Inquiry Journal Facilitation

A Writing Assignment for Practicing Exploratory Speech

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Abstract

The Inquiry Journal Facilitation is a project that helps preservice teachers develop habits of mind for engaging in critical dialogue about the situations they confront in their teaching contexts. In this project, preservice teachers compose a piece of writing that examines an idea, question, or issue that emerges from their clinical teaching site and lead an inquiry-based discussion about the ideas raised in their writing. Pairing the activity of writing with the activity of discussion creates a context for preservice teachers to create "exploratory speech" (Smagorinsky, 2013) collaboratively. In doing so, preservice teachers practice intellectual moves—framing observations, explaining those constructions, and posing questions—that are essential for teacher-learning.

As a teacher educator, I aim to teach preservice teachers how to critically explore the ideas, questions, and issues that emerge from their teaching contexts. This goal is important because effective teaching requires ongoing learning that develops in relation to everchanging teaching contexts. I could not anticipate, for example, that recent graduates would need to learn how to revise their instruction for delivery in a remote context during a pandemic. This situation, however, underscored my commitment to helping preservice teachers learn how to critically dialogue about their pedagogical actions and questions with their professional peers.

When teaching toward this aim, it can be challenging to help preservice teachers understand the importance of seeking multiple perspectives on teaching situations, rather than rushing to judgment. Kennedy (1998) documented this challenge when she shared how preservice teachers responded to hypothetical teaching situations that she presented in an interview setting. Rather than reflecting upon the situations, the preservice teachers provided pointed answers. Reflecting upon this pattern, Kennedy writes:

> It is hard to imagine novice physicians offering detailed responses to hypothetical medical situations. They would be more likely to say something like, "I don't know how I would handle that situation; I have not yet completed my medical education." Yet only rarely did the teachers in this study resist answering our questions.... They rarely indicated that they were considering two or more alternative ideas or that the situation presented certain ambiguities to them. Even before they had studied teacher education, teachers were sure of their responses to most of the situations we presented to them. (p. 172-173)

While the students' overconfidence may stem from their lack of experience, we know that experienced teachers can also rush to judgment when encountering a teaching situation. The tools and motivation to critically explore teaching situations do not come inherently with further teaching experience. Because rushing to a conclusion is not just a mistake of less experienced teachers that will resolve itself with time, it is important for teacher educators to provide strategies for seeking and exploring multiple perspectives.

prompt
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The Inquiry Journal Facilitation is an assignment that I use in my Teaching Literacy in Diverse Classrooms course to help preservice English teachers slow down their decision-making and critically examine how they arrive at their thoughts about teaching, as well as search for perspectives beyond their own. Such thinking is necessary for grasping the socially-constructed nature of literacy. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening—the four areas of literacy instruction in secondary English classrooms—are practices that are created in and mediated through social contexts. Therefore, what counts as "good" or "successful" uses of literacy are contextual and connected to power. For this reason, National Council of Teachers of English (2018) has called upon secondary teachers to "acknowledge that we all have cultural frameworks within which we operate, and everyone—teachers and students alike—needs to consider how these frameworks can be challenged or changed to benefit all peoples" (para. 10). Identifying, considering, and (at times) disrupting the connections between cultural frameworks and instructional practices are challenging tasks, and this intellectual work is central to becoming a literacy teacher.

My Teaching Literacy in Diverse Classrooms course provides a good context for practicing critical thinking because it is an upper-level undergraduate course that is paired with a 30-hour clinical experience in a secondary English classroom. Because the preservice teachers enrolled in this course participate in coursework and the clinical experience simultaneously, they have the opportunity to engage their peers in discussion that critically explores their observations of mentor teachers, their own teaching actions, and their philosophical questions about teaching and learning. In this course, we are able to create a professional community because I have worked with nearly all the students in a prior course, most of the students already know each other, and the course is capped at 15 students. These conditions are optimal for creating a professional community; working with each other over time allows class members to build the trust and vulnerability that is needed for practicing these conversations.

