

Toward Engaging Communities of Practice within the English Classroom

Bill Kerns¹
Bea Bailey²
Clemson University

Author Note

Bill Kerns, Ph.D., is a researcher in the Master of Arts in Teaching Program in the Eugene T. Moore School of Education at Clemson University.

Beatrice Bailey, Ed.D., is a professor of Social Studies Education in the Eugene T. Moore School of Education at Clemson University.

Abstract: *This study describes how action research by pre-service teachers has had a transformative effect on efforts of an English teacher education program to promote student engagement. Collaboratively with pre-service teachers, the authors are researching authentic expressions of literary life involving the use of language arts content to produce texts and performances of personal and/or social worth. Students play at literary roles and personas such as directors or literary critics as they meet English language arts course standards in engaging ways. Curriculum design work discussed in this article includes planning in advance for the conditions of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) to be present.*

Keywords: *student teaching, unit design, engagement.*

One of the most rewarding aspects of teacher education is when we find ourselves stepping out and rethinking what we know (Langer, 2010) in the process of constructing new, shifting understandings. This article details how the research of one English pre-service teacher helps us to consider a fresh approach for encouraging young adults to participate in focused performances within makeshift literary communities in South

Carolina's upcountry English classrooms. We found that collaborating on classroom inquiry opened an opportunity for dialogue and that it helped us reflect on ways to improve our own practices as teacher educators (McLaughlin, Watts, & Beard, 2000).

Angela (pseudonym) was one of 12 English pre-service teachers who participated in this study. Each pre-service teacher was a senior at a research university located in the Southeastern US during the 2009-2010 School Year. They participated in a year-long English Language Arts Unit Design project. Each pre-service teacher strived to usher high school students into a makeshift literary community as they are absorbed in the use of the language arts (reading, writing, speaking, listening, enacting and viewing) and literary and informational texts to produce texts and performances of personal and/ or social worth. The

literary community that we wanted pre-service teachers to help students enter is a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which members share a common interest or, hopefully, a passion for an enterprise being pursued and they collaborate in order to improve in what they are doing. Communities of practice can be defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). The type of community of practice described in this article takes careful planning to foster and to maintain. Pre-service teachers spent the 2009 fall semester prior to student teaching forging a principled and integrated language arts unit of instruction (Cain, 1989; Smagorinsky, 2008) complete with rationale, resource palette, objectives and assessments in alignment with Bloom’s revised taxonomy as well as state standards, and one that culminates in student engagement within a community of practice.

The research efforts by pre-service teachers included (a) reflections related to the crafting and implementation of unit designs, (b) weekly research journal reflections, and (c) creation of their teacher-research essay. Dialogue among pre-service teachers, and with us as teacher educators, focused on seeking to understand and improve instructional practice (Swales, 1990). The reflections were based on a teacher-research essay in which the pre-service teachers responded to the following research questions in collaboration with other:

- To what extent did your students produce high quality texts? We understand texts in a global sense as we included, for example, reproduction of envisionments of literary texts.
- Did your students ever on occasion become engaged in their learning as understood by Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2006)? Did they ever get into a flow? Why or why not?

Angela’s action research shed light on how a pre-service teacher can help students enter a classroom literary community while fostering the possibility for students to be so engaged in activities that they may experience flow.

Methods

Once granted Institutional Review Board approval, we observed pre-service teachers as they designed, implemented and evaluated their unit designs. We also observed and supported them as they collected teacher and student artifacts for their action research essays. During the fall 2009 methods course and the spring 2010 capstone seminar course, 42 formal observations were conducted of pre-service teachers. We explored themes that emerged from the data in order to allow the pre-service teachers’ stories to be told. To enhance credibility and dependability, we made use of prolonged fieldwork, cross-examination of data by each author as co-researchers, participant review of vignettes, and we kept an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Because of space limitations, we selected one pre-service teacher, Angela who

had success with encouraging engagement in a community of practice related to the study of *Macbeth*, for vignettes related to both her instruction and her meaning making.

