2010

Creative Non-Fiction: Teaching Teachers

Emma T. Reeve
University of Northern Iowa

CREATIVE NON-FICTION: TEACHING TEACHERS

A Thesis or Project

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors

Emma T. Reeve

University of Northern Iowa

December 2010

This Study by: Emma Reeve

Entitled: Creative Non-Fiction: Teaching Teachers

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University Honors with Distinction or University Honors (select appropriate designation)

12/9/2010
Date

Dr. James Davis, Honors Thesis/Project Advisor

12/20/10
Date

Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

Introduction

What made me choose this topic/type of project? What, if anything, have I gained from doing this work? Have I learned anything about my beliefs about teaching or the way teachers are taught? Would other people benefit from doing a similar study?

I. Can effective teaching be taught?

Teacher Effectiveness

What is effective teaching? Are UNI classes giving pre-service teachers solid examples of effective teaching?

Teaching Like We Are Taught

Is there disconnect between theory and practice of effective teaching?

Teacher Preparedness

How does the College of Education prepare teachers? Could they be doing so more effectively?

Difference between Elementary and Secondary Majors

What makes an elementary education major different from a secondary major? Are these differences important?

II. Is the UNI College of Education preparing me to be a good teacher?

Field experience

Has the role of field experience in the teacher education prepared me to teach?

Cultural responsiveness

How are we taught (or not) to teach diversity effectively?

Specific incident: Human Relations presentation

This is my portrayal of an experience in an education class involving a presumptuous presentation and assumptions.

Censorship

This entry is based off a disagreement with a professor.

III. How will I ensure my effectiveness as a teacher?

Personal Teacher Readiness

Am I ready to teach? How will I make the transfer from student to teacher?

Hypothetical Classroom

How will teacher education students progress from talking about a hypothetical classroom to teaching a real group of students?

Student Motivation

How are students motivated? What can I do as a teacher to enhance motivation and interest?

Reading Fluency

What can be done to improve or enhance reading fluency and comprehension? More importantly, can students be taught to enjoy reading and writing?

IV. Which assessment methods are most effective?

Grading: Objective vs. Subjective

Which broad method of grading is best for students and accurately represents their learning?

Standardized Testing

What role should testing play in classrooms?

V. How can teachers move past content and be truly effective educators?

Either-or Mentality

This piece, based on an article by David Cohen, revolves around students and teachers changing the way they view problems and solutions.

Collaboration and reflection: Potentially improving teachers

How do teachers and pre-service teachers think about teaching? How can they (we) become even more effective?

Conclusion

This reflection and constant writing and thinking about teaching policies must be continued and could be effectively implemented into curriculums and teachers day-to-day practices for the betterment of education.

Introduction

This project began as an exploration of teacher education. When I started, I had no idea what extreme effects it would have on my thought process, my perceptions, and ultimately, my life. When I started thinking about ideas my thesis advisor put forth for my consideration, I took the concept of creative nonfiction and memoir as an interesting topic, and one that I could dig into with successful outcomes, but nevertheless, one that would not change my outlook significantly.

Through my proposal process, I read books, articles, and blog posts in the style of creative nonfiction. As I continued to read and think, I became more focused on the topics these authors and teachers were able to bring up in their writing than their stylistic choices. When it became time for me to segue into my own writing, I again was drawn into a topical focus. In this case, however, writing and content became intricately related.

What is the point of this project? I wanted to learn about teaching from the experiences of others; now I want to move toward writing about my own experiences. I want to know what classroom structures are effective, what knowledge students will potentially come into my class with and what they should know when they leave. I want to understand classroom management and be able to successfully control a group of students while inspiring a love for learning: that is the biggest part right there. I want to be the kind of teacher who is a changing factor in the lives of students. I want students to love to read and to discover the possibilities that writing holds for everyone. Even if students never love reading and writing the way I do, I want them to appreciate it and know how valuable it can be.

I learned so much from the books that I have read, but the point that will stick with me is the need to continue reading. At the beginning of this project-based journey, I had no idea what to read. I was worried that I would finish the books that Dr. Davis had lent me and be stuck with nowhere to

turn. However, the opposite happened. As I started to read, I was swept up in the desire to read more, to learn more about the lives of the teachers and students in the stories and discover how they worked. I was intrigued. And the more I read, the more I realized there was to read. So am I finished reading? No, not at all. But I think maybe I am ready to move on to writing about my own experiences in becoming a teacher.

The use of creative nonfiction writing gave me the opportunity to not only record my responses to my thoughts and experiences, but also to explore them through text. Through this project, I began seeing the world through new, always-questioning eyes. No longer were my professors or popular theories untouchable on a higher, indisputable plane. Instead of blindly hearing and accepting information, the lens of this project has influenced me to write, talk, and question everything coming into my life. I began to discover that just as I have a right to a high-quality education, I also have the responsibility to examine the education I am receiving in an attempt to ensure I am doing all I can to understand it in terms relatable to my life.

As I began writing more and more, every experience became a viable topic to write about. Often, writing about a specific issue would lead me to discover the underlying reasons behind the discomfort of a certain situation or uncover unforeseen problems with otherwise clandestine-appearing methods. Once I started seeing writing as a possibility for every experience, it was like a light switched on in my mind. Everything was connected: each teaching method I didn't agree with or professor I questioned turned into more than a ranting opportunity. I could do more than let off my frustration in a word document; I could develop my own ideas about the flaws of systems and methods, and, most importantly, come to a consensus about possible solutions. Through this informal writing style, I have been able to critically explore the educational world around me through the eyes of a student and critique without fear.

The most essential part of this work is the understanding that continuation is necessary for future development for students, teachers, and programs. The work I have done cannot end when these pages are handed across the desk, or even when the words are read aloud to peers, professors, and staff members. My thoughts about education have grown in depth and breadth throughout the creation of this project; it has the potential to do even more when I begin student teaching and continue my journey through the teaching profession. If all students—or even a solid number—were to consistently think about ways their teacher education program could be improved to suit their best interests and in turn, those of their future students, programs would increase in their ability to serve students and communities. Even if teachers in greater numbers were to begin reflecting on teaching practices and publishing their problems and solutions, other teachers would have places to turn for suggestions and new ideas to better serve their students. People everywhere stand to gain so much through this type of exploration and reflection of experiences in the past, present, and future.

I. Can effective teaching be taught?

At the base of all teaching methodology, pedagogy, and lesson planning is an essential question: what makes an effective teacher? How can effective teaching be taught, if such a thing is even possible? Through the following entries, I explore the different ways my university education is (and often is not) doing a quality job answering these questions and giving me the tools to find answers for myself ...

Teacher Effectiveness

What is effective teaching? Are UNI classes giving pre-service teachers solid examples of how effective teaching looks in a classroom?

Practicality is a big concept at this point in my life. I, along with many of my peers, am at an especially formative point in my education. I am in the midst of making the transition from student to teacher. Assuming the economy doesn't slide even further down the drain, I am going to be a "real" teacher within the next year. However, it is interesting to juxtapose this knowledge with the teaching strategies and lessons of some of my professors. Most of my classes this semester are based loosely on the same combined lecture and discussion format. This, however, is not how we are told *we* should teach.

In all honesty, I don't think I have been directly taught how to teach. We have had discussions about pros and cons of various styles, but at the end of the day it is up to the individual teacher and the content to determine the most effective practice. But if we teach like we were taught, won't all of us end up using this traditional lecture and teacher-led discussion format? I am inclined to say we are taught (we will teach) that way because it really is most effective, but with great majority it is all I've ever known.

So what is effective teaching? It sounds like such a simple question, yet I cannot fathom a correct answer. I am having trouble aligning my past views of "good" teacher and "effective" teacher. Is the professor I nearly loathe good because he makes me think about issues in learning and education, or is he ineffective because the class itself is worthless?

When I look back on my experience, it is not hard to differentiate between effective and non-effective teachers initially. But the longer I think about it, the more I question my preliminary assumptions. I may have liked Mr. So-and-so, but did I gain anything from him? Even if there is little content knowledge, there are experiences and moments taken away from the time with the teacher and in the classroom atmosphere. But there is more to teaching than that! An effective teacher should inspire through passion and provide reasoning behind the tasks he/she gives to students. Undeniably, it is a difficult position; both passion and content relevance must be involved. There has to be motivation for students to succeed. An effective teacher has high *and* reasonable goals for every student that are made attainable, but not easy. An effective teacher encourages critical thinking and open minds and creates an atmosphere in which every student feels comfortable sharing, working, and being.

This definition could be rubric-ized, made into a checklist, or generally overtaken and used to weed out ineffective teachers. However, even though I feel each of the characteristics listed above are essential, there is also something more involved. Effective teachers want to be effective. These people take the time to think about what their students—individually and as a group—need in order to succeed, and do their utmost to provide it. It becomes difficult to remember that an effective teacher is not always a well-liked one. Sometimes the teacher will teach in such a way that it promotes strong positive feelings, but the best lecturer is not consistently the one who promotes thinking, learning, or creativity.

The problem remains that we pre-service teachers are not getting many examples of this kind of teaching. If we will teach like we are taught, why aren't we taught like we are supposed to teach? It took me a while to realize this, but education classes are not the only courses in which we learn to teach. Here is the major revelation: content teachers are teaching the same, old, ineffective way! Especially in secondary education majors, there are a great many content courses taken intermingled with education courses, and this is precisely where potential teachers lose all of the exceptional, out-of-the-box teaching methods they are being taught in the education courses.

One of my literature professors is incredibly knowledgeable about the content area, but I have concerns about the style in which the material is provided. This professor certainly knows a lot, but is it being effectively taught? The class usually consists of a brief lecture and then a few discussion questions or prompts about the text we were to have read before the class; we occasionally break up into small groups to talk about material. In essence, it is almost identical to any other literature course I have taken. When I compare these used methods to the ways I have been taught to teach literature in education courses, there is a great deal that does not overlap. Professors rarely use more than the historical aspect of the text to introduce it (if it is introduced), students don't often do writing for more than a few pieces, and often the piece is read, lectured on, and discussed in less than 2 days. While I understand the immense amount of material professors must include in their curriculum and the small amount of time they have to explore it, I wonder if it is possible to differentiate methods and assessments.

