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Preservice Teachers Ponder the Power of Poetry

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Abstract

Research confirms benefits of using poetry in the classroom (i.e. Kane & Rule, 2004; Sekeres & Gregg, 2007). However, preservice teachers often lack confidence with poetry (Wade & Sidaway, 1990) and are therefore reluctant to teach it (Hughes & Dymoke, 2011). This mixed methods study examined the effects of a poetry intervention with thirty-three undergraduate preservice teachers. Participants were introduced to various types of poetry and asked to summarize their learning about course content through writing an original poem following the newly presented format. Based on theories of constructivism, the activities were designed to be authentic and active. An analysis of pre- and post-surveys and anecdotal notes revealed an increase in participants' knowledge, confidence, and appreciation of poetry. Implications about active learning and innovative teaching techniques for teacher educators are discussed.

Preservice Teachers Ponder the Power of Poetry

Teachers of preservice teachers have an interesting challenge. On the one hand, instructors must teach their students about content, whether it is foundations of education, research and assessment, literacy instruction, or child and adolescent development. Concurrently, they must teach pedagogy. While doing both, instructors should ultimately model exemplary practices in the classroom. This study was designed to introduce students to an innovative and engaging technique of using poetry as an instructional tool while simultaneously teaching the content of a language arts methods course.

There are many documented benefits of using poetry in the classroom. Research confirms that poetry has been effective in promoting content concepts (Kane & Rule, 2004; Maxim, 1998; Robertson, 1997). Poetry can be used to differentiate instruction (Szabo, 2008), create understanding (Eisner, 1985), and increase personal connections with text (Sekeres & Gregg, 2007). The reason for these benefits is the close ties between writing and thinking because writing “allows students to share their thoughts with others and themselves” (Marcum-Dietrich, Byrne, and O’Hern, 2009p. 14). This is supported by the theories of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) that language is a tool that advances thinking and learning.

In addition to the above benefits, poetry can be a powerful tool for connecting with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) in a meaningful and engaging way (Vardell, 2013). This increases the value of its use since the CCSS are omnipresent across many states today. The CCSS support an interdisciplinary approach to literacy (CCSS, 2010, p.4). Strickland (2012) noted, “The language arts – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – should be integrated with each other and across the curriculum” (p.25). Many standards related to comprehension, fluency, and phonics can be addressed through poetry (Dalton, 2012). Furthermore, poetry has been shown to successfully help students, particularly struggling readers, learn these foundational reading skills (Rasinski & Zimmerman, 2013).

In spite of the positive effects of using poetry in the classroom, preservice teachers often lack confidence about their poetry knowledge (Wade & Sidaway, 1990) which results in reluctance to teach it (Hughes & Dymoke, 2011; Ray, 1999). Not surprisingly, the extent to which preservice teachers utilize various teaching strategies depends largely on their prior knowledge and beliefs (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). In essence, preservice teachers cannot teach that which they do not know (Leko & Brownell, 2011). Due to lack of confidence and/or knowledge, it can be surmised that few preservice teachers may use poetry as a pedagogical tool in their future classrooms.

The intent of this project was to elevate preservice teachers’ knowledge about poetry and its positive effects on learners. The specific goals of this venture were fourfold: 1) to actively engage preservice teachers in learning about poetry; 2) to increase

preservice teachers' awareness of poetry as a tool for teaching; 3) to increase preservice teachers' confidence in a topic they may use as a tool to teach their future students; and 4) to increase language arts content knowledge through the use of poetry.

Theoretical Perspectives

The theory of constructivism guided the design of this project. Grounded in the works of Vygotsky and Piaget, constructivist theories have influenced educational thinking for several decades (Asvoll, 2012). Essentially, constructivist theories propose that individuals learn by connecting new information with their existing knowledge. "The learner brings to the learning environment knowledge from past experience, and that knowledge has a strong influence upon how the learner constructs meaning and acquires new knowledge from new experiences," (Allen, 2008, p. 30-31). A constructivist environment is one that is student-centered and includes authentic learning opportunities. Additionally, advocates of constructivist approaches believe that the process of knowledge acquisition must be active rather than passive and applicable to the learner's everyday world to become stored in long-term memory (Allen, 2008). Based on these principles, the activities of this study were designed to be authentic and active. They are authentic in that participants are using poetry as a tool for expressing their learning of a language arts topic presented during class time. The activities are active because students will be participating in reading, writing, and sharing various poems.