Qualitative methods engaged in by the pre-service teachers included participant observations, informal surveys of student interests, reflection on the results of formal and informal assessments, and the analysis of documents such as student artifacts from within a selected high school class. Classroom inquiry performed by pre-service teachers included:

- Reflection related to the crafting and implementation of unit designs.
- Weekly research journal reflections.
- Dialogue with university course instructors, classmates, the cooperating teacher, and the university supervisor.
- A teacher research essay.

A Pre-service teacher Fosters an Engaging Community of Practice

In early February of 2010 Angela launched a *Macbeth* unit designed to help high school seniors become inspired Shakespearean directors as they assumed the roles and solved the problems related to putting on scenes from the enduring tragedy. Angela greeted a group of 20 students in a technical preparation class within a small, rural high school in northwest South Carolina. She had designed a unit of instruction that could help them take on the roles of Shakespearean scholars, actors, critics and ultimately directors. Angela encouraged critical engagement with a unit that called for students to take on literary roles. In the following excerpt from her teacher research essay, Angela expressed her intention of fostering student engagement by helping students to shuck resistance they may at first feel toward Shakespeare's play:

I chose to create a unit of engaging literary enterprises that would engage the students as ACTIVE (emphasis by Angela) learners as opposed to passive listeners. The unit erased too-cool-for-school inhibitions and created involved scholars. Students were ready to participate in exploring the non-verbal communication, body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice that contribute to a stimulating performance.

Engagement would be encouraged through physical movement. The ideas discussed around the theme of "Thirst for Power" were made available to students in active and sensory ways through drama. Angela shared these goals and assessment possibilities within her unit design that she developed the semester before she was to begin teaching it in the public school. As she launched her unit in February, she shared a student-friendly outline of her unit. In figure 1, note how she emphasizes the fun that these all but finished seniors could have as they engage in the activities.

Figure 1: *Macbeth* expectations guide.

Figure 1: Macbeth Expectations Guide
<p>Expectations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keeping up with the readings is very important in the success of this unit. 2. Participation in all class activities is absolutely necessary—our activities are meant to make this text easier and more fun for you. 3. Because William Shakespeare’s plays were written to be performed, you will be expected to get up and be active! <p>It’s time to become the active learner that you were always meant to be!</p> <p>Items that will be turned in and graded.</p> <p>Macbeth log—this log is very important because it will help you organize the scenes and become a critical thinker about the play. It will set the foundation for all of your other activities, so put some effort into it! You will be required to summarize each scene (some scenes will be combined) and respond to the scene. Sometimes I will guide you in your responses, and sometimes it will be your own personal response. Make sure you take note of which will be expected! (You will receive clearer directions later.) These will be taken up and graded at the end of each Act.</p> <p>In-class essay—you will be writing an in-class essay on the role of evil within the play <i>Macbeth</i>. We will be doing prewriting exercises throughout the reading of the play so you will have well-developed ideas when the time comes for you to compose your essay.</p> <p>Tests—a test will be given after each Act of the play. Breaking it down like this will allow me to make sure you know the Act before we move on. This will also give you more chances to perform to the best of your abilities. If you keep up with your <i>Macbeth</i> logs and the class work, you will do fine.</p> <p>Director’s Notebook and final performances—this is a group assignment and a major grade. You will work together to create a scene from the play as actors and directors. You will use this book as a guide to perform your scene. This will be the culmination of all you learn throughout this unit. Let the good times roll!</p> <p>Vocabulary—you will be assigned vocabulary just as you have been all year.</p> <p>Miscellaneous—you may have various minor activities to complete during the course of the unit.</p> <p>Narrate Your Own Reading—this is an activity that will help us get used to reading the play without having people on hand to perform it for us. It will be completed at the beginning of the unit.</p> <p>Collage—this is an activity that will be assigned to each of you at some point during the unit (but not all at once). It will allow us to visualize the evolution of the play. (Don’t forget to have fun! School and learning are supposed to be fun, and I’m afraid you’ve lost sight of that!)</p>

