for elementary students, this course combines reading and language arts methods in a 9-hour block of classes that includes a weekly practicum in elementary classrooms. Our students begin to experience how reading and language arts instruction are central to and can be incorporated across the entire elementary curriculum.

Our Collaborative Style

Our collaboration is active and systematic. Although we teach different populations of students, we create lessons and course materials together. We share regularly with one another the status of our students’ learning. This includes the successful lessons and the unsuccessful ones. We depend on one another to critique the instructional strategies we design. When schedules allow, we combine classes to provide a team-teaching model for our students. We actively reflect on our teaching in this course and share those reflections in class. Projects our students complete are shared with all of our classes, effectively raising the standards of students’ professional presentations. Learning differences that seem to be a result of our various student populations are shared with all our students, thus challenging them to consider new perspectives. We share instructional files, the journal articles we read, and our creative visions for preservice teachers. When problems arise, we share insights with one another and look for guidance in current research. An important demonstration of our collaboration is the multicultural children’s literature collection we share. Although the books are stored in each of our offices, our students and colleagues are encouraged to borrow books to use in their teaching. Our intent is to offer a model of active, professional collaboration and reflection within our teacher education program.

1 The Literacy Block consists of the following courses: ECI 301—Decoding; ECI 303—Reading Instruction for the Elementary Grades; ECI 304—Language Arts for the Elementary Grades; and ECI 308—Practicum. The students sign up for all of these courses at one time and we simply treat them as one course.
Major Ideas That Have Influenced our Work

The composition of a course nearly always reflects the experiences and passions of those who construct it. This literacy education course situates effective practices in language development and literacy education within a sociocultural context. The field of Social Foundations as well as the Social Foundations Standards presented by the Council of Learned Societies in Education (1996) heavily inform our work. Our primary purpose is to engage our preservice teachers in critical reflection of the varied contexts in which literacy instruction takes place. Our particular concern is with equity issues through examinations of language diversity, race, ethnicity, social class, and gender. Based on our collective background and expertise areas, we bring the following experiential and research perspectives to our literacy course: many years of public school teaching, ethnographic research in inner-city schools, anthropology of education, gender issues in elementary schools, training in literacy education, educational law, and advocacy for students usually labeled “at risk.” As we work and write together, we realize our experience, knowledge, and continuing professional inquiry stimulate our energy to provide teacher preparation in literacy that is engaging, relevant, and equitable for diverse student populations. The course we present in this chapter represents our collaborative work as literacy educators for preservice teachers.

Our course is based on the work of researchers who have explored the cultural socialization children receive around language/literacy and social justice issues in schools. Shirley Brice Heath’s work (1983) and Allyssa McCabe’s research (1996), coupled with research on how children gain knowledge of text conventions (Clay, 1992), signal an urgency for preservice teachers to understand the nature of children’s language and literacy development. Too often, teachers understand only their own cultural perspective regarding the status, acquisition, and application of literacy skill and fail to recognize other cultural traditions that give impetus and form to literacy development. Heath’s and McCabe’s work remind us that all children’s early experiences with story are shaped by culture. We believe teachers need an understanding of how they can use those traditions to effectively foster literacy development for every child.

The real task is to present to our university students content and experiences that assist them to understand how children acquire literacy skill. Central to this task is our use of quality, multicultural children’s literature. Students are required to examine and acquaint themselves with current, multicultural books for children of all ages. They learn to use these books to plan and deliver engaging literacy lessons for children each week in schools. They learn to select books that are rich in content and support literacy skills in developmentally appropriate ways. We intend for our students to use quality multicultural children’s literature to invigorate their own learning about storytelling styles.
across cultures and to provide bridges to the prior knowledge children outside the dominant culture offer. With quality multicultural children’s literature as the focus for lessons, we extend learning by engaging our university students in context-specific activities that provide opportunities for them to read, write, speak, and listen in real, meaningful ways. Our purpose is for these lessons to model the goals, designs, and types of engagement we intend for them to provide for their own students.

**Issues We Considered When Designing the Literacy Block**

We believe that an understanding of language and literacy development alone cannot insure effective literacy instruction in today’s diverse school populations. Consequently, our instruction includes historical and current sociocultural issues as well as effective literacy practices. Our students examine their own schooling and educational perspectives. Part of teacher education is for novices to understand “the way schools work” (Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995). For us, that means critiquing the instructional strategies, materials, curricula, and school structures surrounding literacy education (Edelsky, 1991; Freire, 1970, 1987; Nieto, 1996; Spring, 1995). We provide instruction to illuminate why teachers do things certain ways, why students are frequently blamed for their lack of achievement, and how some instructional practices actually deter literacy acquisition. Central to our instruction are the educational standards provided by national professional organizations, state guidelines, and local school districts. Through reflective practice around a variety of educational issues, students learn to evaluate their professional standards, their developing practice as teachers, and their ethical standards regarding literacy education for diverse learners.