Method

This study was conducted in an undergraduate Birth-Grade Six Language Arts education methods course at a small liberal arts university. This was the second of two literacy courses for the students in the education program, occurring near the middle of their coursework. The study was funded through an internal College Committee on Teaching and Learning grant, and as such, active learning was integral to the design of this project. The study was conducted during the first nine weeks of the semester. The classes met twice per week for eighty minutes each session. The activities for this study took place during the first and last ten minutes of the first class period of each week.

Participants

Participants were thirty-three undergraduate preservice teachers in two different course sections, with fifteen and eighteen students each. All participants were female. Thirty-one were birth through grade six majors and two were Teaching English to Students of Other Languages majors. The majority of students were juniors in college, with the remainder in their sophomore year. Three participants were African American; thirty were Caucasian.

Research Design

During the first week of the semester, participants anonymously completed and submitted a survey modified from Stickling, Prasun, and Olsen (2011) about their feelings and thoughts about poetry (see Appendix). For the next seven weeks, participants worked with a different form of poetry each week. During the ninth week, students again

anonymously completed the same survey taken at the beginning of the study. Anonymity was employed on the surveys with the intent to encourage students to answer honestly without fear of their answers affecting their course grade.

During each of the seven weeks of the study, students were introduced to a different form of poetry in the first ten minutes of class. Over the course of the study, the following types of poetry were used: rhyming (abab and abba format), acrostic, haiku, cinquain, diamante, bio poem, and ABC poem. The instructor began each session by providing explicit instruction about the form of poetry. For example, for a haiku poem, students were told that it is a poem with three lines, with a pattern of 5, 7, and 5 syllables per line, and it is typically about nature. Next, students read several examples of poems following the format of the day. These examples were either provided by the instructor in the form of books or online resources, or students were asked ahead of time to bring in examples. The reading of these poems took a variety of forms during the semester, including whole group readings, small groupings, paired reading, and individual reading.

Following the introductory poetry lesson, the regular course content was taught for the remainder of the class. As part of this language arts course, the content included topics such as emerging literacy, talking, comprehension, literacy strategies, writer's workshop, and vocabulary. The final ten minutes of class were devoted to having students synthesize their learning of the content by creating an original poem following the style introduced at the beginning of the session. The poems were written in a variety of ways each week, including whole group, small group, pairs, and individually. For the whole group writing, which occurred twice, one student would stand at the white board and elicit suggestions for lines or words for the poem. She would lead the conversation and negotiate the choosing of the text as she wrote the poem on the board. Following three of the lessons, students worked in small groups or pairs to create a poem. Two weeks students wrote poems individually. Poems were shared out loud at the conclusion of each class period. This sharing took the form of choral group readings in the instances where poems were jointly created. For the individual writing, volunteers were asked to share their poems. Each week all poems were collected for analysis. Participants were informed that the poems were not graded and did not count towards the course grade.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources were both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Quantitatively, the pre-survey was anonymously completed and collected the first week of class, and the same procedure was used for the post-survey during the ninth week. Using an online statistical analysis instrument, descriptive statistics were calculated for the first five items on the survey. Due to the anonymity of the surveys, an unpaired *t*-test was used to determine if the differences were significant. The means and standard deviations of these items and the results of the unpaired *t*-test are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Descriptive Statistics and Unpaired t-test of Items on the Poetry Survey

