

'Substituting' Becomes a New Way of Knowing

Creating a Different Third Space in a Self- Study of English Language Arts Teacher Education

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A substitute is one who stands in the place of another: the Latin *statuere* derives from the root *stare* — to stand, with an implication of stability and constancy in the etymology. There are many substitutions for “real” teaching built into the work of preparing future teachers: theory largely substitutes for practice, as do vicarious experiences, like the stories told to pre-service teachers, or videos they watch of classrooms, or texts they read outlining teaching strategies.

When teachers-in-training are required to create formal and detailed lesson plans, these are substitutes for the myriad ways practicing teachers prepare to deliver lessons, and the adjustments and decisions they make based on student feedback and teaching experience. Formal lesson planning also substitutes, in a methods class, for research papers and other products more typical in undergraduate education. The lesson plan is used as evidence that the extensive theory and philosophy of teaching promoted by the instructor will be incorporated into future teacher practices.

In this paper, the authors refer to themselves in the third person, as Laura and Natalia. We are both instructors and researchers in this self-study, and we use these labels to clarify the different stances we take in our work together. We refer to the students enrolled in the English Language Arts Methods course described here as pre-service teachers (PSTs). When a reference is made to students, we mean middle- and high-school students.

In the case of the undergraduate PSTs discussed here, substitution can also describe their evolving identities: the methods course asks them to substitute thinking like a student with thinking like a teacher. In this study, some PSTs were well on their way to a first teaching position: they planned to graduate, certify, and be employed in local schools in a few months.

Others were earlier in the program, barely acquainted with classrooms. And some of the classmates were dabbling: heading for graduate school or on other pathways, but wondering about a teaching future enough to enroll in the class. And if substitution can mean changing comfortable roles for new adventures, it is also part of the current professional journeys of both authors. Laura, having failed to earn tenure in a Research 1 institution, is imagining exchanging her autonomous habits for the inexorable schedule of high school English teaching. Natalia, with a Ph.D. and recent experience as a literacy coach in her district, is imagining new opportunities in higher education. Whereas we were once professor and graduate student, we are now friends, wanting to explore the benefits of collegiality and collaboration. We both love our work, are mindful of its costs, and wonder about the next steps.

In this self-study, we examine a temporary substitution of one teacher educator (Natalia) for another (Laura) in a secondary English Language Arts Methods class. We use the intentionality of self-study to examine this substitution as a third space for generating knowledge of our practices. We describe and reflect on the learning that the short-term “standing in” made possible for both instructors: we consider the impact of the substitution on the pre-service teachers we temporarily shared in the course, and the potential implications of our substituting-partnership for teacher education.

Substitution and the Third Space

It is reasonable to think of student teaching itself as a substitution, where the veteran stands away so that the novice can stand up and try the work of teaching for herself. Unlike in the experience of a substitute teacher— where students may weaponize unfamiliarity with names, procedures, and materials— typically pre-service teachers are protected. The process of trial, error, and reflection under the watchful eyes and commentary of a veteran teacher and a supervisor/observer is a guided immersion into classroom teaching provided by the educator preparation program. Studies describe this trio of people as creating a third space of learning: the intersections and relationships among university personnel, mentor teachers, and future teachers (Cuenca et al., 2011; McDonough, 2014; Taylor et al., 2014). In this study, we consider a different third space, one created ad hoc between a university instructor, her temporary substitute, and the PSTs in a methods class. Laura’s opportunity to work at the University of Jordan for two weeks of the 14-week semester provided the impetus for the study, when she requested help — the substitution — of Natalia, a recent Ph.D. graduate who taught in a nearby school district.