Each day, we are receiving education via observation without even knowing it, and we are certainly internalizing the information. Even if I have heard a million times how extremely effective differentiation is to education, my own English teachers are not using the strategy. When I think of my own teaching my first thought goes to my experience being taught content, not educational pedagogy.

To produce quality teachers, everyone has to be in on the game, not just education professors. Every professor, regardless of the number of education majors in her/his classrooms, should learn effective teaching practices and be expected to implement them into their classrooms. This will mean more university dollars spent; for a place that supposedly produces the best teachers in the Midwest, it would be well worth it.

Teaching Like We Are Taught

Effective teaching is not only difficult to come by in content-based courses. Unfortunately, a student would be hard-pressed to find much effective teaching even in the College of Education. So what are these professors doing wrong? Theoretically, their job is to teach and promote effective teaching. It is ridiculous to imagine that even those who are supposed to be heralding valuable teaching methods would themselves be ineffective. However, in a relatively large number of education courses, this is indeed the case ...

Today in class we were talking about what makes an effective teacher. We brought up issues of flexibility, accountability, passion, and good parent-teacher relations, and were in the midst of having a rather unproductive discussion when I came to a startling realization: all the things we were touching on regarding effective teaching were being left out of the very classroom we were sitting in. The professor uses the same format for every class period, he never collects homework, and the class of 37 meets in a room where most students are literally required to crawl over or under desks to get to their seats. This is not a least restrictive environment, it is probably the least expensive for the university. There we were, sitting in a cramped classroom participating in the same type of discussion we had repeated every class session since the semester began, talking about what the ideal classroom should be in terms of class

size, teacher leadership, and effectiveness. It was only through the harsh differences between the two that I learned about effective teaching strategies: don't teach like this professor.

There are so many things wrong with this (his) type of teacher education. First off, it can hardly even be considered teacher education. The students are crammed into the classroom like sardines into a can on the fourth floor of Schindler listening to a professor who has failed desperately to establish any sense of leadership or teaching ability in the 3 months he has theoretically been leading the class, and he is certainly not imparting knowledge. I don't believe that teacher educators should use every class to lead exactly as they would were their students the target age of the pre-service teachers in their tutelage, but differentiation in teaching styles remains necessary. My college attendance may mean that I am more self-motivated and able to do the work assigned in class (or merely more able to individually find the help I may find myself needing), but it does not mean that I learn well through straight lecture! Just as we talk about changing teaching methods with our future students, professors (especially in the College of Education) should begin practicing what they teach.

Secondly, some type of professional leadership is necessary. It is not enough to assign a topic and choose student to present the basics of the issue and then expect students to completely facilitate an educational discussion. In this class, without instruction or leadership, the loosely termed discussion devolves into a no-holds-barred brawl, which is less than educational for everyone. In fact, it is the opposite of educational. Instead of broadening minds to alternative ways of viewing a problem or a solution, these arguments solidify labels and dichotomies, making individuals less likely to cooperate with anyone with whom they have a disagreement.

While I am admittedly opposed to testing, some types of assessment should be used throughout the semester/year to give students a general idea of what is important to retain and whether or not they are indeed learning it. Assessment (or any type of work that is handed in) also gives information to

the teacher, giving her/him an idea of what students have taken away from the course and what needs to be re-discussed. In the class I have been taking apart, we have yet to hand in a single piece of work, and it is November. We are "required" (is it still a requirement if it is never handed in?) to write a 2-page summary of the day's topic with at least one source included, but, as I said, the professor never collects them. The only method he has of judging our learning in the course is the discussion, but all that does is identify who is willing to argue. We as students certainly have no idea how we are faring in the course; the syllabus suggests that anyone needing "feedback" should talk to the professor, but even he would be unable to say anything more than the amount a student speaks in class. It is possible, even probable, that the majority of the class is taking nothing from the content, but no one knows it!

Subjective grading is not always negative; indeed, it often has very positive repercussions. However, this professor isn't grading at all! A teacher can grade with whatever style she/he believes is best for the students, but feedback is essential. It does no one any good to amass these issue papers (2 a week for the entire semester) and presumably hand them in at the end of the course. By that point, if a student has been writing in a way contrary to what the professor wants or expects, it is too late. There is also no way that the professor will have the time or energy to read through every single paper for all his students or take the time to check sources. Students, being able to figure this out, no longer have motivation or reason to write solid papers or put any effort into thinking about or researching the assigned issue.

There are times when the professor gets excited about a specific topic, but he has yet to establish a firm connection between the material and students. He does not even personally choose the topics we discuss; he chose a book with a series of "issues," and we are literally going down the list, reading every issue, no matter how outdated. The book was published in 2007, but the majority of the articles were written before 1980 by presumably white men. Out of the 42 articles, 4 were written by

women, and fewer than that were written post-2001. They are all about education (bilingual classrooms, charter schools, segregation, etc.), but the discussions tend to focus on impractical extremes. Instead of talking about possible ways to solve any of the true problems in education today (of which there are plenty), we fight about topics that don't even matter. For example, we had an entire day focused on whether or not homeschooling was a good idea. There were a plethora of strong opinions, but what did that argument do to further our knowledge of the American public education system or what we as teachers can do to improve it? Instead of talking about how to improve our abilities to teach in a public or private school, we fought about homeschooling. Feelings were hurt, opinions were accentuated and downplayed, and all for what? If the professor indeed believed there was a purpose to our discussion of homeschooling, he did not make it clear.

I understand budget pressures and the impossibility of miniscule class sizes. What I don't understand is making students in an accredited university squish into a classroom where there is no space, especially when it is a class that would be much better suited for a smaller group of students. The benefits of a completely discussion-based class are debatable, but it is absurd to argue that discussion is more effective with a group of 30 as opposed to 15 or 20. While the professor may not have much control over the classroom or class size, he has decidedly more than the students. Even if he wished to have a smaller class size, at the end of the day it is up to him to ensure every student in his classroom, however big or small, receives a quality education, even if this requires a change in class structure, i.e., switching from whole-class discussions to small groups.

If I get anything out of this course, it will be of my own doing. The professor has only taught me *not* to use his teaching methods, and I could have gotten that education without paying college tuition. So what is the solution to this education issue? We can no longer stand to have professors like this in our university, much less as tenured members of the faculty. Students who have experiences such as

this need to be invited and encouraged to stand up and tell someone if/when a professor is not doing an effective job, and there must be consequences. This mediocrity must not be retained and repeated.

Teacher Preparedness

While professors maintain an essential role at the head of the classroom, students must be engaged and willing to learn in order for a classroom to be successful and educational. Having discussed some of the professor-based issues in teacher education, I will move on to reviewing the roles of students in forming their own educations, primarily focusing on entrance to the College of Education ...

To be blunt, should traditionally unintelligent people be allowed to teach? That initially seems like a ridiculous question: if these people are going to be expected to educate future generations, it goes without saying that they should be smart. Granted, there are different types of intelligence; it is not all about ability to take tests or speak eloquently. There is also very little reason for a student planning on teaching kindergarten to know how to teach calculus or transcendentalism. However, an unfortunate number of education students that seem to be fully unprepared to live a successful life in the real world, let alone teach. Should there be standards that prospective teachers should hold themselves to? For example: knowledge that evolution is scientifically accepted, not a belief that one can choose, or the awareness that a 4x6 note card is bigger than a 3x5 card. I walk out of some of these classes wondering how these students made it into college, not to mention the college of education. This is a battle I've fought before, the argument that the teacher education program must have higher standards if we ever want to produce solid, effective teachers. But if these *seniors* don't know facts—basic , elementary facts—how can we ever expect the future teachers, lawyers, doctors, and presidents to know?

To solve this problem, there are a couple of solutions that initially pop into my head. The first answer is to make it [more] difficult to get into the college of education with no exceptions. This would mean maintaining a higher GPA, submitting a more through application, possibly taking more or harder tests, and could include new assessments such as interviews, attendance at professional development sessions or conferences, or a more rigorous course load. Secondly, we could improve the education pre-service teachers receive. The teaching standards of professors could be raised and their teaching could be sporadically monitored and assessed by professionals and students. A rigorous professor assessment system (even for tenured professors) could be set up to hypothetically insure learning was taking place. A final angle would be to combine the two previous solutions. Students would be held to higher standards, but they would also be given options to re-take the sections of the application they have yet to pass. This would require a lot more student tracking than we currently have; each section (written test, interview, GPA, etc.) would have to include re-taking possibilities and regulations for potential exceptions. For example, how many semesters can a student have a GPA lower than the required before she/he is excluded from the program completely? So we have option A: only let smart people in to the program initially, option B: teach everyone effectively, and option C: give every student the opportunity to enter the program and provide opportunities for those who don't make it initially to receive the help they need to achieve. Each of these options would require serious changes to be made to the already-implemented program and people would inevitably need to be re-trained, hired, and mentally shifted.

In my opinion, the third option would be the most beneficial for everyone. Students would be held to a higher standard of achievement, but they would also know there are people on their side, ready and willing to give them additional information to make them better teachers. Instead of the application being a ridiculous hoop to jump through, the application itself would provide students with opportunities to learn how to become better educators. Interviews could be set up in the fashion of a job interview to give students experience, which would require students to take time out of their

already busy schedules, and potentially the need to hire/train interviewers. However, the benefits outweigh the costs. Every student admitted to the College of Education would have had this experience, and in addition to promoting the good image of the university by only sending out experienced (hopefully comfortable) interview candidates, students would indeed be experienced and comfortable with the interview process. If the entire application system—in addition to the instruction itself—could be made this beneficial, imagine the upswing in the readiness of pre-service teachers!

Differences between Elementary and Secondary Majors

In the world of education majors, there is one major distinction: elementary or secondary. While there are a couple of courses required for every education major that force the two types to interact in an educational atmosphere, there remain extreme differences between the educations each type of pre-teacher are receiving. Perhaps it is my secondary major bias, but I believe there are aspects of my English major that can and should be implemented into education courses ...