Item	Pre <i>M</i>	Pre SD	Post <i>M</i>	Post SD	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
1. How do you personally feel about poetry?	3.13	0.87	3.76	0.79	3.07	0.003*
2. How often do you feel poetry should be used in the classroom?	3.69	0.64	3.94	0.78	1.42	0.161
3. How comfortable would you feel using poetry in the classroom?	3.44	0.91	3.88	0.93	1.93	0.058
4. How interested would you be in receiving ideas for using poetry in the classroom?	4.38	0.66	4.42	0.87	0.28	0.798
5. Do you feel poetry instruction is beneficial to students?	3.94	0.72	4.08	0.79	0.74	0.463

* $p < .01$ (2-tailed test)

Qualitative data included the original poems, anecdotal notes from observations during the lessons, and two open-ended questions from the survey. The original poems were collected and evaluated for accuracy of the poetic format introduced during the lesson as well as for evidence of knowledge of the language arts content presented in class. Additional data were gleaned from observations and conversations throughout the semester. In particular, students' comments about poetry were attended to and these were recorded as anecdotal notes by the instructor either during class while students were writing their original poems or immediately following the class. For example, when a student commented to a peer "count the syllables...did we do it right?...nice job!" these words were documented for later analysis. Qualitative data were read multiple times and annotations were written in the margins of the papers. The anecdotal notes and comments from the open-ended response on the survey were coded (Seidman, 1998). Codes included interest, knowledge, accuracy, engagement, appreciation, and confidence. Data was revisited in light of these codes and themes that emerged included active engagement, increased knowledge, and greater appreciation of poetry.

Findings

A careful analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed several findings: the project assisted pre-service teachers with becoming familiar with various forms of poetry; participants' confidence in their knowledge of poetry increased; and participants gained an appreciation for the potential use of poetry in classrooms.

Learning about Poetry

The study promoted learning about specific types of poetry as evident in the original poems created in class, the responses to item six on the survey, and students' verbal and written comments. Original poems were collected at the end of each session and analyzed for accuracy for the type of poem introduced that day. Out of the 88 poems collected throughout the study, 86 poems (98%) followed the correct format. Two examples of Haiku poems about the topic "Talking" exhibited this accuracy:

Words constantly flow
 Making connections with friends
 Conversations rock!

(Maria, Janelle, and Susan)

Communication
 Is essential in the room
 Among the students

(Anna, Sarah, and Claire)

As is evident in the above examples, the students were able to precisely create an original poem following the 5/7/5 syllable rule for haiku. In the following example, Linda, Chantelle, and Jordan created a cinquain poem to summarize their learning about morning messages. While there are several versions of cinquains, this followed the format where each line has a particular type of word. The first has a noun, the second two adjectives, the third three words ending in "ing," the fourth a phrase and the fifth a noun synonymous with the first line.

Morning Message
 Informational, Helpful
 Reviewing, Welcoming, Greeting
 A message that sets the tone for the day
 A.M. Facts

In addition to being accurate with the format of each type of poem, the content of each reflected the participants' understandings of the language arts subject for that day.

Regarding survey question six, in which students were asked to list some forms of poetry they were familiar with, there were a total of 69 responses on the pre-survey and

127 responses on the post-survey. The nearly double increase of responses is indicative of the additional types of poetry students were able to recall and list following the study. Additionally, the types of poems listed on the pre-survey tended to be vague or general, such as “short poems,” “Shakespeare?” and “poetry that forms shapes.” The responses on the post-survey were very specific, and included types of poems used during the project as well as others that were not introduced in this study. Some examples of participants’ responses included, “haiku,” “acrostics,” “odes,” “sonnets,” “bio poems,” “limericks,” and “couplets.”

Final data sources to support the finding that participants’ knowledge of poetry increased were students’ comments throughout the semester as well as responses to question seven of the survey. For example, one student wrote on the post-survey, “I see now that there are many variations of poetry to interest all students.” At the beginning of the study, students often remarked that they were somewhat familiar with a particular type of poetry, but could not recall the names or details of them. While learning about the acrostic poems, Danielle exclaimed, “I remember those! I just never knew what they were called.” In another instance, Sydney said she had “never heard of diamante poems before” and now she “loved them!”