Despite previous work together on a journal article, and the first instructor’s having served as a member of the second’s dissertation committee, the researchers had never before had such a good reason to consider together the “competing centers of gravity” (Smagorinsky, et al., 2013) that produce “a kaleidoscope of perspectives on effective instruction” (p. 147) in English Language Arts teacher education. Laura invited Natalia not only to substitute but also to engage in self-study. For Laura, the opportunity for professional dialogue about preparing teachers, and the window into the real work of high school teaching, was worth the vulnerability that comes with welcoming a substitute: opening up a course design to scrutiny. For Natalia, the excitement about exploring techniques for teaching secondary English was worth the nervousness about making this interaction helpful and not overwhelming to the PSTs. What could she share about her experiences that would be most useful? How should she best support their work on class assignments? How could she best connect their college learning to their future teaching? These considerations guided Natalia’s interactions with Laura’s class. The instructors expected the “substitute” would need minimal acculturation (Kleyn & Valle, 2014), although they recognized that the class was a particular group of people and that a culture was created by its being designed and owned, in a sense, by Laura as the instructor of record. Both instructors were interested in constructivist and even transformative teaching of and by teachers while recognizing its difficulties (Sockmand & Sharma, 2008).

Methodology

The aim of the study was to expand meaningfully on the opportunity to teach together if asynchronously, through self-study processes. The researchers sought to understand the value of a new third space, one which bridged teacher preparation and classroom practices while engaging pre-service teachers as a group.

Data Sources

The two instructors/researchers agreed to not only plan for the substitution but also to think carefully about the affordances of, and constraints to, this new third space: to reflect on and thus better understand what the unusual opportunity for professional dialogue afforded them each. As both English teachers and social scientists, the researchers for this self-study recognized and valued the power of mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990; Woodson, 2014). They documented their experiences so that these would yield self-directed insights and perspectives on each other's work. The researchers first collected evidence of the planning and meeting related to the planned substitute teaching (Grimmett, 2016). Their data sources included (1) texts created in Blackboard that established the curriculum and activities, especially readings in the course; (2) texts created by each instructor to design and carry out the class sessions (teaching notes, PowerPoint presentations); (3) pre-service teachers' comments collected through a Google Form designed according to the "Bless, Press, Address" feedback format. Natalia learned this protocol for guiding feedback at her district's reading/writing workshop institute and also employed it with her high school students during peer review sessions. By using this format with the PSTs, she both invited their feedback and shared a strategy that they would be able to employ in their future teaching. In addition, the researchers preserved such data sources as exchanged emails and contemporaneous notes from their face-to-face dialogues before and after the substitution. Finally, to gauge their shared impact on the future teachers, the researchers reviewed the formal unit/lesson plans that collaborating groups of the PSTs submitted at the end of the semester.

Analysis

To both experience and theorize the "third space" of substitution, the researchers engaged in *dialogue* to make meaning of individual and co-constructed experiences (Hamilton, et al., 2016). These dialogues became the basis for understanding each other's unique professional landscapes (Craig, 2004). The researchers enjoyed long, wide-ranging, open-ended, and trusting face-to-face professional communications before and after the two class sessions where Natalia was the instructor for the course, then shared the drafting of this research report in order to describe and reflect on how the third space they created had useful implications for their practices.

Findings from a New Third Space

Within the third space created by one instructor substituting for another for two class sessions and the valuable professional discussions surrounding this asynchronous collaboration, the researchers found multiple topics for mutual insight, learning, and reflection. Their *documents* and *dialogues* revealed and expanded their thinking about English Language Arts as a content field as well as the strategies and challenges of guiding preparation for teaching in that field. While the usual "third space" in teacher education is focused on coaching and problem-solving for a specific student teacher, the professional dialogue, in this case, created a space that tried to account for serving a group of 30 diverse students. This new third space felt less urgent and more reflective; less about immediate problem solving and more about identifying issues worthy of longer-term dialogue and inquiry. Thus in this third space, the researchers enjoyed a sort of luxury in making time to consider what emerged as four important considerations for their practices.

