Proleptic Autobiography

Envisioning a Future—and a Path to Get There

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Abstract

This assignment challenges students in an English Language Arts teacher education program to compose a proleptic autobiography—a genre of writing that transforms the customary retrospective autobiographical essay assignment as a way to encourage students to envision and create their future professional selves. The goal of the assignment is to support students' development of realistic expectations of their imminent careers as educators and to foster a deeper appreciation of diverse learners. Composing such an imaginative narrative can help students develop stronger professional dispositions as they consider aspects of their future careers such as work/life balance, economic concerns, developing confidence, and providing support and encouragement to their students.

Panic surrounding attrition among early career educators emerges periodically, and as a teacher educator, I became curious about whether this panic was justified and how it has been investigated and documented. Although much of the panic was unjustified (Henry et al., 2011; Johnson & Down, 2013), I did discover some reason for concern (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Sass et al., 2011; Whipp & Geronime, 2017) and was thus motivated to delve more deeply into the possible reasons why some early career educators choose to abandon the profession. Hochstetler (2011) and Lindqvist et al. (2014) theorize that some early career teachers might enter the profession underprepared for the challenges of the classroom; these novices might possess only vague or unrealistic expectations for the wide range of aspects that comprise everyday life as a teacher. Their scholarship suggests that the practice of creating clear expectations and proactively envisioning a future as a professional educator might boost teacher candidates' resilience and assist their persistence in the face of the many challenges that early career teachers experience.

Considering these goals, I developed a writing assignment that would assist future educators—enrolled in a course called Academic Literacy and the Urban Adolescent, an upper division requirement for English Education majors at a large, urban, public university—to imagine their imminent careers as teachers. I chose to contextualize this assignment within a narrative frame familiar to most students (a narrative autobiography). However, rather than directing students to tell the story of their past, I asked them to tell the story of the futures they intended to create—and to tell that story of the future *as if* they were recollecting the past. As the converse to the more commonly assigned retrospective autobiographical essay, I described this assignment as a proleptic (or forward-facing) autobiography. By provoking students enrolled in a teacher education program to imagine themselves as professional educators completing their fifth year in the classroom, the proleptic focus of the current assignment directs students to envision their future, develop some sort of "action plan" for achieving their goals, and compare their expectations with the realities they will likely experience.

Composing a proleptic autobiography can also help students achieve one of the more abstract goals of the course (and the program), a goal that is often challenging to assess: supporting the development of effective teaching dispositions that include a realistic perception of the profession and that value and support diverse learners and learning styles. The proleptic focus of the assignment can help students avoid conforming to the dominant cultural narratives

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that often pervade autobiographical writing and reify the "romanticized power of education" (Alexander, 2011, p. 609). Prompting students to imagine their futures as professional educators confronting complex challenges in actual classrooms, the proleptic autobiography assignment can encourage students to "explore the possibility that the literacy-equals-success narrative is a faulty, or, at the least, an overly generalized, myth" (Alexander, 2011, p. 610). Composing such a speculative autobiography will allow students to transcend the "simplistic and even inaccurate" (Alexander, 2011, p. 611) narratives easily accessible to them from past autobiographical writing assignments and focus their attention—and professional pursuits—on their future goals by urging them to critically examine their sometimes unwitting complicity in following overarching narratives that the dominant culture has composed for them (Alexander, 2011, p. 627–629). Moreover, proleptic autobiography assignments can help underrepresented students to overcome stereotype threat, another damaging cultural force that enlists marginalized students in their own academic oppression. Claude M. Steele (2010) describes a research study in which Black students had the opportunity to create new narratives for their own experience. This "brief narrative intervention" resulted in an average grade increase of "one-third of a letter grade higher in the next semester" (p. 166). As Steele argues, "Helping to shape the narratives that stereotyped students use to interpret their experience in a school may be a 'high leverage' strategy of intervening" in students' perceptions of themselves and improving academic achievement (p. 166).