The assignment requires preservice teachers to identify and narrate a teaching situation by writing a one-page "inquiry journal" and to facilitate a whole-class discussion about that teaching situation with their peers. I have designed the inquiry journal and accompanying facilitation expectations so that students are prompted to produce "exploratory speech," speech that can "represent an idea *and* contribute to the formation of an idea" (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 194). Exploratory speech—as applied in my classroom— is language (both written and oral) that is produced to promote further learning and results from engaging in inquiry-based thinking, which recognizes that "inquiry both stems from and generates questions" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 56). Many of my students affectionally call this work "questioning their questions." Exploratory speech allows preservice teachers to voice their questions and learn how and why other teachers may frame and/or address those questions differently. Prompting preservice teachers to produce exploratory speech provides practice with habits of mind that are necessary for the kind of deliberation that supports teacher-learning in ever-changing teaching contexts. It also helps preservice teachers understand the value of learning from teaching situations, rather than rushing to solve them. Through this assignment, then, I aim to highlight how teachers can engage in an inquiry-based process for addressing the ideas, questions, and issues that are most pressing for their ongoing teacher-learning. With this assignment, students have explored many situations, including student protests, teacher burnout, administrative demands, student motivation, technology's role in learning, standardized assessment, and much more. While individual reflection through journaling is a common practice in teacher education, the collaboration that occurs during the facilitation makes this assignment unique. Pairing the activity of journal writing in the inquiry journal with the activity of discussion in the facilitation creates a context for students to create knowledge collaboratively. Journal writing, in this assignment, serves the important role of initiating reflection, rather than representing the end

of reflection.

Description of Assignment

This assignment involves two steps. First, students compose a one-page "inquiry journal," which is a piece of writing that examines an idea, question, or issue that emerges drawn from their 30-hour clinical experience. In this writing, students address the following questions:

1. What is a significant idea, question, or issue emerging in your clinical experience? Please describe the matter.
2. Why is this idea, question, or issue important for you and other teachers to notice and explore? What's at stake for different stakeholders if we do or don't attend to this matter?
3. What educational theories or principles are shaping your understandings of this idea, question, or issue?

I explain to my students that their inquiry journal is a place to explore the relationship between educational theories and practices, and I encourage them to cite direct quotes from scholarship as needed to support their ideas. This scholarship can include assigned reading from my class, reading from other classes, and personal reading. My students are invested in the topic of their inquiry journal, so they often engage in independent research to explore the matter further. I ask students to cite sources to help them begin to identify some of the sources that have shaped their initial thinking on the matter. I also emphasize that excellent inquiry journals demonstrate an awareness of the complexity of teaching and learning by acknowledging multiple perspectives on this matter and/or exploring the potential consequences for attending or not attending to this matter from multiple perspectives. After composing the inquiry journal, students share their writing with their peers on their assigned date by posting it to the course's online discussion forum.

Secondly, students facilitate a discussion about the ideas raised in their inquiry journal with the whole class. This part of the assignment is important because it provides students an opportunity to practice interrogating their ideas and raising questions with colleagues. When I introduce the assignment to students, I make clear that we will not aim to "solve" the teaching matter; instead, we will practice exploratory speech. As facilitators, students are expected to lead the conversation in a way that evokes multiple perspectives. I suggest that students may encourage their class members to examine specific examples from their current or former teaching/learning contexts and consider how the inquiry journal supports, challenges, and/or complicates their pedagogical thinking.

Students facilitate these discussions throughout the second half of the semester so the coursework from the first half of the semester can inform their thinking. Each facilitator has 20 minutes to lead a discussion, and we participate in no more than three facilitations during a class meeting. All class members are expected to read the inquiry journal prior to the facilitation date and bring questions and comments that will contribute to our collaborative exploration of the matter. Near the end of each facilitation, I ask each facilitator to synthesize the comments from the conversation and express how those comments are tentatively shaping their understanding of the matter. This structure allows us to look across the range of issues discussed and draw some larger insights about the ways we conceptualize our learning as teachers.