Is there an additional component to teaching aside from pedagogy? In addition to lesson plans, standards, and curriculum, is there something extra teachers should have? This thought stems from the required all-education-major classes I am taking this semester. Generally, I feel as though the majority of the students I know who have an emphasis in addition to the education portion of their major are excited to teach and will do well in front of a class full of students. However, it seems to consistently be elementary education majors who appear the most unprepared to my admittedly untrained eye. To generalize, these are people who decided to major in education because they "love kids." While respect and an open mind towards the ideas and thoughts of students is important, there has to be more than an affinity for children at the base of a teacher's philosophy. A mere fondness does not necessarily

incorporate the drive to give students an opportunity to have a future of learning or even the skills they will need to further their education or life.

One of my mixed classes this semester has a majority of elementary education majors (about 30) with a smattering of secondary majors (a couple physical education, two history, one music and I). The discussions in this particular course tend to run in circles, and while there is a severe lack of professorial control or input, I cannot *completely* blame the professor for the arguments the discussion usually turns into. It is not only the different viewpoints and ideas my peers have that destroy the conversation, it is the incredible futility of some of their statements and the utter disrespect they often show the professor, presumably because he is offering a perspective different from theirs. The class would be exponentially different were it full of my English Ed. peers or even a more evenly distribution between elementary and secondary majors. In another mixed education course, we discuss issues not everyone agrees with, but it never even hints at the tumultuous atmosphere shown in the elementary-dominated course.

There are a great number of explanations for this phenomenon, ranging from uncooperative elementary education professors to a strange accumulation of all the angry people on campus in this specific class. As I have heard said, elementary education majors love kids, secondary education majors love content. Is it possible that this added passion for a subject aside from education pedagogy makes students appear more prepared to teach? In the specific class discussed above, I wonder if the elementary education majors are acting out against the professor because he is so contrary to their vision of what a teacher should be. An elementary school teacher would rarely, if ever, allow an entire class to discuss a topic without a great deal of teacher involvement, which is precisely what this professor does. It is also possible that in other education classes they have taken, ideas and methods have been enforced as the only way to teach or look at a specific incident. This class has the potential to

encourage students to look at an issue through different lenses, but if one way is all that has ever been shown, it would admittedly be extremely difficult to see any situation from a different angle.

Take grading, for example. I know from experience that the College of Education wholeheartedly supports strictly objective grading. This professor, however, makes no attempt to hide his subjective grading style. While there are admittedly other problems with the way he chooses to grade, the moment he handed out his syllabus and we looked to the grading portion, the entire class took up arms against him. And because he did not even try to explain his policies or the reasoning behind them, he immediately lost respect from the majority of the students. In fact, it took me a great deal of thinking and writing before I could pinpoint what made me so unhappy about his particular grading policies. It turned out that I had no qualms with the subjective nature of the grades, but other aspects of his policy.

Perhaps it is this theme of constant reflection and the potential to shift beliefs these other students are missing. English courses encourage and often require reflection. None of the solely-education courses I have taken have. Serious reflection has the potential to revolutionize the way educators think and act. Really, would we want a population of teachers who refuse to reflect on their practices or simply don't know how to do it effectively? These teachers will be teaching the same way forever, regardless of student response or other available methods, because they will never take the time to think about the way they are teaching. The inability to think critically about their teaching methods or beliefs could easily transfer over to a failure to effectively teach all students. Without reflection on what can be bettered, nothing will ever change.

II. Is the UNI College of Education preparing me to be a good teacher?

I am very close to having made it successfully through the UNI Teacher Education program with my teaching certification in hand and no visible scars. However, as I discussed above, there are unquestionably portions of the program that should be changed to positively impact the students in the program and their future teaching. In the following entries, I take an in-depth look at specific incidents I have had concerns about within the College of Education. These are only a few of the many dimensions of the program needing to be seriously dealt with before UNI is able to consistently produce high-quality teachers.

Field Experience

Field experience is an essential portion of a student's teacher education journey. However, the progression, amount, and goals of field experience are often taken for granted, especially by students. Does the current field experience model help create strong teachers? Is any thought given to the possibility that field experience is not the be-all, end-all of teacher education? This piece explores my individual field experiences and the contributions they have made to my overall teacher preparation ...

UNI has a nationally recognized teacher education program. For many students, the most influential component of the curriculum is field experience. When I met with representatives from the College of Education on my first visits to the campus, they stressed how forward thinking UNI was for having a field experience element to go along with every year of an education student's college career. Their spoken accolades obviously worked for me, as I am completing my fourth and final year as a UNI student. However, having experienced the wonders of field experience, I must voice some reservations.

The theoretical model of field experience would indeed have a student participating in outside classrooms at least four times throughout their years in the university. A great number of students, however, do not adhere to the specific scaffolding model (if the traditional curriculum is indeed building on itself). I came to UNI as a sophomore, so my freshman year I took a large number of education courses, while the ideal progression has freshman spending their first year taking liberal arts core courses. First semester of my sophomore year, I took the junior-level education courses, including a hefty field experience portion of class work. As soon as my lessons had been taught and my mini-teacher work sample was submitted, I got on a plane and spent the next five months studying literature in England. I returned to the states and enrolled in mainly English courses, as the majority of my education major classes had been taken care of before my semester abroad. This also meant that when I started my "level III" field experience, it had been a full year since I had been in the classroom. That in itself is permissible; after all, I studied abroad, creating a gap in my UNI-centered education. However, the "level II" field experience I completed before leaving for England seems to be the only one in which I was required or even requested to be an active participant in the classroom I visited. While I have observed classrooms since then and have written lesson plans, the two lessons I taught the first semester of my sophomore year remain the only times I have been at the head of a classroom.

The lineup of field experiences does not seem to be well thought out. Level I is 40 hours of observation in any classroom, regardless of student content or interest area. The theory is that there are certain aspects of teaching that transcend the grade and content levels; this is supposed to be a first taste of teaching for students. Level II is set at 30 hours, and is meant to involve more cooperative teaching than Level I. Students complete a miniature teacher work sample (the large TWS to be completed during student teaching) and write and teach at least two full lessons.

The third field experience level is differentiated by different content areas and majors. Elementary education majors spend an entire week in a classroom, teaching lessons and observing the full day activities of their cooperating teacher. For English education majors, however, there is less of a plan. We take three methods classes that require field experience hours: Teaching of Writing, Teaching of English, and Methods of Teaching Content Literacy. While I did field experience for these three courses, it was less controlled than the elementary Level III experience. Each professor had a different focus and a good idea of what they wanted us to take out of the experience, but when the experience only totals 10 hours, neither the student nor the teacher has enough time to feel comfortable letting the student take the lead. The experiences are also focused differently; for example, in my Teaching of English field experience, we were to focus our observations on different forms of assessment. The goal was not for students to write or form assessments, but instead to observe methods and forms of assessment to supplement what we had already learned from theory courses.

My level I FE was probably the least productive. It was possibly this way because it was the first time I had been in a classroom as anything but the student, but more likely it was the fact that I, as a secondary English education major, was placed in a first grade classroom. The requirement was forty hours, and the general expectation was that students would observe for four hours at a time for a series of ten weeks. After my ten weeks of observing a first grade classroom, I discovered two important things. One, I didn't want to teach first grade, and two, four hours is a really long time. For the most part, the teacher I was working with had me do what I considered to be parent volunteer jobs: putting up bulletin boards, grading spelling tests, and putting students' work into their cubbies. I did have the opportunity to read one-on-one with many of the students, and spent a lot of time working with students who were having a harder time with reading comprehension and speed. I read a few books out loud to the class, but mostly just sat in the back of the classroom doing busy work and watching the teacher babysit 25 six year-olds.

While there were certainly benefits to this experience, I don't think I needed to spend 40 hours of my life solidifying the knowledge that I didn't want to teach first grade. I am not sure anything I contributed to the class had the potential to stick with any of the students, and I am hesitant to say I gained anything incredible from the hours spent observing. What has stuck with me through the years since that experience was the one negative comment my cooperating teacher wrote on my final evaluation form in April when my ten weeks were up. She wrote a lot of positive things about my ability to teach (though how she had any idea what I would be like as a teacher I don't know. Intuition, perhaps?) but she wrote that I was too hesitant to really involve myself in the classroom. Ever since I read that comment, it has been something I wonder about. It is possible I have become defensive over the years, but I maintain that I was in the right to not push myself on her class or teaching styles. I was an eighteen year-old freshman in college who wasn't sure she wanted to teach at all, much less be in control of first graders. To this day, I am unsure of what I was supposed to have learned from that experience and if it was fair of her to assess me as not willing to participate. If it was to cement teaching as a career path, it didn't manage to discourage me from teaching altogether. I didn't, however, learn about actually teaching: classroom management, assessment, lesson planning, etc. It is possible I would have learned just as little had I been placed in a high school classroom, but when compared to my second field experience, I doubt it.

My level II field experience remains the most educational out of the field experiences I have had. It was a 30-hour experience; students typically spent an hour a day in the classroom for a month. The way my schedule worked out, I spent two hours Tuesday and Thursday and an hour on Friday in a sixth grade English class. Aside from the great deal of practical knowledge I gained from observing and being a part of a classroom like the one I hoped to teach in someday, the teacher was committed to helping me understand his practices and discussing them with me. He took the time to explain every move he made in the classroom from discipline and student conferences to concerns he had about the personal life of a

specific student. When it came time for me to start thinking about lessons I would teach, he gave me options and we talked some about what I wanted to do with the class. I ended up creating a couple of lessons introducing "Little House on the Prairie" to the class, and my cooperating teacher was supportive, helpful, and gave intensive feedback. After every class I sat in on, we would discuss the way the day had gone, what could have been done differently, and what went well. The most influential part of this experience was his willingness to share his reasoning behind teaching methods, especially when I didn't know enough to ask. Through his guidance, I started to feel comfortable being in the classroom in a leading role. When my 30 hours were up, I left the classroom with confidence for the future. My cooperating teacher had not only given me a fantastic teacher to observe, he helped give me the self-assurance I needed to truly embrace teaching as a profession. I obviously had some desire to teach before, but this experience animated my passion.