Angela first invited these teens to assume the roles of Shakespearean scholars by helping them develop basic background about the Elizabethan period, Shakespeare's life, and the setting and context for *Macbeth*. As part of this process, she developed a *Google Earth* presentation that took students from South Carolina, then to the Globe Theatre and back in time and place to the Scottish settings within the historical *Macbeth* tragedy. Like budding scholars in a new discipline, the students worked within groups to construct the Elizabethan period and the settings for the historical tragedy. Angela noted in her reflection, "They seemed to get into the flow." While clearly a teacher cannot know what is in the minds of students, this observation is relevant as it shows evidence of the importance that Angela placed on setting a context that encouraged the possibility of flow. She then continued with a gateway activity (Smagorinsky, 2008) that she designed in order to help her students become curious scholars by participating in improvisations related to one of the play's major themes: "Thirst for Power." The seniors began thinking about the theme before they read the first word of the play. Figure 2 features one of the three situations included in her gateway activity's Performance Expectations Guide (PEG).

Figure 2: Excerpt from a gateway activity performance expectations guide

Figure 2: Gateway Activity

SITUATION 2: *An ambitious student sees an illegal way to become Prom King, but his cautiousness and loyalty make him indecisive about pursuing his goal. His motto: "Maybe tomorrow." He shares his ambition with his equally ambitious girlfriend who is refined and elegant on the outside but a "killer" within. Her motto is "Just do it."*
WHAT HAPPENS?!

The goal in using the gateway activity was for students to relate the theme to their own lives. In addition, Angela knew that students would need to overcome their fear of Shakespearean language so she, like her cooperating teacher and thousands of Folger Shakespeare teachers in the past, let students hurl Shakespearean insults that they devised from the bard's extensive stock, insults such as "Thou mammering beetle-headed clotpole" (O'Brien, 2008). She also let them have fun with a staple "line toss" activity that *Shakespeare Set Free* (2008) encourages. Basically, the teens were tossing around a soft bean bag about the size of a baseball as they practiced over and over again key lines from *Macbeth* such as "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" or "Screw your courage to the sticking-place." By the end of the TOSS, they had memorized their own lines and those of many thrown by their peers. Students also began to make guesses about their meanings. Again, students played at being actors by slowly getting a feel for the language. In addition, she encouraged her young Shakespearean scholars to keep reading logs as they analyzed the play. Treating her students as Shakespearean scholars, they read the play without audiotaped recordings droning on and on for ninety minutes or by reading the handy *No Fear Shakespeare* that provides the translations

for them (Crowther, 2005). Instead, within their *Macbeth* logs, they were invited to include summaries, analyses of selected quotes, paraphrases of critical scenes, and responses about deeper meanings they were gathering from the play. Because Angela had anticipated that the young Shakespearean scholars would find the language a bit strange and unfamiliar, she modeled how to begin reading as a Shakespearean scholar.

Later, maintaining their roles as apprentice Shakespearean scholars, students developed visualizations of various scenes within *Macbeth*, each student having an opportunity to add to the group's emerging envisionment (Langer, 2010) of the play. These colorful 3 x 5" index card sketches were projected on the Promethean board as students shared the logic of their *Macbeth* scene's symbols, words and staging. The cards were then added to a bulletin board collage that helped the young scholars actually see that they were slowly making their way through a challenging literary classic. Figure 3 shows a collection of some of the collages created by the students.

Figure 3: A collection of *Macbeth* collages.

Photograph courtesy of the Clemson University Publication Services, Clemson, South Carolina.



According to Angela's observation at this point in the unit the students seemed engaged: "Each activity melted into the other and students lost track of time these challenging experiences with the text." Figure 4 is an excerpt from Angela's Performance Expectations Guide (PEG) for this dimension of her enterprise for young Shakespearean scholars.