Structuring Exploratory Speech

Exploratory speech is produced through three activities that occur during the writing and facilitation process. First, students frame their observations in their inquiry journal by writing a

narrative description of the teaching situation and explaining why their observations are worth noticing. How they choose to narrate the situation (Who does the action in the story? What is the conflict? What is the setting?) and the reasons they provide for sharing this situation help students identify and explore the beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape how they understand the teaching situation.

One student, for example, wrote her inquiry journal about the issue of providing written feedback to writers in a 7th grade English class. She began her inquiry journal by explaining her observations of the learning context and her mentor teacher's instructional goals when teaching a five-paragraph essay format. Then, she explained that she became interested in this situation when the mentor teacher asked her to grade and respond to some of these essays. The student narrated the problem in the following way:

> She told me that she likes to do marginal comments, however she wanted these papers ready for parent teacher conferences (which were that evening). So, she decided to forgo the marginal comments. She then told me to give the students feedback in the format of two paragraphs. The first paragraph was things the student did well. The second paragraph was ideas for improvement. She also had me fill out a rubric for each student.
>
> The format of her feedback seemed relatively standard until she proceeded to pull up a word document. In the word document was a list of 3 or 4 potential things the student could have done well such as: "good thesis statement" or "great job using your sources." Then there was a list of 3 or 4 potential things the student could work on such as: "Read your paper aloud to catch mistakes" or "try and narrow each paragraph to a single idea." The teacher told me I could choose one or two from each list and just copy and paste them into a student's feedback box. She explained to me that most students struggle and excel in these 3 or 4 areas, so it saves her time to copy and paste the feedback. In essence her feedback was generalized rather than individualized. When the teacher told me about her style of giving feedback, I was a bit taken aback. Initially, it struck me as unethical that the feedback students were receiving wasn't authentic, or at least authentic in the way I perceive it. However, I will admit as I read the essays, I did see the reoccurring problems that her list addressed.

In this narration, my student explained the directions provided by her mentor teacher and why these directions seemed problematic, thereby identifying her values as a teacher. For her, feedback should be "individualized" and "authentic." She began to question her notions, though, in her admission that her conception of "authentic" feedback might be too narrow, especially as the standardized comments addressed reoccurring issues that were present in the essays. Deciding how to respond to student writing is an important and common question for preservice English teachers, and this inquiry journal helped all class members consider the kinds of relationships and learning conditions that are created through the process of composing and sharing feedback, as well as how those choices are situated in the broader context of teacher work conditions.

While questions one and two from the inquiry journal writing prompt ask students to frame their observations, the third question helps students *explain how* they have framed their observations. In other words, students articulate the assumptions, values, beliefs, and theories that shape their current perception of the situation. In doing so, students have the opportunity to articulate how their understanding of a situation is constructed and how that construction shapes their response to the situation. In the example from above, the student explained that

her commitment to "individualized" and "authentic" instruction is shaped by her commitment to differentiated instruction, a core concept in our teacher education program. Citing one of our class texts, she explained that her definition of a differentiated classroom is one that responds to the "unique needs of students." She wrote, "The practice of giving feedback in this class was by no means differentiating instruction for students. However, the teacher was pressed for time and the issues did in some ways fit." By making her commitment to differentiated instruction visible, the student identified a tension between a pedagogical commitment (differentiated instruction) and a teaching constraint (time).

With this tension identified, the class was positioned to explore that tension during the facilitation. To support such discussion, the student posed questions in her inquiry journal. She wrote:

> I would like us as a class to consider two primary points that this particular example highlights. The first is the ethical nature of this means of feedback and what it means to give students feedback in general. The second is how do we as teachers decide what to sacrifice in regard to time management, because as much as we would like to be able to do it all—we can't.

During the facilitation, the student guided the class through a conversation of these questions and questions that emerged from our exploration.