On that potential-teacher high, I left the country. When I came back in August, I had been so focused on the English content I had almost forgotten my aspiration to teach. I began Teaching of Writing, another course with a field experience component, and was re-energized. I chose to work with my level II teacher again for this field experience (after level II there are no assigned cooperating teachers). The last teacher I worked with was fantastic, taught what I wanted to teach, and was one of the very few teachers I knew in the area. I observed some writing instruction; it was certainly informative, but I wasn't in the classroom long enough to make much of an impact.

The most beneficial part of the field experience portion of the course was the reflection included with the hours in the classroom. I was able to take notes during my observation, talk with my cooperating teacher, and then reflect through writing on the strategies I observed. I summarized the student's activities and questioned their effectiveness.

> On the other hand, I can't help but feel that this is a limited way of getting students to write. All that is required of them is that they write a couple of things about their current book each week. While the lack of rules encourages freedom, it also leaves the door open to unmotivated students who simply throw a paragraph together at the last minute, because not only is the grading scale (1-10) very flexible, any poor writing that they may hand in is never seen again other than a number on an eventual progress report. How could this be remedied, keeping with the same basic class structure? (Reeve Fall 2009)

This course was the first step in this type of reflection on teaching practice. Although I was not in the classroom very long, I saw enough to have the ability to think critically about what the students were being asked to do.

I hesitate to label any experience worthless, but my next field experience was close to being entirely without value. The course, "Methods of Teaching Content Literacy," was decent, but not because of the field experience or the professorial leadership. The professor did not view English as a valid content area, so the English majors in the classroom were not permitted to do their field experience in an English classroom, decreasing the practical value of the experience initially. Secondly, the field experience can hardly be termed as such. She merely required us to tutor a student—as opposed to lead a classroom—and while we had to write lesson plans including standards and assessments, there was no reflection component involved. Essentially, I helped a student with her homework, and then wrote "lesson plans" to cover what we worked on. It would have been incredibly unhelpful to teach entire lessons to an individual student, requiring more work on their part and an unreliable response for me to base lesson plan changes on. In addition, since I was not allowed to even tutor this student in English—a subject I could have potentially improved her understanding of—we worked on physics. I never took physics in high school or college, and I have absolutely zero knowledge

of how to teach it effectively. I borrowed the student's textbook the day before we met, read through the chapter she was working on and formed a plan for our session. I ended up having her do a dual-entry diary of the chapter she was supposed to be reading, but any help I may have provided was entirely unnecessary.

The basis of this course was to teach teaching of literacy in a variety of contents. However, as I hope is obvious, the field experience the professor created to go along with it was entirely ineffective. If I had been given a class to work with or even a teacher to observe, I would have potentially gained more than trying to help a student wade through a chapter in a physics book.

The final field experience in my arsenal was an interesting one. For the first time, I chose a local teacher off of a list given to me by my Teaching of English professor. More importantly, he ended up being bad. The field experience goal was to gather information about different ways of assessing students; this is something that I had yet to focus on, making it an educational opportunity. I began this 8 hour field experience with high hopes; my cooperating teacher was more than willing to let me participate in grading student speeches and gave me rubrics and grading sheets to aid my reflection on the practices he utilized. However, as I began observing him on a consistent basis, I came to realize how ineffective he was as a teacher. His classroom management skills were nonexistent, he didn't know very much about the content, and most importantly, he had no passion for the subject or the students, and it was obvious. However, even though I was not observing a stellar (or even decent) educator, my Teaching of English course gave me a lot of room to explore his methods and reflect on changes I will be able to make in my own classroom so I do not come off as unconcerned and uninformed as he did. It was incredibly beneficial to see the connection between his lack of control and his lack of care.

Through the described experiences, I have certainly expanded my knowledge of teaching and my arsenal of potentially usable methods. But is it enough? Even though the field experiences I have had

(with one exception) have been useful, I have not been in front of the classroom teaching, and I wonder if I will be entirely comfortable when I am. With practice comes some modicum of comfort, but within the nature of teaching is constant change and fluctuation, so I could have been leading a classroom for months and still be anxious about "real" teaching.

Field experience currently lines up as such: observation, limited participation, observation of specific aspects of teaching, and full participation with a safety net. As any education major will tell you, student teaching is the last experience to go through before teaching for real. I have to wonder, though: how well will student teaching prepare me to actually teach? Will it be any more effective than my level II experiences—which were wonderful—but didn't prepare me for a roomful of kids I alone am expected to teach? Is true teacher preparation even attainable? My initial thought leans towards no; I can teach hundreds of lessons, but if I still have the real teacher standing behind me ready to jump in if anything should happen, I will not be having the full experience of a teacher. I am also concerned about the potential influence of my student teaching cooperating teacher—will it potentially un-teach everything I have learned through the teacher education experience? Will my cooperating teacher be negative, traditional, or unwilling to help me explore my untested teaching theories? Even if cooperating teachers were to be individually hand-picked, it would be impossible to pair every student with a teacher to make a perfect pedagogical fit. I suppose it is up to both the teacher and the student to make a relationship work to the benefit of the students. Even if a teacher has views running contrary to those of the student teacher, hopefully he/she will be committed enough to the learning process to allow the student to make mistakes, try new styles, and learn how to thrive in the classroom on their own, making the culmination of field experience one of self-esteem building and opportunity, which ultimately has the potential to transform students successfully into high-quality teachers.

Although restructuring is something to be seriously considered, field experience as a whole should not be denied importance. It has the potential to revive education students struggling without a place to practice the methods they have been learning, and inspire the minds of uncertain teacher education students. Without field experience, there is great possibility the entire point of education—the students—could be lost and forgotten behind a veil of pedagogy.

Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness is an enormous issue in the world of education. Diversity abounds, and as teachers we must acknowledge it in all forms as best as we can without bias, prejudice, or ignorance. However, the methods being used to reach this lofty goal are weak, to say the least. Every education major is required to take courses supposedly focused on valuing and relating to every student, but are they doing the job? ...

How many sob stories does it take to become culturally responsible? Understanding is an important, essential component to being an effective and respectful teacher, but I can't get behind the idea that it can be achieved through watching videos about children who have had or are currently having bad experiences or power point presentations with all of the meanings of the word "culture" defined in bland sentences. We are in a rut of ineffectiveness. We know these things: cultural respect, responsiveness, understanding, awareness, lack of bias, etc., are hugely important to the lives and educations of our students. Our problem lies in teaching them.

Cultural responsiveness is an understanding that should be created alongside and followed by correlated action. Knowledge about the cultures, beliefs and traditions of your students is the first step, but the actions and responses to these are the key, both to your awareness and the education of your

students. How can we teach potential teachers to implement these theories (i.e. responsiveness) into their classrooms? Right now, it is all theory. Some ideas sound good in an education classroom but fail to provide the desired results with real students. Or because, as students, teachers weren't explicitly taught how to relate to students, they fail to do so. Just because a particular train of thought makes sense doesn't mean it will follow through to the classroom. Is it possible to teach teachers in a way that will allow for more than remembered pedagogy?

It's a daily thing with one particular professor. You know it's coming, too. She moves behind the console and switches the projector from ELMO to computer mode. It takes her a few minutes to figure out the sound, but never long enough to make her rule out the clip that will inevitably include or induce tears. The class should be called "Inequality Realization," not "Human Relations." I am not learning how to relate to my students or, heaven forbid, teach them content. I am spending my classroom time trying to get rid of the goosebumps.

Is sympathy (or even empathy) going to make me a better teacher? I want to be aware of issues that may cause my students to have difficulties that affect their potential to learn, because I want to be able to shift my teaching styles to ensure they are not missing out. *I want to be an effective teacher.* Before I started this class, I knew there was inequality—often in severe forms—in all areas in our country. *I knew that.* I had already seen plenty of Oprah specials, thanks. It can be a very positive thing for people to feel like they are sick of seeing something; there is great possibility that overexposure will become the stimulus to make individuals take up the mantle and start thinking about what they can do about it. There is a time and a place for those video clips. But I am going to college so I *can* do something. A college degree is certainly not necessary, but this is how I feel I can do the most good. I am not here to listen to the same speech regarding the enormous amount of inequality in our world. I want to know what I can do about it. Education is the bridge out of poverty, but millions of kids are not

getting the education they deserve and desperately need. So how can I inspire them, or anyone? I'll tell you one thing, I don't think the way I teach is going to be impacted one bit by any of the videos we've seen so far. Awareness is good, essential even, and I know far, far from everything, but I legitimately worry about reaching the boundary of empathy, but failing to go any further. I just hope that the class ends up giving me some idea about how to make the connection between goosebumps and change.

Specific Incident: Human Relations Presentation

Diversity-encouraging courses such as this often have special guests come in and speak in during our class sessions. The following is a response to a specific speaker I had a severe disagreement with, and it influenced me to think sincerely about the power perception can have on an overall message ...

I walked into the classroom with a slight sense of anticipation. Not much, maybe, but for Human Relations, any snag of a feeling more than distasteful apathy is welcome and unusual. Everyone at my table was already seated; my jaunt across campus gets me to the classroom with no time to spare. Always the diligent student, I located the attendance sheet and initialed my specific box before flipping my notebook to a fresh page. As I glanced around the classroom, in addition to noting that the presenter was late, I saw that about half the class had set out their name cards. I waged a brief internal debate about pulling mine from my folder, but within a few seconds I remembered that I am not in fourth grade and that it is probably not necessary for the presenter to know my name and what my favorite activity is. A couple of minutes after ten, a middle-aged man walked into the room and greeted the professor knowingly. He marched to the front of the room and swiftly pulled up a power point presentation with a picture of a sad-looking girl with hair falling in her face and the word "poverty" in bold white type against the purposefully dark background. At this point, our professor stood up from her new position in the corner of the classroom and introduced the man in the front. "He's going to talk about teaching in

urban districts," she said. "He's been coming here for years." Smile. Nod to the man, whose name I had already forgotten. And so it began.

