

Promoting Theory and Practice: A Year-Long Residency Program to Better Prepare Future Educators

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A challenge frequently voiced in the field of teacher preparation is the divide between theory and practice. Specifically, university coursework is often viewed as “the theory,” with classroom teaching experiences in PreK-12 settings being considered “the practice.” One Teacher Preparation Program re-designed their program to address this divide and better prepare pre-service teachers (PSTs) for their futures as educators. To do this, the re-designed program included more authentic classroom experiences through the implementation of a year-long residency model and the creation of a residency-specific course. This article details how an English methods course and residency course were designed to support PSTs as they made connections to their residency experiences. In this way, PSTs majoring in secondary English Language Arts (ELA) education were immersed within middle and secondary ELA classrooms as residents, while simultaneously engaging in rigorous university coursework, which sought to promote educational theory and practice. Specific instructional approaches and assignments are shared, along with reflections on what was learned.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, teacher preparation, residency, clinical experiences

INTRODUCTION

“Rather than entering the field as an insecure newbie with nothing to offer, I felt like I was immensely prepared. Not only was I able to just learn from veteran teachers, but I really felt like I had much to offer myself by way of new techniques and perspectives. I entered into the profession with a strong voice. And I also had the language to really identify glaring issues in the field and communicate them with superiors...I know many people complain that theory learned in class doesn’t translate to practical experience in the school system, but I really don’t think that’s true. The combination of both of these is what has been the most effective, I think.... My thanks to UL for the theory, the language, and the practical experiences and reflections that allowed me to shape my own vision moving forward.”

This e-mail exemplifies the goals of every teacher educator—for students to leave their teacher preparation program feeling confident and prepared to enter their own classroom. However, this recent graduate also hit on an important topic that continues to be a challenge in teacher education—the divide between theory and practice. Though most educational researchers would argue the need for both (as evidenced in the vignette above), concerns are frequently voiced regarding this divide explaining the belief

that “the theoretical resides in university course work and the practical resides in school-based placements” (Grossman et al., 2009, p. 275).

The education field is unique compared to many other professions in that on the first day of school, a brand-new teacher will (more often than not) have the same teaching responsibilities as that of a veteran teacher. Despite limited experience, first-year teachers generally have the same amount of students, courses to prepare for, and lesson plans to submit. Novice educators who recently graduated from a university-based teacher preparation program are ideally equipped with the latest information on best instructional practices supported by research (i.e., the theory) and are full of fresh ideas they are ready to implement within their classroom. However, when they get to the classroom on the first day of the school year, it becomes apparent that expectation and reality are not always aligned, with new teachers often feeling overwhelmed by the realities of being a full-time classroom teacher (i.e., the practice). This article explains how one Teacher Preparation Program (TPP) sought to promote theory *and* practice as pre-service teachers (PSTs) engaged in a year-long residency program to better prepare them for their future as educators.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

The divide between theory and practice is one educational researchers have been concerned with for quite some time. In 2015, Cochran-Smith et al. conducted an extensive review of literature on teacher education, including the impact of clinical experiences on learning to teach. Through this work, the researchers found that “persistent tensions between teacher education programs and K-12 schools spilled over into teacher candidates’ experiences during fieldwork” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015, p. 111). While still in their teacher preparation program and completing fieldwork, many PSTs face challenges “when they try to transfer ideas learned in campus classes to their work with students in schools, particularly when those ideas run counter to standard school practices” (p. 111). This highlights the fact that the disconnect between theory and practice is often felt before even entering the profession. Then, once PSTs become in-service educators, this feeling persists as “novice teachers struggle with the reality of schools” (p. 113), which the researchers attribute to “the divergent views of teaching and learning promoted in universities, on one hand, and those enacted in schools (and increasingly mandated by education policies) on the other hand” (p. 113). As such, they called for further research to identify ways to address these concerns.

Other researchers have noted the challenge of preparing PSTs for the realities of the classroom while simultaneously preparing them to implement more ambitious teaching (Lampert et al., 2013; McDonald et al., 2013). To address this, Lampert et al. (2013) examined the pedagogical practice *rehearsal*, in which PSTs are able to practice teaching in an intentional manner with a focus on targeted feedback to improve their teaching. Based on findings, the researchers concluded this to be “a pedagogy that bridges academic content and fieldwork by deliberately focusing on how the academic content novices learn in courses is used in working on school-based problems of practice” (p. 238). McDonald et al. (2013) proposed the *Learning Cycle* framework which guides PSTs through various stages, including initial introductions, planning, enactment, analysis, and reflection, in order to familiarize them with core pedagogical practices. This aligns with their call for ideas on “how to conceptualize the aspects of practice that support practitioner learning of high-quality instruction” (p. 381).

Another recommendation for connecting theory and practice is through the implementation of teacher residency models, which, according to Pike and Carli (2020), “are designed to provide rich clinical experiences to education scholars through an innovative program structure and partnerships between universities and local school districts” (p. 7). Teacher residency programs have also been linked to the recruitment and retention of educators (Guha et al., 2017; Williams III et al., 2022). While residency programs may vary in implementation, key characteristics of successful programs include a working relationship between a university and school district, clinical experience placements with a mentor that usually last an entire school year, and a university curriculum aligned to clinical experiences (Guha et al., 2017). By providing teacher candidates with high-quality, in-depth residency experiences, the goal is for novice educators to enter the teaching profession more prepared to meet the demands of today’s classrooms.