Writing proleptic autobiographies also engages students in composing "borderland discourse," which Alsup (2006) describes as "discourse in which there is evidence of contact between disparate personal and professional subjectivities and in which this contact appears to be leading toward the ideological integration of multiple senses of self" (p. 36). Integrating various aspects of one's identity is especially important for pre-professional students who dwell in the liminal space—or "borderland"—between *student* and *professional*. As Alsup (2006) concludes, "such integration through discourse can lead to cognitive, emotional, and corporeal change, or identity growth" (p. 36). Pinar (2012) describes this process as part of the "second or progressive step" of currere, wherein "the student…imagines possible futures, including fears as well as fantasies of fulfillment" (p. 46). Developing the practice of currere, Pinar (2012) argues, leads students to consider their "positionality" as they engage with their colleagues "in the construction of a public sphere" informed by the past, the present, and the future (p. 47). Both the more individual practice of identity integration described by Alsup (2006) and the more social practice of imagining and constructing possible futures with one's colleagues, as described by Pinar (2012), can assist pre-professional students in education, as well as in other fields, to envision and actualize professional environments in which they can succeed. As Kohl (1994) asserts:

> We have to be dreamers ourselves and not allow foolish accusations about being out of touch with the real world bother us. What is real is less important than what can be made real through our efforts and our students' untapped brilliance and boundless energy. (p. 86)

Supporting students in this practice can, as Pham and Taylor (1999) contend, help teacher candidates transform "imagined experience into action" and create "an explicit vision of the future" that enables them to "construct a pathway for getting there" (p. 250); in fact, assisting pre-professional students—in any field—as they discursively construct a realistic impression of their future selves can be an effective ways to help students develop a clearer sense of the ways in which they can transform their current identities as students into their future identities as professionals, whether they aspire to become educators, attorneys, scientists, physicians, or business leaders.

To encourage my students' development of perseverance and persistence that will support them during their initial years in the classroom, I relied upon a foundational principle of critical thinking—the idea that, in addition to learning to write, students also write to learn, a strategy that can also help students "conceptualize writing" in their discipline "in a way that is grounded in" the discipline itself (Carter, 2007, p. 387). Thus, through a discursive medium, I direct students to "construct these envisioned worlds" through "the use of proleptic practice" and create a plan of action that will help them achieve their vision (Hoffman-Kipp et al., 2003, p. 252), a technique that can easily be modified to suit students who are studying in fields other than education.

I introduce the assignment very early in the semester; it is the first formal writing assignment in the course. Since most students are unfamiliar with this genre of speculative writing, I explain—as I mention at the end of the assignment itself—that students are expected to use their imaginations to envision their futures and that their writing will not be assessed according to typical standards of expository writing (*e.g.,* accuracy and veracity). To demonstrate the creative aspects of the assignment, I prepare a mini-lesson on creative nonfiction that includes mentor texts such as passages from *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (1964/1994) and *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer (1997). In addition, I provide online sources that students may consult to help them understand the way the genre blends imagination with fact and for clarification of techniques used in the genre (Nordquist, 2018; Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), n.d.). Finally, I invite students who have taken creative writing courses (or who have experience with creative writing) to share with their peers any strategies or tips that might assist them in composing the proleptic autobiography.

In my spring 2019 course, once students adjusted to the unconventional nature of proleptic writing, they seemed to embrace the opportunity to indulge in a bit of realistic fantasizing about their chosen career. One student mentioned that the assignment "made us think about the realities of being a teacher," and most students expressed the expectation that they would encounter a variety of struggles. For example, they discussed attempts to reconcile and overcome the discrepancies between romanticized visions of themselves as young, "cool," relatable teachers (which one student characterized as "super Hallmark") and more pragmatic images of themselves as eager novices required to cope with a vast array of challenges such as overcrowded classes, scant resources, and unmotivated or apathetic students. More often than not, however, they imagined themselves as adaptable, resilient, and well prepared to confront these challenges as they developed the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they would need for continuous improvement as professional educators. For example, one student concluded, "I had come to realize that there could be no formula…no full proof [*sic*] plan. No single class that I taught could compare to any other because they were all so different." Another expected to undergo noticeable improvement in her ability to design and facilitate effective lessons: "Although my lessons were clumsily put together at first, I began to become more confident in my teaching, and the students began to respond positively to the change." See Table 1 for a list of additional topics and representative student comments.