The presentation started innocently enough. He told us that he teaches in Houston, Texas in one of the poorest areas of the city. He has been a principal for years – I assume he has a past as an actual teacher, but he failed to mention those experiences—and his middle school just won a prestigious award. With that, he hit a button on the computer mouse and slow piano music started streaming out of the speakers. Not trusting the roomful of college seniors to turn down the lights efficiently, he walked purposefully to the back of the room and bathed us in darkness. As our eyes adjusted, the chords got heavier and text appeared on the screen in front of us. "The life of a child... is in your hands," the screen proclaimed. A teenage boy with his thick eyebrows in a v and feigned anger in his eyes sprinkled onto the screen next, with his *true* story. He was a good student until his house was destroyed by a hurricane. At this point, the piano music gains lyrics. "It's not easy / to be me..." As hurricane boy's picture and tale fade, another picture pops up, and I can't help but think to myself as I feel the goosebumps appear on my skin, really? This again? The presentation continued without surprise: a few more good-turned-bad students—due to natural disasters, poverty, and most importantly, teacher failure—and then, just as the music picks up and adds drumbeats and a chorus of background singers, the you-have-a-responsibility-to-be-a-good-teacher message pops up. Everybody has tears in their eyes, people are rubbing their arms to get rid of the goosebumps, and after the final chorus we watch as the man we have forgotten about turns on the shock of artificial light and walks to the front of the classroom. "Those were all real stories, guys," he says. "A friend of mine made the video and a bunch of my teacher friends and I gave him the stories." He chuckles to himself as if this is a funny memory. He walks back behind the computer console and clicks once to change slides back to the initial "poverty" shot.

At this point, I am already more than a little put off. I have a history with videos in that genre, and it has not been a good relationship. I am not a believer in emotional manipulation for any purpose, be it to receive donations, convince students to not commit suicide, or influence a classroom full of potential teachers to feel inspired. It is an ineffective practice, and in my experience, it leaves people feeling empty and let down when their life does not automatically become everything this slide show made it out to be. The stories, be they true or false, made me feel something; I am not denying my emotional response. However, I refuse to believe for a second that when any of these situations come up in my life or my classroom that it will be as straightforward as this video encourages one to believe. When Jimmy's house gets hit by a hurricane and he and his family lose everything, there will be no background music.

The presenter is an experienced talker. He speaks quickly and efficiently, asking rhetorical questions and spewing statistics. He has a voice that is easy to listen to and paces along the front of the room making the speech an active event. He reminds us that he is the principal at a middle school in Houston that has won a great award (the biggest award a public school can get, I believe he said) and this school is unlike anything we have ever experienced. After sharing about his school briefly, he tells us that the reason he is here to present is because he was once just like us. He went to college in Ohio, which he says is exactly like Iowa, and got a teaching job in Texas before he graduated. The plan was to stay down in Houston for a year or two, and then move back to the nice, small, homogeneous Midwest. But that didn't happen. He fell in love with his school district and has never looked back, except to come give lectures and hire UNI students to work in his district. "UNI produces good teachers," he said (and I remember this part nearly verbatim, "but there is no diversity here. You have no experience. All you want is to graduate and go back to your small town and teach." He said that. He *told* us what we all wanted! He said, straight out, that he somehow knew exactly what all of our hopes and plans and

dreams were, and that they were wrong. I just stared. I thought to myself, he can't mean what he just said.

Back to the power point, he clicked to the next slide and told us that we were going to talk about some misconceptions of schools in poverty. How many times before have I played the "look-at-how-stupid-you-are,-white-kid" game? More than once, I can tell you that much. That is exactly what we did, and, keeping in mind that this is all my perception of an experience, it was incredibly offensive. It is possible that the Women and Gender Studies classes I have taken or various books I have read about poverty have helped open my mind to some of the things he wanted us to not know, but he was, without shame, assuming we were a group of hick racists. You're all middle-class white people, he kept repeating. You have no idea what it's like to be anything different.

He put some words up on the screen: building, hallways, students, attendance, etc. "What pops into your mind when you think about a school in which most of the students are in poverty? What do you think the building looks like? What are the attitudes of the students? Think about it for a minute or two," he asked us. He expected the prejudiced answers. Well, sir, I wanted to answer, the building is broken down with the windows shot out and spray painted, the students are little shits with guns in their pockets and spitwads in their mouths, and the district itself, well, let's just say it's somewhere I would never want to be. However, he called on some other random kid to answer. "Uh, well, I guess I see crowded hallways?" he suggested. "What little school did you go to?" the man shot back. The kid told him the name of the 3A high school he had attended. "Were your hallways crowded?" "Yeah," he answered. "So, my hallways being crowded are different than yours? Okay," he chuckled (read: you are dumb, naïve and ignorant, not to mention prejudiced for thinking my school is worse than yours was), leaving the kid to sputter. He moved on to the next subject and did the same thing with the next student —made assumptions about their life and their educational experiences and called them prejudiced.

After that activity was done, he switched slides to one filled with statistics about his particular middle school. 67% Hispanic, 30% African American, 2% White, 1% Other. "Is this diversity?" He asked the class. People nodded. "Eeeeeerrrrrr. Wrong." He smiled the whole time he made the buzzer noise. "Homogeneous. Do you know what that means?" You asshole, I thought. "The same. These kids are all in poverty. They're connected by that. And you won't know how to deal with it."

That was his presentation. When I walked out of the classroom after counting the seconds until it was done I was nearly in tears. How dare you assume that you know me? How dare you?

I wrote up until the previous sentence directly after his presentation. By then, I was so upset I was unable to write much more without doing something in anger I would regret later, like punching a wall or eating an entire bucket of chocolate ice cream. Re-reading this piece, however, brings up more than angry feelings. Yes, I am and was outraged, but my fury has taken on a more productive power.

More than anything, I felt condescended towards the entire time he was speaking. I don't know everything about poverty or racism, and yes, I did grow up in a small town in the middle of a cornfield. But I have also been on work trips to El Salvador, Kansas City, Honduras, Indianapolis, and more; I have seen poverty firsthand. I spent my summer in Texas, volunteering for the AIDS Outreach Center in downtown Fort Worth. None of that makes me a better person or changes the way I should be treated. It merely accentuates the fact that this man knew absolutely nothing about my life or the lives of my classmates, yet he walked in with such a sense of superiority he was unable to see that.

Whether he knew it or not, this man put a black stain on what was already a dull class. He was speaking to a group of pre-service teachers, and he chose to present his information in a way that gave us an extremely negative view of administrators and other teachers we may be working with. This presentation was presumably supposed to be an educational experience, but I merely learned to do

everything in my power to be the opposite of that man and to mistrust the judgment of my professor, neither of which are particularly healthy viewpoints.

Months after the presentation, his words are still with me. I cannot stop thinking: is this what teaching has become? The answer is absolutely not. I am making it my mission to combat his actions. He was wrong, so I am going to make it right. The presenter, who shall remain nameless, will probably never come to my doorstep and apologize as profusely as he should for assuming anything about the students in my classroom, but I am taking this experience and turning it around. As much as I can help it, students in my classes will not feel condescended to. Whether that means giving them the opportunities to choose their own literature circle books, picking partners, or deciding on the classroom rules, I will try my utmost to make it a priority to give my students agency. This has the potential to improve self-confidence that they will carry out of the classroom and into their lives. They are in control of their destinies; I will not be the one to take that away from them.

Censorship

I have always tended towards passivity. Even in instances of severe disagreement, I am continually inclined to keep quiet and observe as opposed to speak out and take an active role in a discussion or argument. However, in an attempt to broaden my metaphorical comfort box, when a professor made a comment completely contrary to where my beliefs lie, I decided to speak out. This incident led me to wonder how comfortable students are and should be questioning professor or teacher ideas, opinions, and teaching policies ...

I got into a fight with a professor today. Without ever mentioning the word, we were fighting about censorship. He firmly believes teachers should have the final say in a student's education, no

matter what. We are the guards of education, he said. It is our job to make sure students are taught what we as trained professionals believe they should know, regardless of what their parents may say. I began the argument by saying that not only is that type of action a valid reason for termination, it is often unnecessary. While I will do my best to convince a disbelieving parent of my best intentions (and will hopefully already have done so by sending home newsletters, having conferences, and being genuinely concerned about all of my students), if it gets down to the wire, I will bow to the authority of the parent. He seemed to think there were innumerable problems with this mindset. He went so far as to question my ability to be a good teacher, painting me as a job-mongering, salary hungry quasi-teacher who is completely unconcerned with her students overall education. Regardless of his berating, my thoughts have not changed. It could be explained by my natural avoidance of confrontation—it would be more natural for me to bend than fight. That said, if I was in a situation in which I truly felt that a student would be done a great disservice by not reading/doing a specific thing, I would absolutely, with no doubt, try to help the parent(s) see my point of view. But at the end of the day, parents have the right to decide if a particular thing is unfit for their child. Period. While I do feel like I will be a successful, engaged teacher, I would not presume to be so educated that I will try and control parental choice. I will be in the schools to educate kids, not to tell them their parents are wrong. Why would I as an effective teacher choose this battle? There *will* be another book, writing prompt or video clip. I want to be fighting about quality home lives, books in the home, and encouraging open thought and discussion, not becoming a martyr over a single text.

III. How will I ensure my effectiveness as a teacher?

Professors and peers have certainly molded my journey towards becoming a teacher. I have learned various methods of inspiring and motivating students through my days at UNI, and I feel as though I will be able to sufficiently manage a classroom. Being an efficient teacher takes more than an understanding and appreciation of pedagogy. Has my teacher education given me the skills I need to inspire student motivation and ensure learning is indeed taking place through all types of student and environment challenges? Am I truly ready to call myself a teacher? ...

Personal Teacher Readiness

I don't know if I am prepared to teach. I often feel as if I know nothing. Grammar, for example: how can I teach English if I don't know correct apostrophe usage completely? I worry: what am I getting myself into? What if I can't hack it? What if I end up being a quit-within-the-first-five-years statistic? But I have had some seriously bad teachers, and I know quite a few pre-service teachers who will, in my opinion, be worse as teachers than a pile of rocks. If I had taken more methods courses, had more field experience, or asked more questions, would I feel more confident entering a classroom?

This is the problem that I am having with the transition between student and teacher. I am still in the student role fully. Although I am doing a great deal of thinking and writing about being a teacher, in my day to day life I am completely a student, left to fend for myself in the world of professor leadership. For the past seventeen years I have been looking towards the head of the classroom to watch and listen for my next instruction or task to complete. Even though in the workforce I will have an administration and government to tell me what to teach, I wonder if I will have the classroom presence to turn around and teach my students.