Increasing Confidence

Anecdotal data gathered throughout the study revealed an increase in participants’ confidence about their knowledge of poetry and their use of it in their future classrooms. These findings were supported by written comments on the post-survey. One student noted that the poems with very specific rules, such as the haiku and cinquain, were beneficial for “beginning poets!” She continued, “This helped me feel more comfortable.” Another student commented about how active learning contributed to her confidence, stating, “I think that doing the activities and actually writing examples of the poems we talked about was helpful.”

It is important to examine the quantitative data from question three on the survey, which is related to confidence in using poetry in the classroom. While there is an increase in mean from the pre- to the post-survey, the difference at $p < .05$ is nearly significant ($t = 1.93$, $p = 0.058$). Taken in conjunction with this theme across the qualitative data, it can be presumed that this study did indeed increase participants’ confidence with the use of poetry in the classroom. Further investigation of this topic would substantiate these findings.

Greater Appreciation of Poetry

As shown in Table 1, the results of the unpaired t -test showed a statistically significant difference in participants’ positive attitudes toward poetry ($t = 3.07$, $p = 0.003$) across the course of the study. This change in attitude was palpable in the classroom and particularly noticeable during the original poem writing time. At the beginning of the study, there was audible grumbling and negative comments about poetry. This was also reflected on the pre-survey through comments such as, “I don’t remember anything about it, or how it would be useful in a classroom other than for rhyming.” Other comments at

the beginning of the study included, “I am *really* not a fan,” and “Poetry has always been difficult for me.” As one student blatantly stated in class, “I don’t like it!” others nodded in agreement.

As the study progressed, students became visibly more engaged in the writing of original poems. Exclamations of “Let’s do this!” and “This is really good!” could be heard from small working groups. Students especially looked forward to sharing the poems during the final minutes of class. One poem in particular was lauded for its originality and thoughtfulness. In this case, participants were asked to individually write a diamante poem after a lesson about writer’s workshop. During the lesson, there was much discussion about how the writer’s workshop was similar to reader’s workshop, and how one influenced the other. As seen below, a diamante poem is a seven line poem in the shape of a diamond. There are several different versions of diamantes. The rules governing this poem were as follows: The first and last lines are opposites; lines two and six are adjectives, and lines three and five are verbs, each describing lines one and seven, respectively; and line four is a phrase for describing both line one and seven. Joanna created the following poem:

Reading
 Fun, creative
 Viewing, feeling, thinking
 We think they are opposites
 Thinking, feeling, viewing
 Creative, fun
 Writing

After reading the poem out loud to the class, Joanna’s classmates cheered and clapped, and asked her to read it again. They checked to make sure it followed the correct rules of the poem, had accurate content, and celebrated her creativity. This impromptu discussion was a visible sign of the participants’ increased interest and enjoyment with poetry.

Several students mentioned their appreciation for poetry as a means for expression. One participant noted, “I feel like poetry is good for expression and instruction.” Another wrote, “I have learned that poetry is about ideas and expressing oneself and that it is not about conventions.” Similarly, another wrote, “Poetry is good when freedom of thought is allowed.” Another participant commented on the post-survey, “Poetry is a great form of expression through words and finding the meaning behind the words...the form they are in can help generate class discussions.” Concurring with the above theme, another participant wrote, “I like how you are able to write freely and express yourself in poetic forms.” General positive comments about poetry on the post-survey included, “I have a new outlook of poetry,” “I like using it as a learning technique,” “I really like the idea of using poetry in the elementary classroom,” and “I have learned that poetry is a very useful tool in the classroom.”

Even amongst the participants who commented that they still did not like poetry at the end of the study, each remarked that they understood the value of it. In class, Karen stated, "Well, I'm still not crazy about it, especially writing, but I can see how it might be helpful for kids." Another student wrote on the post-survey, "I still am not personally a fan, but I understand the merit and importance of poems in the classroom." A little more enthusiastically, Kim said, "I do like it a *little* better now." So while these few students claimed to not like poetry very much, they recognized the potential value of it as an instructional tool.