Reading and responding to their proleptic autobiographies helped me, as an instructor, connect other aspects of their coursework to the ideas they had expressed in their writing. For example, later in the semester, as students worked together in book clubs to establish collaborative guidelines for civil discourse among their peers, I could guide them to consider their work as an "imaginative rehearsal" for some of the classroom management challenges that they had anticipated in their proleptic autobiographies. And as students worked together to build meaning from the "tough" texts they chose to read in their book clubs, I prompted them to assess their efforts as potential models for supporting their future students, who—as many

Table 1. Topics and Student Comments in Proleptic Autobiographies

Topic	Representative Comments
Managing identities and work/life balance	"Balancing my personal and professional lives is a challenge, but I am still able to find happiness in both"; "Doing what I love keeps me happy, and teaching is on that list"; "My profession became a critical part of the person I am today"
Practical concerns (e.g., income, economics)	"The pay is not very generous, but it is consistent and gradually, with savings, accumulates over the years"; "The amount of credit card debt I drowned myself in trying to build my classroom made sure that I didn't really have a paycheck for the first month"
Developing confidence	"In reminding myself that I did not need to be the best teacher ever, I became a better teacher"; "I'm by no means perfect now.... While my glasses may no longer have a deep tint of rose, I never lose sight of why I chose to become a teacher"
Providing support and encouragement	"I want my students to know that they're not alone. I want them to believe in themselves as much as I believe in them"; "I was here to show my students that no matter how stacked you feel the odds are, you can overcome them"; "I hope my students know how much I truly care about their growth and development as readers and writers as well as young adults"
Diversity and inclusion	"I try to...understand the different learning abilities and styles to meet students halfway"; "I think it is my job to help teach them more sensitive and inclusive ways of thinking and speaking, and hopefully encourage them to develop a more tolerant mindset"; "I struggled every day to create a fair and equitable environment in which all of my students could thrive"

had mentioned in their proleptic autobiographies—might also struggle with making meaning from and comprehending challenging texts. The field experiences they were completing for the course afforded additional opportunities to help students connect their current learning with their future aspirations.

Students enrolled in the course are required to complete 25 hours of clinical field experience by tutoring under the supervision of a non-profit organization that places them in urban middle schools and high schools to support underserved students as they work on literacy projects. In the reflective journals that students compose about their experiences working as tutors, some perceive connections—ranging from accurate anticipations to stark incongruities—between the expectations they expressed in the proleptic autobiographies they authored at the beginning of the semester and the real-life experience of working with secondary students in urban secondary schools. This tutoring experience allows students to shift their perspective from that of student, an identity to which they are accustomed after many years in school, to teacher, another identity to which they are accustomed but one that they have had only limited opportunities to inhabit. Students preparing to enter other fields often complete similar field experiences or internships as part of their training and could also benefit from a proleptic autobiography assignment that has been modified to reflect issues relevant to their respective fields. Thus, the writing assignment provides students with a foundational vision of their future selves that they

can immediately begin to evaluate and modify as they embark upon their field experience or internship, one of their first practical steps toward that future as a professional.

As more current data about early career teacher attrition and retention becomes available, I plan to modify the assignment to reflect emergent trends, such as the growing need for bilingual educators, the challenges associated with online instruction (*i.e.*, the "digital divide"), and the urgency of better salaries for teachers. I am also exploring the possibility of including this assignment in each teacher education course I teach so that students will be able to revise and/or supplement earlier versions of their autobiographies. For example, if a student wrote her first proleptic autobiography in one of my fall semester classes and took another class with me during the following spring semester (or any subsequent semester), they could choose to either revise their earlier version or compose the next chapter. In addition, recruiting the support and collaboration of my colleagues who also teach in the program would allow us to integrate the assignment into all courses so that students would have an opportunity to consistently develop their proleptic autobiographies each semester or each year, regardless of which instructor is teaching which course. Embedding the practice of proleptic writing within each course in the program would then allow students to combine reflection (on their previous proleptic autobiographies) with ongoing proleptic compositions. Another valuable opportunity might be to ask pre-service teachers to compose proleptic autobiographies at the start of their student teaching experience and again once they have completed student teaching. Such an exercise will allow them to assess the evolution of their expectations, knowledge, and skills; it could also foster a habitual practice of periodically composing proleptic autobiographies throughout their teaching careers as a way to help guide and support their professional development.