Figure 4: Performance expectations guide for *Macbeth* collage

<p>Figure 4: <i>Macbeth</i> Collage</p>
<p>Performance Expectations Guide (PEG)</p> <p>Description: Over the course of the unit, we will be creating a Macbeth collage on the bulletin board in the back of the room. One or two of you will be given a 3X5 index card during each class period.</p> <p>When you are given an index card, you are instructed to go home and fill up that index card based on the readings we discussed in class that day.</p> <p>You may draw, paste magazine photos, or even write words on your index cards. On the back of your index card, you will write a paragraph responding to the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What elements of the design correlate with the readings you were assigned? 2. What are your reasons for including these elements? 3. Why did you choose to design this part of the readings? <p>During the following class period, you will be asked to give a short presentation of your card. You will then place your card on the bulletin board.</p> <p>You may design your card after a central theme, influential character, a character's secret, or any other focus of importance during our discussion of the readings. Please remember to stay true to the text; your index card will be approved by the teacher before your presentation.</p>
<p>Parameters: Your design is restricted to the boundaries of the index card. You may have some edges that hang off, but you should not add additional length. Likewise, your responses on the back of the card are restricted to the length of the card.</p> <p>Objectives:</p> <p>Students will be able to:</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Produce interpretations 2. Generate responses to central themes 3. Produce oral presentations

Long before the *Directors' Notebooks and Performances* were due, Angela shared the performance standards by which the directors would be evaluated. These standards helped the teens realize that all their efforts would contribute to this final performance. In figure 6, see how Angela helps them become editors of their own scripts, yet another engaging enterprise, as she coaches them through this Performance Expectations Guide (PEG). Note how she uses the literary language related to scripts, stresses, costumes and staging. She is trying to help them imagine being directors.

Figure 6: Performance expectations guide for director's notebook and performance

Figure 6: Director's Notebook and Performance	
Name: _____	
<i>Macbeth</i>	
____(20) SCRIPT: Does the script indicate how the scene will be played?	
Does the script include most of the following indications:	
____Vocal pauses, stresses, and inflections	
____Tone of voice	
____Gestures and facial expressions	
____Notes or diagrams of actions and movements	
____Definitions of words or phrases you do not understand	
____(15) COSTUMES: Does this section include the two costumes?	
Conceptual Costume	
____ Actual Costume	
____(20) CHARACTER ANALYSIS: Did you write an in-depth analysis for each character that appears in the scene, making sure to address all the questions?	
____(10) STAGING: Did you draw the set and make a model of the design? ____	
(10) SET AND PROPS: Did you design a simple set for the classroom? If necessary, did you include props?	
____(5) MUSIC: Did you select the appropriate music for your scene?	
____(20) PERFORMANCE: Did your performance reflect your understanding of the language, scene, and of the play as a whole?	
Total Points (out of 100) _____	Grade: _____

Despite all of this engaging literary fun, Angela was mindful of the need for students to perform in accordance with state English course standards. Rather than viewing the need to meet learning standards as an obstacle to engaging students in learning, we instructed teacher candidates that standards and even high stakes assessments should not inhibit them from fostering exploration and intellectually rigorous playfulness among students. Students were engaged in the composing and reading processes, exploring the history and meaning of words,

using communications strategies effectively, researching the life and times of Shakespeare, and reading classic canonical literature as well as companion young adult and children's texts written by authors from diverse backgrounds and orientations. Within her unit, she made sure that students were performing in accord with South Carolina English Course Standards as illustrated in figure 7.

Figure 7: Performance expectations guide on unit goals for becoming Shakespearean directors.

Figure 7: Unit Goals for Becoming Shakespearean Directors
<p>Goals for Response to Texts or Literature</p> <p>Students will be able to:</p> <p>Produce an interpretation E4-1.5, E4-1.6, E4-1.4</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Director's Notebook 2. Collage 3. Macbeth Log <p>English Course Standards Addressed:</p> <p>E4-1.4 Evaluate the relationship among character, plot, and theme in a given literary text.</p> <p>E4-1.5 Analyze the effect of the author's craft (including tone and the use of imagery, flashback, foreshadowing, symbolism, irony, and allusion) on the meaning of literary texts.</p> <p>E4-1.6 Create responses to literary texts through a variety of methods such as written works, oral presentations, media productions, and the visual and performing arts.</p> <p>Goals for Writing (process and product)</p> <p>Students will be able to:</p> <p>Generate responses to central themes E4-1.4, E4-4.2, E4-4.4, E4-5.3</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Macbeth Log 2. Collage <p>English Course Standards Addressed:</p>

E4-1.4 Evaluate the relationship among character, plot, and theme in a given literary text.