From my perspective, the conversation began with many students expressing a negative reaction to using generic comments. As the conversation continued, however, students wrestled with the fact that the generic comments seemed to address areas for improvement in the essays. In this conversation, we grappled with the ongoing tension between supporting the development of the writer versus supporting the development of a piece of writing. This conversation led us to further consider the instructional role of written commentary. Together, we explored the uses of written feedback, the other instructional practices that can support written feedback, and the limitations of written feedback. Following her facilitation, the student shared with me some of the most salient points she heard in the conversation. She noted the following assertions: "Meaningful comments take time but are worthwhile. Genuine improvement is derived from genuine feedback. Writing is very personal, and so it deserves personal feedback." In her own summary of the conversation, the student shared that "as a general rule, we agreed it's better for the teacher to take longer to grade than to give generic feedback." She also concluded that "students may not even read the feedback I give, but at the end of the day I will be satisfied I did my part in trying to help them improve their writing."

My student's notes and tentative conclusions demonstrate that she maintains her commitment to crafting personalized feedback. But the tension she writes about in her journal—one between a pedagogical commitment (differentiated instruction) and a teaching constraint (time)—shifted. Following the facilitation, she shared with me that she is considering "breaking essays into smaller portions [to] allow more time for targeted feedback." Her comment indicates that she is now considering how she can use her instructional time in a way that supports a teaching practice that she values. In this way, her conception of time in this situation deepened. Rather than imagining time as a constraint, she is now thinking through how time—through the use of lesson design—can be used as a resource to support her pedagogical goals. Her peers, as a community, helped her affirm her commitment *and* explore ways that she could reconceptualize instructional time. In doing so, students challenged the cultural assumption that seemingly efficient teaching practices are preferrable to less efficient practices.

The assignment's three activities—framing observations, explaining those constructions, and posing questions—are "tools of cognition" (Bazerman, 2009) that facilitate intellectual

exploration because they make the connection between problem-posing and problem-solving evident. As Dewey (1938) reminds us, inquiry involves searching for possible solutions to the problematic situation *and* accounting for how that situation has been defined. As students discuss and extend the problem-posing provided in the inquiry journal, all class members critically examine the connection between problem-posing and problem-solving, especially for different stakeholders. Working with others through conversation in the facilitation enables a process of "making current arrangements problematic [and] questioning the ways knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated, and used" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 121). In doing so, students learn how to slow down their decision-making and engage in exploratory conversations that can create deeper understandings of teaching situations.

To prepare students for these conversations, I provide instruction that illustrates the need for exploratory speech. For example, I use Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," to illustrate how our stories about teaching situations shape our observations as teachers. I also use the STORRI website, a project sponsored by Teachers College at Columbia University (n.d.), as an example of inquiry-based teacher-learning. On this site, teachers share narratives of moments when their belief systems wobbled, and, in doing so, the teachers illustrate how classroom moments can be instructive. Because my course focuses on literacy instruction, I also use Sfard and Prusak's (2005) narrative learning theory to provide a framework that can help students explore the connection between the stories we tell and how we learn literacies. I also share my own teaching examples to highlight and explain the role of exploratory speech in teacher-learning. All these resources hold in common the notion that how we frame teaching situations—a process that often occurs through narrative—shapes how we address those situations. Exploratory speech, then, becomes a tool for crafting and trying on new narratives, thereby creating new possibilities for teacher-learning.

This assignment is one of my favorite projects because it creates a context to learn from, work within, and stretch the intellectual frameworks my students bring to the course. While it can be intellectually and emotionally challenging for new teachers to slow down their decision-making and engage with the complexity of teaching and learning, the practice of exploratory speech provides a strategy for working through pedagogical questions in a critical way with colleagues. As I reflect upon ways to improve the project, I am considering the tension that emerges when students aim to learn *from* each other's stories and perspectives and *with* each other through the dialogue process. My students successfully focus on the task of exploration during the facilitation, possibly because we have developed trust together in prior courses, but our conversations sometimes lean toward consensus at the end. While I state explicitly that we do not need to come to consensus and try to describe the value in not arriving at consensus, I have noticed this trend. I understand why my students, as classmates, listen for connections among their comments and questions during the discussion, and I want to continue to help them listen for difference and dissonance, too. As Gallagher et al. (2002) argue:

> Reading [and listening to] teacher narratives for mutual interruption, for difference and dissonance, creates a productive context for pedagogical development. Like moments of resonance, moments of *difference* in teacher narratives can become instruments for critical and collective inquiry into pedagogy. In this way, teacher narratives become a means not only for sharing "best practices,"—but also—and we believe more importantly—for mutual critical engagement. (p. 49)

While I currently use my voice in the facilitation to model listening for resonance *and* dissonance, I want to better support students in their ability to listen in ways that further inquiry. As I continue to refine this project, I plan to help facilitators pay attention to the distinction between analyzing assumptions in cultural frameworks and evaluating consequences

for teachers' actions. Both notions are related and important for inquiry-based discussions that support teacher-learning. I have noticed, however, that it is easier and (perhaps) more natural to evaluate the consequences for teachers' actions, rather than analyze assumptions in cultural frameworks. In the future, I want to continue to help facilitators push their peers to tackle both kinds of questions in the discussion. The group may continue to feel compelled to reach consensus when discussing the consequences for teachers' actions, so we may find more room to listen for dissonance when analyzing how cultural logics shape assumptions about teaching and learning. It is my hope that paying better attention to this distinction will build upon the good work students are already accomplishing and improve their ability to critically explore the most pressing ideas, questions, and issues that emerge from their current and future teaching contexts.

ASSIGNMENT
Inquiry Journal Facilitation

In this facilitation, you will have the opportunity to lead a conversation about an idea, question, or issue emerging in your clinical experience. To prepare for this facilitation, please compose an "inquiry journal," a piece of writing that describes the topic and its significance. Your peers will have the opportunity to read and consider your thinking in this journal prior to the facilitation.

We will sign up for the facilitation dates in class. Please use the schedule below to plan your specific due dates.

Inquiry Journal Due	Facilitation Date
Week 9	Week 10
Week 10	Week 11
Week 11	Week 12
Week 12	Week 13
Week 13	Week 14

Part 1: Your Inquiry Journal

Your inquiry journal is a place to explore the relationship between educational theories and practices. To facilitate class discussion, please address the following questions in your one-page inquiry journal:

1. What is a significant idea, question, or issue emerging in your clinical experience? Please describe the matter.
2. Why is this idea, question, or issue important for you and other teachers to notice and explore? What's at stake for different stakeholders if we do or don't attend to this matter?
3. What educational theories or principles are shaping your understandings of this idea, question, or issue?

Please cite direct quotes as needed to support your ideas. Excellent inquiry journals will successfully address each question and place this matter in conversation with pedagogical

scholarship. The writing will also demonstrate an awareness of the complexity of teaching and learning by acknowledging multiple perspectives on this matter and/or exploring the potential consequences for (not) attending to this matter.

Part 2: Your Facilitation

We will view each inquiry journal as a pedagogical text. This means each inquiry journal is a moment of pedagogical meaning-making and worthy of study. As a class, we will aim to engage with your ideas just as we might respond to published pedagogical texts. As a facilitator, then, your job is to lead a conversation about the matter in a way that evokes multiple perspectives. For example, you may encourage class members to examine specific examples from their current or former teaching/learning contexts and consider how the inquiry journal supports, challenges, and/or complicates their pedagogical thinking. We won't aim to "solve" the teaching matter; instead, we will practice interrogating the ideas and raising questions. Our conversation should be a place of "exploratory speech" (Smagorinsky, 2013). Ideally, the facilitation will provide a place to wonder, helping us all understand the connection between problem-posing and problem-solving. Excellent facilitations will be interactive, foster an awareness of both problem-posing and problem-solving, and connect the conversation to our emerging understandings of teaching literacy in diverse classrooms.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.10.31719/pjaw.v6i2.109.

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