Although pre-service teachers are pursuing careers in academia—an environment with which they are quite familiar after having spent much of their lives in schools—their classroom experiences and field experiences provide them with new perspectives and new insights about education and the roles they can play in the profession. Students in any discipline who are preparing for or engaged in internships, community service-learning, research opportunities, or study abroad, for example, also experience new perspectives and gain new insights; consequently, proleptic writing assignments could be useful anytime students are entering a new reality, either to set goals or to better understand and construct the reality they would like to enter. In addition, proleptic autobiographies might enable undecided students to articulate their aspirations and expectations as they consider various majors and career choices. Encouraging students to create and compose visions of themselves as practicing professionals in specific fields can help them determine whether a given career is a suitable match for their interests and abilities.

ASSIGNMENT

Proleptic Autobiography

Educational researcher Sarah Hochstetler[1] theorizes that "the disconnect between the myths about being an English teacher and the reality of the English classroom likely contribute to low retention. Making space in a teacher education program for thinking about teacher identity is one way to address these misconceptions and thus better prepare students for a career in secondary English education" (p. 258). Similarly, Lindqvist, Nordänger, and Carlsson[2] imply that some portion of teachers who abandon the profession within their first five years were unable to even articulate their expectations for a career as a teacher (p. 100).

Therefore, to help you develop a clearer sense of your future as a secondary English Language Arts teacher and to increase the likelihood that you will persevere in the profession, you will

compose a brief proleptic[3] autobiography of your early career as a classroom teacher.

The Assignment: The year is [current year + 5], and you have been working as a secondary English Language Arts teacher since your successful completion of a single-subject credential program. Look back on the early years of your teaching career and, in a chapter of your autobiography consisting of approximately 1000-1200 words, tell the story of your development as an educator. ***Be sure to compare the expectations you had for your future work as a teacher at the time you began your career with the reality you have experienced as a classroom teacher.***

You are free to discuss any aspects of your professional life, but you might want to consider some of the following topics:

1. The students you teach—demographic information (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender identity, etc.); academic ability; special needs; English language proficiency
2. School setting—urban? suburban? rural? Where in your state? Or are you teaching elsewhere in the USA? Or abroad?
3. Curriculum—which grade level(s) do you teach? What kind of content do you teach? How much control do you have over what you teach?
4. Standardized exams, assessments, and accountability—how do these issues affect your teaching?
5. Administrators and colleagues—describe your relationships with your colleagues, your department chair, assistant principal, principal, superintendent, etc.
6. Work/Life balance—how do you manage or integrate your personal life/identity with your professional life/identity?

An excellent response will:

- Feature a clear structure and organization with a recognizable beginning that introduces the focus, a middle that supports and develops ideas, and a conclusion that wraps up your thoughts in an interesting and compelling manner.
- Compare/contrast your expectations with your (imagined) actual experience.
- Use specific details and examples to develop your ideas.
- Use precise diction to convey meaning clearly.
- Use grammar, punctuation, and spelling that facilitate meaning.
- Consist of at least 1000 words but no more than 1200 words (double-spaced).

N.B. Use your imagination to envision your future. Think of this as a work of creative, speculative non-fiction.

Notes

[1]Hochstetler, S. (2011). Focus on identity development: A proposal for addressing English teacher attrition. *The Clearing House, 84*, 6. 256-259.

[2]Lindqvist, P., Nordänger, U.K., & Carlsson, R. (2014). Teacher attrition the first five years – A multifaceted image. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 40*. 94-103.

[3]*proleptic* means "considering the past from the perspective of the future," similar to a flash-forward; the opposite of *retrospective*.

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.v5i2.84.

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