Some days I worry about how I am going to motivate students, seeing students as *them*. However, when I think about my homework, classes, assignments, etc., I am in the shoes of the student. What does this say about my future as a teacher? When I student teach, I will be much closer to the age of the students than my cooperating teacher (ahem, 21 year-old me teaching potentially 18 year-old students). How is the line drawn? I am not overly concerned with classroom management and gaining the respect of students, at least not regarding my age. It is the mentality switch that I am mainly thinking about. I wouldn't say that I worry about it; I feel like it will be natural. I have spent so much time thinking about what it will be like to be a teacher and recently my mind has been constantly centered on lesson plans, motivating students, and creating a comfortable learning atmosphere I believe that I am prepared to teach. That said, there is an interesting perspective switch involved. It will literally be an overnight change. And during student teaching, I will be a student teacher. I will be as prepared as I will be, and I will be trained on the job regardless.

Hypothetical Classroom

The hardest part of preparing teachers to be successful seems to be the ambiguity of the future classroom. No student knows where he or she will eventually get a job; even if we could somehow know, students have a million different things going on in their lives that can and will change the way they relate to us and the material we are attempting to get them to connect to. Is there any way to combat this uncertainty? ...

It becomes tricky, this hypothetical classroom. "Our students" are forever changing in age, race, religion, motivation, everything. While it is quite possible that at one time or another we will all have students that match any of these given descriptions, it remains difficult to theorize about actual classroom procedures and lessons without taking into account the environment. For example, discussing

an upcoming holiday may be important, but the method of doing will change entirely depending on the students and their levels of bias, knowledge, and experience. Every student in an education classroom will have an entirely different group of students in their classrooms; even students change from day to day in their moods, motivations, and even interests. When a question such as this is brought up in an education classroom, however, the professor often only uses one word: differentiation. While we have all heard this term thrown around since the beginning of our UNI education, few students understand how to effectively employ it.

Differentiation has become a catch phrase in education. It is lauded as the best policy for all classrooms and is expected to be a part of every teacher's vocabulary. But our professors never give solid examples of differentiation for their students to observe. Our classroom is hypothetical; theirs is decidedly not. It makes just as much sense to say college students are all at the same intellectual level as it does to say make the same commentary regarding sixth graders. However, if I were to suggest a class layout for sixth graders leaving no room for the concept of differentiation, my policies would be called rigid and harsh, while college professors think nothing of mainstreaming the content to supposedly fit every student. There are solid differences between the high school and college classroom atmospheres and purposes; primarily, college students are attending by choice and are typically looking for something specific to come of their education, i.e. career opportunities, mind-broadening ideas, etc. However, it would be incredibly beneficial to observe teachers practicing differentiation before we were expected to magically know how to use it ourselves.

I think the solution to this hypothetical classroom situation comes from practice and eventually, from experience. As teachers, we will never entirely know what will happen in the classroom on any given day. Therefore, we will never be able to be completely prepared. How comforting, then, to be able to look back on days or experiences when even professors met something unexpected and had to deal

with it using various methods. It is too bad most professors in our program apparently have such faith in our abilities to never slip up, make a mistake, or find ourselves with too much or too little time. I have one professor who has been completely open with us (the students) about his thought processes as he progresses through class time, and it is more than appreciated. By observing his daily thoughts about his methodology, we are able to see and understand while teaching will not always be easy; it is doable and often enjoyable. It is through professors like this that students begin to feel comfortable with their uncertainty about their future in an unknown classroom.

Student Motivation

Having established that I will never be able to know my students before I begin teaching them, how do teachers encourage and create motivation? Are there specific strategies proven to work regarding student motivation, or must it be completely individualized? In fact, how important is student motivation in terms of their overall learning? ...

The discussion again leads to student motivation. Even though as a college student I can clearly see and believe in the benefits of an education, the work professors are assigning me to do, and even vaguely enjoy the work I am being told to do, it is oftentimes a struggle to motivate myself into doing the work, or even showing up for class. It comes as no surprise that middle school and high school students need just as much (if not more) motivation than I do to complete the requirements that I their teacher, the administration, and the government suggest they do. Understandably, college students are expected to have more awareness of their own educational needs (the need to set aside a longer period of time to complete reading, for example), but it is the responsibility of the teacher to make the material being taught applicable and relatable to students.

Student choice is an enormous part of motivation and connection. English classes especially give room for individual choice in the forms of writing, book choices, differentiated lit circles and the like. Should all parts of student work be based on choice? I cannot see why not. Standards can be met using a variety of different elements; government-mandated standards do not mention the necessity of specific books or writing topics, and I don't feel school districts should either. Not only does choice improve motivation, it has the potential to make students excited about the work they are doing. Students are often so unconnected to the material they fail to see why literature or writing could relate to their life. We must motivate students not only to get their work done, but to see and appreciate that connection.

Recently, however, there has been a push to remove student connection from literature. How do we engage students without connection? Do text-dependent classrooms promote the best and/or most beneficial type of literature study? Theoretically, I can buy into this theory that is sweeping the standards writers of the nation. Viewing a text and focusing on the language and style without any outside influences could greatly improve textual understanding and comprehension—a major goal of English educators. Some (the standards writer I heard speak at the October ICTE Conference, for instance) go so far as to argue true comprehension of literature is impossible without separation from the life and experiences of the reader. He specifically suggested that with the influence of our own experiences, we will consistently be putting our own lens of life over the textual evidence and miss the entirety of the literature.

While this is an admirable position, I have to wonder if it is possible. Everything an individual sees, reads or hears somehow shades their outlook and their future experiences. I don't believe this necessarily subtracts from the overall meaning or comprehension of literature. In fact, in most cases, a connection is inspiration to move further *into* the text. If students are able to see parts of themselves in literature in any context, there is a much stronger likelihood they will become connected to the

character development, plot, or purpose of a piece, even if the character or situation does not continue to follow their experience.

Another portion of this argument involves the complete removal of the "I" factor. Students in a text-focused atmosphere would focus on critical thinking, taking "I" out of writing and thinking about a text. Again, is this viewpoint ever feasible? This classroom mindset would encourage students to form arguments other than "because I think so." Hypothetically, this strategy also moves beyond right or wrong answers. By removing opinion-based (and therefore unarguable) answers to textual questions, students will dig deeper into the text to find answers. Regardless, benefits from this classroom mindset are only possible if the teacher admits/agrees that there is more than one way to read a text.

Just this morning in an English literature course, a student ambiguously accused a professor of searching for one specific interpretation of a text and failing to see any other readings as valid. In my opinion, the assessment was correct, but the professor got visibly upset. I understand her reaction: supposedly, she has been trying her damndest to attempt to appreciate all the ridiculous interpretations students develop about texts she has spent her life analyzing. However, assuming she is trying to be open to other interpretations of text, she needs to work on her presentation. More than once, I have felt that I have given a valid explanation of the text along with including textual support for my position, and it has still be overlooked or graded poorly. If my argument isn't solid, that is grounds for a lower grade. But a text-based argument disagreeing with the professor? It is my opinion that such a thing should be encouraged, not downgraded.

So if personal connection is discouraged, what happens to motivation? In my experience, few high school students are motivated to do their out of class reading based on merit of the text alone or even the threat of a poor grade (which is an ineffective practice on its own). Is "because it's fun" a legitimate motivator for teachers to work toward? Chances are, just because an assignment or project is

enjoyable for one group of students, the joy will not carryover to the rest of the class. Ultimately, students should enjoy what they are doing, but should student enjoyment enter the planning phases of teaching? It would be next to impossible to attempt to individually motivate each student for every segment of a course, but is something of that nature necessary and should it be the goal? Teaching is more than giving students material and information; ideally, student and teacher work together to establish a curriculum that is able to work for both participants. But at some point, the teacher has to take the lead. Students should be able to believe their teachers would not assign ridiculously unnecessary work; unfortunately, it takes a solid amount of convincing to establish work legitimacy. However, this could potentially be incredibly positive for students and teachers alike. If teachers are making firm attempts to have strong reasoning for lessons, units and assignments past district or government requirements, everyone will benefit.

Reading Fluency

As a teacher, there are a plethora of individual student needs I will be required to address, often connecting directly back to student motivation and unique student backgrounds. One specific skill set I am concerned about is reading fluency and comprehension. Every student will come into my classroom at a different level with a diverse past of varied reading experiences. What aspects of my classroom can be changed to amplify reading fluency and comprehension for every student? ...

In any classroom, from elementary school to upper level college, there is a great variation in reading levels. Some students may have been reading avidly for as long as they could remember, others may proudly declare their continuous dependence on sparknotes. The ultimate goal is to get every student to enjoy reading, not just tolerate it for the sake of a grade. How is it possible to reach every

student, regardless of reading level, and improve or enhance their desire to read as well as their ability (fluency and comprehension) to do so?

Enjoyment of text can come from a combination of reasonable factors, or it can be sneaky, magical, and unexpected. Sometimes, without any personal connection or outside reasons, a student will form a bond with a text and will be inspired. More typical than that, however, are students who become interested in a certain piece because of the connections to their lives or interests. Enjoyment absolutely plays a role in development of key skills in reading; every student should have the opportunity to enjoy what they are doing, even in school.

If it is not possible to have every student enjoy every piece read in the classroom (which is understandable), what is to be done to increase fluency and comprehension of text? Fluency is increased by rereading text, not by lowering text complexity. Is there space for rereading in my classroom? How does (or how should) that concept transfer to college courses, in or out of the college of education? If we know that rereading texts improves fluency and comprehension, why are we not doing anything to encourage it? Even now I have trouble seeing rereading as a valuable use of my time, although I have personally experienced how drastically it can change perspectives of a piece and improve understanding. It is presumably educational for students to have the opportunity to experience the increased understanding that often comes with rereading. Harder than their acceptance of this concept, though, is finding the time to incorporate rereading into curriculum and lesson plans. It is easy to say this now before I actually enter a classroom with students, but it is so important for students to comprehend literature. Certainly, their understanding is more important than the ability to say that the class finished the required curriculum or made it through every book on the list. It is possible to meet all standards and objectives without forcing students to move on without comprehension.