1. The Validity of the Work Required of Pre-Service Teachers in the Course. The

instructors/researchers considered the validity of the requirements of the major project in the course. Pre-service teachers were tasked with designing teaching strategies and materials for approaching a canonical text through a reading/writing workshop model. In the course, the workshop model was largely defined by using the Gallagher and Kittle text *180 Days*; however, the third-space dialogue of the researchers revealed a reality that there are many versions of “the workshop model” in practice in school districts where the PSTs were placed.

The researchers found they had a new working definition for *validity*: the extent to which activities and requirements in the methods course prepared pre-service teachers for authentic situations in teaching. In addition to comparing what different schools and districts required (for instance, submission of lesson plans to a principal or other administrator), discussing the validity of the methods course assignments led to considerations of the nature of high school teaching, especially in the age of accountability. There are requirements that teacher education professors can choose to ignore, but classroom teachers cannot.

Reviewing the final units that the pre-service teachers created, the researchers found that the PSTs were well versed in the language of the Texas Standards and very aware of testing mandates, especially because many of the future teachers were the product of the regime themselves. The teacher education program certainly acknowledged the reality of state standards and required formal lesson plans to include them. Laura would characterize the College of Education stance in general as seeing state testing as necessary but flawed. But in the third-space dialogue, Laura learned much more about the state assessment’s question design and what happens when a thoughtful teacher (Natalia) is strategically focused on what the state test offers, rather than what it constrains.

Natalia’s approach, a result of developing Texas-test-styled assessments as a literacy coach, is that the state test can be a helpful tool for effective lesson design. While acknowledging the limitations of the multiple-choice format, she saw value in the sophistication and clarity of the test’s questions, most of which connect an author’s choices to the text’s meaning or purpose, a design feature that can be effectively used to focus instruction on sophisticated literary and rhetorical analysis skills. For instance, preparing students to respond to questions like “What does this excerpt reveal about character?” is helpful — perhaps even critical — for instructional planning. It will not be sufficient for students to simply identify, for instance, a literary term like *metaphor*: students need to learn to see and describe how a metaphor conveys meaning by expanding understanding, making connections to other ideas, etc.

The researchers’ professional dialogue about the relationship between assessment and planning led to further analysis of the validity of the work in the methods course. How might course requirements engage pre-service teachers in thoughtful consideration of their role in motivating and guiding students to success? The overall theme of the course assignments is that PSTs should engage and empower adolescents (from the Gallagher and Kittle text, as discussed further below), and Natalia shared her struggles with wanting to set high expectations for her high school students. While she “love[d] the kids and want[ed] them to be happy,” she also was determined that her intervention course truly prepared them for the state test they are required to pass. She intended for her instruction to be less about “corralling and hoping” that the students were learning, and more about providing clear expectations and direct feedback about student successes and failures. She wanted her students to be less in the “comfort zone” and more demanding of themselves. Together the researchers wondered: what assignments could PSTs complete, what instruction and assessment could they learn to design, that would enable them to be similarly rigorous?

2. Strategies for Recognizing and Supporting the Developing Professional Identities of Pre-Service Teachers. In the third-space dialogue, the instructors/researchers began to articulate the extent to which pre-service teachers learned to think like teachers, and they wondered about how class activities and assignments promoted this thinking. They considered two incidents with the PSTs and what these might reveal about emerging professional dispositions. Because the course met in the evening, and the instructor substitution happened in the midst of the baseball championships, both instructors felt the PSTs were distracted by score feeds from their phones and the desire for the class sessions to be over as quickly as possible once the first inning started. In addition, when Laura returned to the class, she was somewhat dismayed that, while the PSTs were quick to praise Natalia and say they were happy to have had her teaching the class, they were mostly focused on finding out more about the end of the semester and what papers and projects would be due when. These PSTs did not seem to be thinking like teachers.