**Tensions in Teaching the Literacy Block**

We find ourselves balancing a variety of tensions as we teach this literacy course. One that continues to be troublesome is the resistance our students demonstrate toward multicultural literature and education. Mainstream, dominant culture students are those most likely to reflect conservative political views and offer the most resistance to multicultural issues. Classes made up of nontraditional students and students of color offer less resistance to such issues. We continue to explore ways to help preservice teachers understand the need for instruction that welcomes cultural diversity and recognizes its value in an effective literacy program.

A particular challenge is changing preservice teachers’ notions about effective literacy instruction. For most of our university students, their own views about effective literacy instruction are obstacles at the beginning of our course. For some students, these views remain problematic throughout the semester, reinforcing the voices of researchers who report that most teachers teach as they have been
taught. For a few students whose desire to read and write was effectively stifled by poor literacy instruction, the challenge is to change their attitudes toward literacy so that they can begin to learn sound instructional strategies. Coupled with these tensions, is the lack of knowledge many of our students have about child development. As their understanding of child development is limited, it is difficult for them to devise lessons that are effective and developmentally appropriate. For many of our students, it is easier to employ strategies their own elementary teachers used. The practicum experience that is a part of this course becomes a series of trial and error attempts to learn how to engage children to support their developing literacy skills. It is not uncommon for the practicum to convince students that their own educational experiences were harmful to their literacy acquisition.

An additional tension we experience is supporting students’ transition from full-time students to part-time professionals. We believe that professional attitudes and behaviors can be taught and assessed. We have devised various ways for our students to measure their developing professionalism. However, it is hard for our students to maintain professional standards that affect their learning during this course and their practicum experience when they view themselves as university students, not members of the teaching profession. We continue to search for ways to successfully negotiate behaviors that evidence appropriate professional development during the term of this literacy course.

A SAMPLE OF SUCCESSFUL LITERACY INSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES

The Literacy Block

The following activities and assignments represent ones we have developed apart from the usual instruction in reading and language arts methods. We hope you will find them helpful in understanding how we have shaped our course to reflect literacy education in the context of social justice issues in school settings.

Cultural Autobiography

Students write a short essay describing who they are in terms of their cultural background. They are asked to include descriptions of: ethnicity/heritage, family traditions, geographical influences, gender socialization, critical school experiences, and social class influences and how these shaped their experiences, goals, and the person they are today. They are asked to reflect on ways their cultural values influence their beliefs and behaviors as teachers. The cultural autobiography assists us to know them and is used from time to time to illustrate students’ diversity and commonalities.
Learning to Read/Write Memoirs

Students write a short essay describing their memories of learning to read and write. They are asked to focus on experiences inside and outside of school during their pre-school and elementary years. Students choose their most vivid positive and negative memories related to learning to read and write, paying careful attention to the details of their experiences and feelings. They are asked to include a reflection of how their experiences inform their preparation for becoming reading/writing teachers.

Survey of Learning to Read/Write Themes

Over the course of several years, we have devised a 60-item survey of events learners encounter in learning to read and write. These events are derived from a qualitative analysis of students’ Learning to Read/Write Memoirs. Students complete the survey, marking items that reflect their personal experiences and compile the results of the entire class. Particular attention is given to the class demographic information (number of students, ethnicities represented, age ranges, gender distribution, etc.). Class results are compared with other classes with varying demographic profiles. Class discussion focuses on differences in literacy education experiences for children.

Emergent Literacy Timeline

The class constructs an illustrated timeline that evidences their emergent literacy experiences. Using colored chalk on a chalkboard (or butcher paper) that spans the front of the class, the class works together to write or illustrate the play activities, rhythms, songs, games, riddles, codes, and so forth that children use as they practice language in early childhood. The timeline, marking the first 10 years of life, soon becomes a mural of activities children engage in around language. The more diverse the class, the more students are likely to see that every culture and every family is an exciting arena for children’s early language development. This activity often points out common and different experiences across socioeconomic and ethnic groups.

Weekly Lessons

A practicum accompanies this nine-credit literacy block and provides students an opportunity to work with students in real school settings. Our students work individually or in pairs to construct engaging, high quality literacy lessons for elementary students. They use a lesson plan format that is modeled during the first weeks of class to prepare their lessons. A checklist of lesson components supports their lesson plan writing. This checklist and their lesson plan is submitted for approval prior to teaching it in the schools.
Child Literacy Study

During the first 3 weeks of their practicum, students complete a series of literacy assessments on one young child. Specific instructions for these assessments are explained and modeled in class. At the end of the 3-week period, students write a complete report of their findings. Literacy assessments include but are not limited to: a modified concepts of print test; letter recognition; sight word assessment; interest and attitude inventories; environmental word recognition; sound/symbol relationships; story retelling. This study enables students to construct a detailed literacy profile of a child and share that information with the child’s teacher.

Professional Growth Assessments

Professional growth criteria around the themes of reliability, initiative, credibility, collaborative skill, reflective skill, academic skill, personal wellness, and respect are presented at the beginning of the course pack and explained during the first class meetings (see expanded version on Web site). These criteria represent ways we expect students to evidence their growth toward becoming professional educators. Each class meeting, with its discussion, small group participation, reflection and practice activities gives students opportunities to demonstrate their professional growth. At midsemester and at the end of the semester, students are asked to evidence and assess their professional growth progress.