E4-4.2 Use complete sentences in a variety of types in written works.

E4-4.4 Use the conventions of written Standard American English.

E4-5.3 Create descriptions for use in other modes of written works such as narratives and expository or persuasive pieces.

Goals for Communication

Students will be able to:

Produce an oral presentation E4-1.6, E4-6.4, E4-6.5

1. Collage
2. Narrate Your own Reading
3. Director's Notebook

English Course Standards Addressed

E4-1.6 Create responses to literary texts through a variety of methods such as written works, oral presentations, media productions, and the visual and performing arts.

E4-6.4 Use vocabulary (including Standard American English) that is appropriate for the particular audience or purpose.

E4-6.5 Create written works and oral and visual presentations that are designed for a specific audience and purpose.

Goal for Word and Language Study

Students will be able to

Plan a strategy for reading E4-3.1, E4-3.2, E4-3.3

1. Narrate Your own Reading
2. Macbeth Log

English Course Standards Addressed:

E4-3.1 Use context clues to determine the meaning of technical terms and other unfamiliar words.

E4-3.2 Analyze the meaning of words by using knowledge of Greek and Latin roots and affixes.

E4-3.3 Understand how British history and culture have influenced the use and development of the English language.

Goal for Research

Students will be able to:

Use information from multiple sources E4-6.6, E4-6.7

1. Director's Notebook

English Course Standards Addressed

E4-6.6 Select appropriate graphics, in print or electronic form, to support written works and oral and visual presentations.

E4-6.7 Use a variety of print and electronic reference materials.

Unit Evaluation

100 points: Director's Notebook

100 points : *Macbeth* Log

25 points : Collage

15 points : Narrate Your own Reading

Angela encouraged students to make literary connections with real events, to ask questions related to gender roles or identities, to play at being writers, directors and actors. She freed students to play in literary roles while they engaged in rigorous academic challenges. She believed that signs of highly focused concentration or engagement among her students were worth noting:

After ninety minutes of actively exploring the play as actors, directors, and scholars, I witnessed many occasions when students turned back to look at the clock and were surprised to see that their second period class was nearly over.

Students were engaged in the composing and reading processes, exploring the history and meaning of words, using communications strategies effectively, researching the life and times of Shakespeare, and reading classic canonical literature as well as companion young

adult and children's texts written by authors from diverse backgrounds and orientations. Angela shared these goals and assessment possibilities within her unit design that she developed the semester before she was to begin teaching it in the public school. The unit that Angela crafted was designed to help students enter into what Wilhelm (2008) would call the "storyworld" of Macbeth through engaging in a community of practice. Angela's teaching philosophy was strongly shaped by our program's emphasis on fostering what Smagorinsky (2008) has called construction zones, based on the idea of students acting as builders who use tools within workshops to construct texts.

Conclusions

Findings presented in this article were the result of a pilot study. During the 2010-2011 School Year, eight more pre-service teachers at our university designed, implemented, and evaluated units of instruction intended to foster student engagement within communities of practice. We are investigating their efforts. Our understanding of engagement within a community of practice will be re-evaluated and reshaped through these ongoing action research efforts with pre-service teachers.

Pre-service English teachers can successfully establish engaging communities of practice in classrooms. All twelve pre-service teachers met target National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards as they designed, implemented, and evaluated units of instruction during their student teaching. Chances are they can be used by experienced teachers as well. The approach described in this article of striving for student engagement within a community of practice can offer a sound design, implementation and evaluation approach for helping high school students perform in accord with national and state standards as they take on literary life in all its glories and variations. But this approach can only be a viable alternative to the monotony of skill-and-drill instruction if teachers and administrators recognize that it is not merely drama and fantasy. The result of careful reflection and design, this approach can help students get a taste of literary life.

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