In relation to the great benefits of rereading, where did in-class reading go? With college comes an assumption of homework and out of class reading, and theoretically upper level high school courses prepare students for the upgrade in homework amounts they will experience. College students are paying [out of their parent's pockets, in many cases] to take courses and gain something from them, so it should go without saying that college students will be inclined to do the work assigned for them. As anyone who went through college will tell you, this is a foolish assumption. It is also the basis for the in-class reading time many high school teachers provide, insuring that some of the assigned reading is indeed completed. Is this a valid practice? Is there enough time in the period or space in the curriculum to make in-class reading worthwhile? When I look into my future classroom, I can imagine the possibility of infrequent class periods devoted to individual reading or even reading aloud. It will not always be a good solution; a teacher must be able to read the progress of the class as a whole and as individual students to make decisions to best suit their needs in conjunction with curriculum.

IV. Which assessment methods are most effective?

After discussing my experiences and overall worries regarding students and teaching, the real-world applications of teaching procedures take precedence. Unit and lesson plans, classroom management, and a veritable collection of other themes are mildly concerning, but my biggest personal conflicts come in the arena of assessment. While some amount of evaluation is needed to provide a basis for curriculum changes and appraise student learning, the incredible pressure and focus of many on grades and scores is appalling and disheartening. In this society where grades are revered, class and assignment scores become intensely personal and often become more like reflections of students themselves as opposed to proof of student learning. I believe it will be part of my job as an educator to remove as much stigma from grades as possible and try to make grades about what they are meant to be about, student assessment, as opposed to a judgment or life sentence.

Grading: Objective vs. Subjective

What method of grading will best accomplish this goal? How can I ensure students are receiving grades that accurately reflect their learning and effort? ...

One of my professors this semester grades subjectively. In his syllabus, the grading policy section explicitly states, "The instructor does not use any kind of rubrics; only his best and fairest judgment squarely based on your work during the semester. If you need 'feedback,' let the instructor know" (Reppas). The grade for the course is entirely based on how this man feels about my work and remembers my cooperation in class discussion. Keeping in mind that every single student in his class has taken and passed "Classroom Assessment," is this really a valid way to assess?

When I began this semester—and even this entry—I was quite opposed to Dr. Reppas' grading policy. I was angered that he would have the audacity to grade us based on nothing more than his own judgment. But as the semester progressed, I realized it was not the subjectivity of his grading I minded. In his classroom, nothing is ever handed in. This professor is not grading subjectively—he is not grading at all! Never have I felt the true significance of assignments and grades as harshly as I have in this particular class. Without any type of solid feedback—objectively point-based or not—students and teachers are unable to gauge progression or learning.

This subjective vs. objective grading battle has been a popular one in every class that has covered assessment, but every discussion tends towards objective. What is this focus on anti-emotion we are being taught to have in response to our students? Grading objectively is taking a step away from all the individual characteristics and abilities of students that make them unique, and giving them some type of score based on their performance in accordance with how their peers performed and how we believe they should be able to perform. Should that be our goal?

Everything is so focused on competition. Our entire scholastic model is based around a win-lose mentality. Teachers are labeled as "easy" or "hard" graders, and it is generally assumed that only the "hard" graders are truly teaching. If anyone can get an A, hard work must not be required, because presumably not everyone is able or willing to put a decent amount of effort into a class. According to everything I have been taught, a good teacher has a nice, standard bell curve of grades: one student receives an A, others receive Cs and worse. I am not advocating for a policy in which every student who puts in minimal effort will get a top grade because they tried, but then, on the other hand, why not? If grades are based on what a student has learned, shouldn't every student who has put in effort relative to their ability level be expected to receive a good grade, or at least pass? We pre-service educators are being taught that every student is unique and differentiated education is heralded as the only effective

way to teach to every student. But concurrently, we turn around and are almost across the board encouraged, nay, told, to grade objectively. Every student needs to be taught a slightly (or significantly) different way, but they can and should be assessed identically and held to the same standards. These typical grades are based on a standardized product as opposed to individualized effort as well as product.

Is there a place for both subjective and objective grading in the classroom? Yes, but as with almost everything, I feel there has to be a middle ground. I can't wrap my mind around an exclusively objective grading system, nor am I sure such a thing is possible. Not only is it extremely ineffective to grade assignments—essays, for example—objectively (i.e. focusing solely on aspects of writing that can be objectively graded, like grammar, vocabulary, and even handwriting as opposed to the depth of thought, writing style, and/or effort), it is detrimental to students to choose to see and teach only what can be objectively graded. And, when you get right down to it, everything is subjective. Even the pieces we read in English Lit courses have been chosen by someone for us to read because they believed that there was something worthwhile within the prose. Not everyone sees value in "Huckleberry Finn," but it is still considered by some to be the great American novel. The world is subjective, so why shouldn't my grading be?

We are constantly living in fear of being called judgmental, racist, stereotypical, or favoring. While this mindset has benefits (i.e. stopping people from encouraging their own biased thoughts further), it also has the potential to halt instructional and beneficial changes and discussions about real problems. If I give students a subjective grade, I have been taught to believe I will be giving in to my emotions and non work-related feelings about that particular student. How would I back up my grades? The more I think about it, though, the more foolish it seems.

Subjectivity does not mean without rules or methodology. Grading is still based on student work, not favoritism, as it is often assumed. If/when I incorporate a largely subjective grading policy within my classrooms, it will be for the benefit of all my students, not just those to whom I feel favorable. Grading subjectively gives students a wider range of possibilities. If they are no longer being graded within strict boundaries they have a freer range of opportunity because I will not be grading them on their adherence to specifics. Each individual grade will still have substantial backing, and I will consistently be able to explain any given grade. But because every student is different, learning looks different for every student.

Standardized Testing

As any teacher will tell you, the grading battle involves more than simply choosing to use one grading method over another. There is a systematic structure to the way grades and test scores are perceived in our society, and I believe it is detrimental to education, the very thing grades are supposed to promote. Is it possible to educate without grades? Is there any way our grading system can be restructured to improve the relationship between assessment and learning? ...

I have been thinking a lot lately about testing. In my heart, I am so opposed to multiple choice, right-answer wrong-answer tests it makes me want to scream. I cannot believe that jumping through these hoops does any student any good, much less the student who finds himself/herself unable to perform to the standard that the government deems acceptable or at grade level.

As a student I hate(d) taking tests. Part of it is the stigma our society has formed around evaluation. Just the word test (or quiz, examination, assessment, etc.) has the power to make anyone who has been through the public school system shudder. Students in college sit at tables in the

overcrowded library through the wee hours of the morning the weeks before final tests, cramming for exams that have been looming over their heads the entire semester. That is not effective learning or teaching.

Looking at the base problem, we need to shift our thinking about assessment. As it is today, students are more focused on the grade they obtain at the end of the course than the learning that should be taking place within it. Students end up learning more about how to cram than they do about the content of the course, their individual learning methods, or life. Why do we teach? We teach to give students opportunities, to broaden their worlds and their lives, to make a difference. Are tests helping or hindering this goal?

I was talking to a friend earlier this week about my distaste for testing and grades, and I found myself thinking about an idyllic school where there are none of those things. Students would come to class relaxed and ready to learn, because they are not stressed out about bringing home a shiny A and because they know that their teachers are committed to teaching them things that are relevant and important, otherwise, why teach them? At the end of this little fantasy, I realized that it would probably not work as well as I imagined. Parents and communities need justification and verification that the schools are teaching young minds something worthwhile, and test scores and grades are tangible and understood ways to convey the message. But it will only be when grades are accurately reflecting student learning that they will be fulfilling their purpose and effectively helping teacher, students, and parents work to improve.

So how can these lofty goals be reached by a relatively inexperienced teacher such as myself? Rubrics seem to be a fairly straightforward way to grade; the teacher has complete control over what particular pieces of the assignment are graded and how important they are to the overall grade, students can see the rubric beforehand to know what to focus on, and there is then solid evidence as to

why any student received a particular grade. But even the best made rubric does not solve the real problem. I know from personal experience that the presence of a rubric does not mean necessarily that any student will learn what is supposed to be taught by the assignment. A rubric also does not change the presence of a self-defining grade circled at the bottom of the assignment.

The only way to make grades matter less is to make grades matter less. In order for students to focus more on learning than on the grade, take grades out of the equation. I don't know how possible this is in a public school system that requires quarterly grades or is partnered with parents who want online grades updated every week. In a situation in which a teacher could take control and talk with parents and administrators about the benefits of doing a unit without grades, it might be possible to separate learning from grading. However, at the end of the day (or quarter), a grade would still have to be submitted. The obvious answer would be to give As to all students who participated fully, but what about those who didn't? Would parents, administrators, or students trust the judgment of the teacher enough to allow grades to be placed entirely in his/her hands? What if a brave teacher created this type of setup, and gave every worthy student an A regardless of outside perceptions? I feel like it would take a little while to implement; initially, there would be students who would be so shocked with the concept of no grades they would test the resolve of the teacher, and not do any work just to see what happened. But after a while, when it became clear there really was no grade penalty for not doing anything, I believe that the inquisitive side of the student would out: if there is no grade attached, why are we doing this activity? It must not be pointless, so maybe I should participate.

Perhaps this is merely the dream of a burnt-out student who is sick of stressing out over grades and worrying about GPA. I fear oftentimes that my views of students are overly naïve, and a plan like this would fail in more than just the administrative realm. But even if I never use a grading scale as outlandish as the one above, I imagine I will be an easy grader just the same.

V. How can teachers move past content and be truly effective educators?

Teachers do more than teach content. Through example, students (consciously or not) learn about life through their teachers. Teachers must be at least partially responsible for the eventual ways their students choose to deal with their lives. An inspiring teacher can change the way a student views a problem, and, more importantly, a solution.

Either-or Mentality

After reading an article by David Cohen, I began thinking about my opinions regarding some major problems and potential solutions of various educational debates. Through writing and thinking about problem-solving, I came to the realization that our society is overwhelmingly either-or, and that I do not believe that this should be continued ...