Both instructors wondered what would convince PSTs that the course represents precious time for finding and reflecting on valuable ideas and materials — time that would be a luxury in the heat of real teaching. The instructors felt that PSTs should be more pro-active, less passive, in this stage of preparation for teaching. Laura had hoped that having Natalia substitute in the course would inspire the PSTs to better recognize just how complex and demanding high school teaching is. Discussing this hope led to the instructors' wondering what such "recognition" would look like in the assignments required in the methods class. Laura noted that her rubric for assessing the canonical text units was already many pages in length. She, like other methods instructors, used such rubrics to delineate and explain the many dimensions required in the PST unit planning. Both instructors agreed that the descriptors and indicators were appropriate and comprehensive, but worried about overwhelming the PSTs. Would evaluating additional dimensions of "professional dispositions" help or hinder them in enacting high professional standards?

3. Questioning Whether the Technical Language of the Profession Reveals a Teaching Philosophy. The instructors/researchers recognized that the *terminology* the PSTs used for different instructional strategies in their lesson planning revealed implicit, perhaps sometimes unconscious, and occasionally contradictory philosophies of teaching. For instance, Natalia was struck by how the PSTs inaccurately labeled activities in their lesson plans, such as "minilessons" that in fact looked far more like lectures, and "formative assessments" that seemed to require students to do extended analysis while still in the middle of reading. The instructors were also both amused and a little horrified by PST planning that included reading aloud the entire text of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but they realized that these were all examples of PSTs espousing one set of ideas but planning for another.

The researchers considered a related issue of bridging theory and practice — how school districts across the area were struggling to put in place student-centered reading/writing workshop models in ELA classrooms. Teacher adoption of such practices seemed to be constrained by the number of "moving parts" (and much new terminology) that must all be effectively balanced in the workshop model of instruction. These included the amount of time required to prepare effective mentor texts and models; and the purposeful sequencing of multiple minilessons, particularly when teachers are planning in teams. Laura also noted that this complexity in the reading/writing workshop model made it difficult to explain and promote all of its parts to the pre-service teachers. It seemed understandable that terminology could become overwhelming to the PSTs, who sought to show their knowledge of many teaching strategies through their incorporation of them in the required canonical text units. The instructors/researchers also noted the challenge of grading these works when the strategies for making the units usable as "real" planning guides (such as including hyperlinks to key

documents) made them complex to navigate.

4. The Authenticity of the Collaboration and Reflection Requirements Built into the Assignments. The instructors/researchers found that their collaboration in this study led them to further consider the collaboration that was required of the pre-service teachers as they completed the major unit assignment. They noted how the PSTs had divvied up the work, some more successfully than others. The researchers realized that the strategy of “dividing and conquering” the work required for designing a complex unit was not unusual in schools, because teachers are working together to meet many goals under severe time constraints, and splitting up planning and playing to each other’s strengths could be a good thing. Nonetheless, the researchers saw that some of the units were disjointed, with seemingly wavering, if not confusing, purposes for reading a text.

As a result, the instructors/researchers determined that pre-service teachers should plan as well as reflect on their collaborative processes for a unit’s design. For instance, in order to become aware of their unit-writing processes, the PSTs might be asked to share with each other about their individual strategies for completing a research paper. Did they tend to be more deductive or inductive? Did they typically write from an outline, or create one after initial drafting? Who started with a thesis? Who began with an end in mind? Becoming more conscious of these writerly decisions could help PSTs in multiple ways by reminding them that different learners (and teachers!) had different strategies for learning and creating — including instructional units — and by allowing them to share strengths, as well as build upon them through collaboration.

Even as the instructors/researchers were collaborating in a third space to specifically meet the needs of the particular course through this substitution of instructors, they also found great pleasure in speaking seriously about practice and their ideas about what best serves PSTs and, ultimately, their students. They hoped to make room, time, and occasion for PSTs to do more reflection on their collaborations because they believed this would de-emphasize “playing the game of school” and promote learning the best professional moves that would serve PSTs in their school placements.