Big Book and Multicultural Read-Alouds

Students select a Big Book to read aloud to the class. Criteria for this assignment are given in the course pack and modeled before this assignment is due. They are also responsible for selecting a multicultural picture book that fits criteria for high quality children’s literature. Students prepare and read this book for their peers as a way to develop engaging skills as readers.

ABC Book

Students select a theme and compose, illustrate, and produce an ABC book. Text and illustrations must be original. The book is evaluated on richness of content, creativity, and professional presentation. Students find this to be a time-consuming, but rewarding and creative project that is later shared with family members and friends.

Author/Illustrator Display

Working in a small group, students select an author or illustrator of multicultural books for children. After reading the author’s (or illustrator’s) work, they design and present a display center that illustrates an overview of information about
Annotated Bibliography of Children’s Books

Students read 30 multicultural children’s books, 25 picture books and 5 chapter books (two of which are required reading for two other assignments, the Reader’s Response project and the Literature Circles project). At least half (15) of the books must be award winners or “placers” (Newbery, Caldecott, Coretta Scott King, Horn Book, ALA, etc.). Annotations include correct citation, award/year, suggested grade level/purpose (i.e., read aloud, independent reading), a brief summary, an analysis of the art work, and a list of the content the book offers for instructional purposes. The bibliography may be presented in any attractive, usable format such as a file box, ring holder, notebook, and so forth. Some very good books are not recommended because they represent books required by other courses and popular reading that students may have already done. Our intent is to be sure students read new, excellent, multicultural books that contain a large amount of content about multicultural issues.

Reader-Response Project

Students read chapter books such as Sing Down the Moon by Scott O’Dell, Racing the Sun by Paul Pitts, Crossing the Starlight Bridge by Alice Mead, The Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito by Sheila Garrigue, and/or The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 by C.P. Curtis. They select one book for their reader-response project, a personal exploration of a topic central to the book’s theme. Students submit a proposal for the reader-response project that includes criteria listed in the course pack. Students prepare and present a center explaining their topic and providing engaging learning activities for children to do.

Literature Circles

Students choose one of the books listed previously for their literature circle project. During class time, they meet with small groups of peers in a literature circle where they discuss the book thoroughly. We ask students to choose roles from the following list to assist in the literature circle discussion.

Word Keeper. This role explores vocabulary, phonics, derivations, word analysis, jargon, or other interesting ways words are used in the book. The word keeper’s job is to construct interesting ways to explore and learn more words in the book.

Illustrator. The illustrator’s job is to illustrate the book’s major themes or
unique messages. This role may incorporate various artistic ways to create a visual response to the book.

**Historian.** The historian explores historic themes presented in the book. The historian traces the major events of each chapter or creates a representation of historical events and themes.

**Geographer.** The geographer is responsible for constructing an activity that represents geographical themes in the book. The geographer draws a map and creates symbols, logos, place markers, and text to support the geographic content of the book.

**Character Analyst.** This role focuses on the book’s characters. The character analyst studies one of the characters in-depth or compares and contrasts characters, and displays this knowledge in interesting ways.

**Questioner.** The questioner designs engaging questions about the book. The questions should require factual knowledge, an analysis of the story, a synthesis of information, and answers beyond yes or no. The questioner devises ways to display student-centered responses to expand the group knowledge about the book. We have added new roles to enrich the literature circles and provide students options for engaging in discussions about book in creative ways. These roles include playwright, poet, musicologist, and journalist. We suggest that the reader continue to expand this list of roles.

**Service Learning Project**

Students submit a proposal for a personal service learning project to complete during the semester. Suggested activities include reading to children at a community food center, assisting with tutoring in after-school programs, listening to children read aloud at local schools or community centers. Six hours of service and a reflection about the experience is required for completion of this project.

**Personal Writing Portfolio**

Students choose any three of the following genres: personal journal, story, simulated journal, poetry, essay, informational/nonfiction (hiking guide, how-to, etc.). They write a piece for each genre that is original, current, and reflects their growth as emerging writers. Students participate in some group editing activities with their portfolio pieces during class. They choose one piece to share with the class during the Literacy Celebration at the end of the semester.
Literacy Celebration

Students present a selection from their personal writing portfolio to read aloud to the whole class. The literacy celebration is a special event scheduled at the end of the semester. It includes refreshments, room decorations, invited guests, and a written program provided by student committees.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

We find our creative and collaborative efforts challenge us to constantly reflect on our own growth as literacy professionals as we discuss what is working effectively and what is not working as well as we would like. Throughout the last 3 years, our course has undergone tremendous change as we learn more ourselves and refine our practices. We are able to support each other and engage in an energizing process that results in more engaging and authentic work for our preservice teachers. For us, the challenge and intense nature of collaboration is certainly worth the personal and professional growth we have experienced and have observed in our students.

REFERENCES