As inspired by the article "What Would It Take to Change Your Mind" by David Cohen, I am trying to think of issues I am holding on to on principle instead of validity of the issue itself. It is unfortunately easy to realize that I feel this way about far too many important education issues.

In fact, I am currently in a class in which we discuss specific issues each class meeting. Instead of giving students different angles to the same debate, this class encourages steadfast clinging to one particular side. While I believe that it is important to have opinions, the particular structure of the class (fighting as opposed to debating) promotes adherence to an individual initial side of the debate at all costs, regardless of the facts. The class size is such that not every student is able to give her/his full opinion on a topic; even if a student has the opportunity to share an opinion, there is little space for reflection or reconsideration within the confines of the class time. This has created strong animosity

between sides of every debate and created pictures of every student that enhance the belief that an individual can only agree with one angle of an issue.

The fundamental problem behind these often unsupported yet staunchly held quasi-beliefs of teachers and students alike is the severe either-or mentality so many of us have in regard to argument. Our society has taught us to believe that there are only two ways of doing any one thing and specifically, one side is right while the other is wrong: Democrat and Republican, subjective and objective, constructivism and behaviorism. We tend to place ourselves in a group or label ourselves, often in an attempt to separate from the "other," and blindly follow the issues of that particular group. This leads to assumptions, stereotypes, and adherence with opinions we as individuals have never seriously considered. For the sake of our future we—especially as teachers—need to begin breaking out of this mold. We are part of a world that encompasses more variety in viewpoints, ideas, and creative thought than any one person could ever know; it is essential for our students to be given open eyes with which to view the world, hampered as little as possible by our own beliefs about the world or about teaching.

That said, I am going to take a step to change my own opinions and/or open myself to potential change. As modeled by Cohen, I am going to attempt to make an initial list of these "strongly felt, weakly held" opinions, detail where I may have picked them up, and why they may be hazardous to the education of my future students.

1. Standardized tests are unequivocally negative.

   Even when I was an elementary student, I hated standardized tests. Hard pressed will be the individual who tries to find someone who didn't. There was always such a stigma associated with them, and even though I saw every test as a serious opportunity to fail, these tests sent in taped booklets with special bubble sheets requiring even a specific type of lead were especially daunting. In my memory, classroom teachers never spent an inordinate amount of time

preparing for tests, but the time we spent taking them sticks out harshly in my mind. The pressure to get a high score was incredible. Neither my parents nor my teachers encouraged this, but even as a kid I knew that in a few months, the scores from this test would come in a big envelope, and if I got a bad score, everyone would know how unintelligent I was. No one ever told me this; they didn't have to. It was known throughout the class who got high scores and who didn't, and the anxiety built through the allotted test time. To this day, I do not believe I, or anyone else who was forced to take these types of tests, learned anything from the experience, except how to take a standardized test. Did it really gauge our learning? Did our teachers change their teaching styles at all in reaction to the scores? I will probably never know these answers about my particular teachers, but I do know I have sustained a strong hatred of standardized tests throughout my education.

This belief, as true as it may be, puts my students at risk of picking up my bias. Even if I don't see any benefit in standardized testing or even going over testing material/content, I would not want my students to suffer (i.e. get lower scores than they otherwise would) merely because I have a personal vendetta against the government's standardized testing policies. Strangely, I have heard very little about the abundance (or lack thereof) of standardized testing in our classrooms today. Is this because they are magically not used anymore, because every professor assumes that by going through public education systems we must all already understand how they work, or are our professors using their own biases against standardized testing to prevent us from learning about them?

2. Standards themselves are detrimental to unique teaching styles.

I used to believe this wholeheartedly. I felt as though standards would be commanding the proper way to teach as well as the exact content. However, the more study I have done on current standards, the less applicable this statement appears. In fact, at this point in my

education (thanks to a specific few experiences with standards writers themselves) I encourage standards adherence. Standards provide a starting block for any teacher to jump from. Looking at Iowa's core standards, instead of directing a particular teacher's methods, they are purposefully vague enough to allow and encourage individual modification and interpretation while still ensuring every student has a similar base of background knowledge.

Still, not all standards are good. Every teacher has individual skills and methods enhancing their ability to teach. Without the opportunities to display these skills, teaching potential will be affected. For example, I really hate "Huckleberry Finn," and I believe that I will be able to successfully teach my students about that period in literature and American history without using that particular text. However, if I were to teach in a district requiring all sophomores to read "Huck Finn," I and my students would be in some trouble. I have read it, I would read it again, and we would all muddle through. But just thinking about teaching that specific book makes my stomach turn, and I can guarantee that I would not be as effective a teacher while trying to push a text I do not even believe in on my students.

3. Differentiated instruction is the most effective way to teach.

Every class I have taken about education has emphasized the importance of differentiated education. To me, it absolutely makes the most sense. Every student is different, so why shouldn't my teaching styles relate to these differences? The tricky part comes when I realize that I have only been taught (in terms of lecture and discussion, not observing practice) to use differentiated instruction. Are educational practices like religion: 99% location, 1% choice? The biggest thing I can do teach my students to the best of my ability is keep learning, reading, writing, and talking about new and different methods of teaching. Someday, maybe sooner than I anticipate, differentiated education will probably not be the biggest thing in

education. Whether then next big theory will be better for anyone is impossible to say at this point, but it is essential that we maintain open minds. Maybe it will revolutionize education as we know it, maybe not. But we will never know without a fighting chance.

This has been the entire point of this entry, to encourage myself to keep an open mind with regard to educational practices I may not currently agree with. The course I wrote of earlier is quite the opportunity to expand on these idealistic goals. Since it has been set up in such a bipartisan format, against my wishes or comments, it can be incredibly easy to see the other side of any issue. The harder part by far is to try and see it from a completely unbiased angle.

This very problem has been getting me down recently. I have felt so angry in response to other students and ideas because I just don't agree. That is not a healthy mindset! It is an intriguing juxtaposition, however. All my life I have been encouraged to be passionate about something, to get involved and have opinions. Now, I find myself with plenty of opinions and a large helping of anger and misunderstanding to go with them. I am not going to throw my ideas out the window. But perhaps there is a way to make myself less intense, more accepting, less judgmental. Not only will a change of that order be welcome to my internal rage meter, it will definitely make me a better teacher.

Collaboration and Reflection: Potentially Improving Teachers

While I have almost completed my teacher education program, I have not yet had the opportunity to be a part of a teacher community. I feel vaguely uneducated speaking to teacher improvement as opposed to teacher education changes. However, this is the perfect example of the progress of this compilation of writing. While I do not have an excess of experience in this particular area yet, as I get a job and begin learning more about teachers and their preparation and reflection practices, this will

be a piece I can begin to revise and reshape. As of now, this is a very brief train of thought piece to be improved upon.

Teachers should constantly be reading and writing and learning. It would be so easy to fall into a teaching rut. Write! Read! Discuss! What about teacher book groups or writing workshops? Even team meetings where the point is to discuss teaching styles, new ideas, etc. as opposed to administration, budget, or whatever else is discussed in those meetings I will soon be attending. What about enjoyment? Should that be an important consideration, too? Honestly, the majority of feelings I hear from students regarding teaching are ones of negativity regarding their chosen career path. I can't believe we have to do this assignment, I can't wait until the weekend, I have this super irritating student, and so on. What if the atmosphere shifted from one of criticism and disdainful trudging through a sea of busy work to one of collaborative education? By the time students enter college, they have been immersed in education for at least thirteen years; they have opinions and beliefs about teaching, and have some reason as to why they want to pursue a career in teaching. If we worked to make students opinions valued and taken into account, maybe overall opinions of teaching would become more positive. Who wants an angry teacher, anyway?

Conclusion

When I sat down to write a conclusion to this project, I quickly realized such a thing would be nearly impossible. The very nature of reflection is to induce continuous thinking and writing about a topic, and this project is no different. My thinking about a variety of themes has been changed throughout this semester, and it would be detrimental to me and my future students to let the work behind these mental shifts stop now. The purpose here is to encourage reflection as a style of continuing and constant education, not as occasional journal entries or publishable material.

I used to believe if I had an opinion or viewpoint on a certain topic, it would be a waste of time for me to think or write about it by myself, because I would merely be restating my own thoughts repeatedly. My standpoint could not have changed more. I have discovered that writing does not only have the potential to enhance my initial beliefs, it has immense potential to change my mind even if I am the only one contributing thoughts to the discussion. Through this semester of writing, the more I wrote, the more I began to realize how many different ways there are to do anything. More importantly, without an open mind, I am losing worlds of information. This is an especially striking realization for a potential teacher. If any teacher is to stick to one method of doing anything, his or her students are losing so much. This is bigger than even differentiation. Reflection quickly becomes a way of life, past teaching methods, grading styles, and all other aspects of education. Regardless of individual choices, with reflection as a primary part of education, a better teacher will be made.

This project has been formative for me, and it is my goal to spread some of what I have gained to the greater teaching community. I not only feel like I have the ability to explore teaching more effectively, I am more prepared to teach. The ideas I have formed and solidified throughout this semester are stronger by way of my focus and reflection upon them, but they are concurrently more malleable. Reflection has created an ability to be more open to different ways of thinking; as soon as I discover a

different way of solving a problem or teaching, I write about it and explore through text. Think about the possibilities: if every teacher consistently reflected about teaching, they would have stronger reasoning behind educational choices as well as the ability to change methods without haste or uncertainty. Students would be better suited, because teachers would have a place to reflect over the classroom choices they were making and the relation of those practices to their actual students. Administrators would be better informed about what was working and not within their policies and buildings, especially if teachers had consistent opportunities to share their reflections with their principals and school boards. Reflection does not only create something tangible to submit, it often brings about serious issues that need to be dealt with.

Now is the time to encourage reflection! With near-daily headlines about failing American schools, it is high time for teachers and students to make their opinions known. Even if creative non-fiction does not reach the government or national newspapers, it can be a powerful catalyst for connections between teachers, students, administration, and communities. There are too many benefits of reflection through creative non-fiction for the teaching world to ignore. We can make education more effective, more collaborative, and more beneficial, and creative non-fiction can be an incredibly valuable part of the journey.