Discussion and Implications for Teacher Education from Studying a New Third Space

Adopting a self-study framework allowed the instructors/researchers to recognize important learning that arose through a third space of collaborative reflection on their individual but parallel situations. Through thinking carefully about substitution as a context for a third space, the instructors/researchers felt that their personal and professional struggles seemed less overwhelming and more meaningful. They found that they could coach each other, laughing about the aggravations, and feel encouraged rather than embittered. They helped each other recognize that much of their work in fact goes well and has positive results. Rather than focusing on problem-solving for specific pre-service teachers (as would happen in a “third space” during student teaching supervision), they used their third space to gain insights into their practices that would inform their future work in teacher education.

Four topics arose from the specifics of the course and led to a broader consideration of issues in teacher preparation and development, each of these seems worthy of further study:

1. They considered the validity of the requirements of the major project in the course. They wondered: When do methods courses (instructors) look at the content validity of assignments given to future teachers?
2. They wondered about the different indicators they saw of pre-service teachers learning to “think like teachers,” and considered the extent to which class activities and assignments promoted this thinking. They questioned to what extent teacher education programs defined and promoted “thinking like teachers” as an aspect of professional dispositions.
3. They recognized that the terminology for different instructional strategies that the PSTs used in their lesson planning reflected divergent philosophies of teaching. They wondered about the use of the language of standards in teacher preparation, and whether PSTs were encouraged to critically reflect on what state standards (for instance) reveal about teaching philosophies.
4. Their collaboration in the self-study led them to further consider the collaboration that was required of the PSTs in completing the major unit assignment. They asked: In a teacher preparation program, what kinds of real-world situations/contexts for teaching are (or are not) reflected in a methods-type class?

These questions also led to the possibility that a third space might open up opportunities for reciprocal questions. For instance, Natalia asked how a veteran teacher could get an “outside” perspective on her teaching and its validity in addition to student and administrator feedback. Could a third-space context be appropriate for teacher educators to share their perspectives on the lesson designs of veteran teachers?

Conclusion

Rather than waiting for a chance opportunity for one professional to substitute for the other, this study led us to think about ways we, as researchers and instructors, can systematically combine expertise to benefit future English Language Arts teachers (and ourselves).

We intend to seek further collaborative opportunities specifically around pedagogy for literature and writing. We discovered our shared belief in the value of purposefulness in English Language Arts teaching. For us, this means communicating with clarity our intentions as we design instruction and present materials. We discussed “wanting to make sure the students have a perception of our teaching — what we do and ask them to do — as neither chaotic nor random, even as it is being responsive to their needs.” For Natalia, the importance of thinking about purpose was captured in the questions the pre-service teachers had asked her about strategies for starting their literature units. We wondered about what assignments and experiences might help PSTs imagine how even the start of a unit — and certainly its design — could support students in learning to read a complex text and write about their analysis successfully. Beyond making the required statements of standards and objectives, we knew that we wanted the PSTs to strive for internal coherence, for communicating

many values for literacy in how they taught reading and writing to any level. For English Language Arts teachers, the challenge is for students to learn to read more insightfully and to express their ideas through increasingly sophisticated writing. The third space created in this study offers a powerful place for considering these challenges further, for the benefit of both veteran and pre-service teachers.

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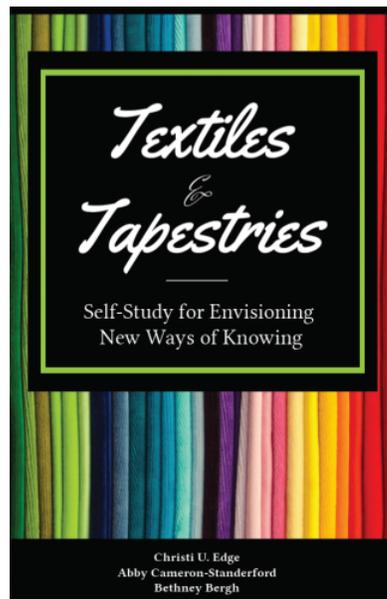
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