In light of the qualitative data that points toward a greater appreciation of poetry, it is important to revisit the quantitative data related to this theme. One would expect to see a difference in scores on questions two and five to support this theme. While the mean scores of both measures went up, the differences were not significant. However, the qualitative data and positive comments made by students at the end of the study reveal this increased appreciation.

Discussion and Implications

Since students learn best when they are actively engaged and have multiple exposures to a concept (Breznak & Scott, 2003), it was intended that the activities in this study would help preservice teachers learn about poetry as well as help them process the course content in a meaningful and personal way (Kane & Rule, 2004). These above results may be due in part to the writing of original poems throughout the project, as this mode of language use potentially advanced participants' thinking and learning (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). The findings of this study showed preservice teachers learning about poetry, increasing in their confidence about using poetry in their future classrooms, and growing in their appreciation of poetry in general. In particular, Table 1 reveals that the increase in participants' positive feelings about poetry was statistically significant. This positive change may be the catalyst for providing preservice teachers with the confidence to use this technique as a learning tool in their future classrooms (Ray, 1999).

Implications of this study for instructors of preservice teachers are related to active learning and innovative teaching techniques. By actively engaging participants in learning and writing about poetry, preservice teachers were able to accomplish both the tasks of learning about course content while also experiencing one of many tools they may utilize in their future teaching to promote student understanding. Interestingly, the task of learning about poetry was accomplished within a rather brief period of time once per week - essentially ten minutes at the beginning and end of each class meeting. This focused attention did not take away from learning the content of the course, but rather provided participants with an additional means for processing information, which concurs with research as noted by Kane and Rule (2004) and Eisner (1985). While poetry was the focus of the current study, the guidelines of active learning and modelling innovative teaching techniques can be applied across a wide range of topics. Instructors of preservice

teachers are accountable for assisting future teachers in gaining a wide repertoire of teaching strategies, one of which is the possibility of using poetry in the classroom.

Limitations

The results of this study may be limited by the sample size and potential biases. This study examined the impact of an intervention with a small number of preservice teachers at one liberal arts university, making generalization of the results difficult. Since the researcher was also the course instructor, researcher bias could have impacted the results. Finally, preservice teachers participated in this study within the context of a graded college course, which may have influenced their responses.

Conclusion

The impact a teacher preparation program has on beginning teachers cannot be underestimated. Beginning teachers often employ strategies and methods they learned in their training (Clark, Jones, Reutzell, & Andreasen, 2013), and their beliefs often reflect those of their training programs (Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2009). Likewise, knowledge gained through coursework can change the way preservice teachers teach in their forthcoming careers (Hong-Nam and Swanson, 2011). It stands to reason, “Without access to knowledge about pedagogical tools, preservice teachers can not appropriate them” (Leko & Brownell, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative that our teacher education programs reflect research-based teaching techniques. This study revealed the positive impact a brief, but active, intervention can have on preservice teachers’ knowledge and feelings about poetry.

It is unclear how the understanding of poetry gained through this project would transfer to teaching in the k-12 setting. However, participants’ increase in confidence for using poetry should not be discounted. The correlation between student reading achievement and a teacher’s beliefs in helping his or her students learn has been documented (ie. Cantrell, Almasi, Carter, & Rintamaa, 2013; Vartuli, 2005). Therefore, it is quite possible that participants’ gain in content knowledge along with increased confidence may result in positive student literacy outcomes in their future classrooms.

As part of the Common Core State Standards movement, all preservice teachers will be required to infuse literacy instruction across content areas. One method for doing so is integrating poetry into various subject matters. While this project was conducted with preservice teachers, it may also serve as a model for professional development with in-service teachers. Short-term professional development programs can have a positive influence on teachers’ knowledge base and ultimately student achievement (e.g. Kennedy, 2010; McCutchen, Green, Abbott, & Sanders, 2009). Interventions such as the current project may prove beneficial for both populations of educators in terms of expanding their repertoire of pedagogical practices, which may ultimately increase student success.

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