In the following section, one teacher preparation program's approach to implementing a year-long residency model is described, along with the piloting of a university-based residency course intended to lessen the divide between educational theory and practice. Through this approach, PSTs were immersed within secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms as residents, while simultaneously engaging in rigorous university coursework to prepare them to implement high-quality instruction for their students.

INNOVATIVE RPROGRAM RE-DESIGN

In Fall 2016, legislation in one state sought to better prepare PSTs for the classroom by adopting teacher preparation regulations, including “a full-year classroom residency alongside an experienced mentor teacher, coupled with a competency-based curriculum that will provide them with the knowledge and skills needed for their first day of teaching” (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2016). By having PSTs participate in a year-long residency, as opposed to a more traditional one-semester student teaching experience, the goal of this legislation was to integrate theory and practice so that PSTs were provided with more authentic PreK-12 classroom experiences prior to graduation. Soon, programs across the state began to adjust their approaches to meet these legislative guidelines.

One teacher preparation program (TPP) designed (and later implemented) an Innovative Residency Program to be a 40/100 model (Office of Clinical Teacher Experiences, 2021). Using this approach, in Residency I (i.e., the first semester of the year-long residency), PSTs work alongside their mentor teacher in a PreK-12 school setting for at least 40% of the school's instructional week. During this semester, the university students complete their coursework in addition to fulfilling Residency I requirements. Throughout Residency II (i.e., second and final semester of the year-long residency and culminating semester of the undergraduate program), PSTs work in the same PreK-12 setting with the same mentor teacher 100% of the school's instructional week, more closely mimicking that of traditional student teaching. Importantly, the residency starts when the PreK-12 school starts and is not bound by the university calendar. For instance, PSTs beginning Residency I in the fall semester start their residency when PreK-12 teachers report back to school, rather than when the university resumes classes approximately two weeks later. By beginning (and ending) when the PreK-12 school year does and working alongside an experienced mentor teacher throughout an entire year, PSTs are better able to fully experience an academic year, including professional development sessions, the first day of school, and parent-teacher conferences.

In addition to the 40/100 approach, this TPP innovative model utilizes a co-teaching model that consists of the PST or “Resident,” Mentor Teacher, and a University Supervisor. According to the university's Office of Teacher Clinical Experiences (2021), through co-teaching, the resident and their mentor “shar[e] the planning organization and delivery of assessment and instruction,” providing an opportunity for the resident to be “actively involved and engaged in all aspects of instruction” (p. 12). In doing so, PSTs are not simply observing their mentor, but are actively involved within the classroom early on. Given that residents work alongside their mentors while completing their university coursework, this model provides a fantastic opportunity to address the often-voiced concern regarding the disconnect between educational theory and practice. Along with the residency itself, a new Residency I course was piloted as part of PSTs undergraduate experiences beginning in Spring 2021. The following section includes an explanation of how a secondary English Language Arts (ELA) methods course and Residency I course were designed to bring the year-long residency into the university classroom.

PILOTING A NEW APPROACH

During Spring 2021, a group of students gathered for three hours each week for their methods course focused on learning strategies and materials for teaching secondary ELA. Immediately following this class, the new (hybrid) Residency I course took place and provided PSTs with an opportunity to discuss their residency experiences and engage with others who were also in the first semester of their year-long residency. To support students in making connections between their coursework and residency experiences,

assignments in both courses were carefully considered and designed with a focus on alignment to their residency experiences.

Secondary ELA Methods Course

Methods courses are often seen as a space in which PSTs are taught “contemporary views of teaching that support constructivist views of learning” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015, p. 111), despite this not always aligning with PreK-12 classroom practices. In this ELA methods course, PSTs were exposed to contemporary views and best practices of teaching while still ensuring connections to practice were made. For instance, course objectives included: 1) exploring various approaches to teaching ELA, 2) demonstrating knowledge and understanding of relevant literacy standards, and 3) designing and implementing instruction that promotes higher-level thinking. To meet these objectives, PSTs completed a variety of assignments and participated in different instructional activities designed to promote educational theory and practice. In the following section, specific assignments designed to narrow the gap between university coursework and clinical experiences are detailed.

Course Assignments

According to the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) 2018 Position Statement on “Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children’s and Young Adult Literature,” there should be a focus on introducing, preparing, and supporting preservice teachers as they develop a rich understanding of and appreciation for children and teen literature. Furthermore, NCTE recommends that teachers “be readers” so they can support and engage their students as readers. With these best practices in mind, one assignment in the ELA methods course required PSTs to read a young adult (YA) novel and participate in literature circles, mimicking those that frequently occur in middle and high school English classrooms. Students considered the role of YA literature in their future classrooms, engaged in discussions about the text with one another, and participated in ongoing written reflections. Throughout the assignment, PSTs were continually prompted to consider the role of YA literature broadly, their experiences participating in literature circles, and connections to their residency and future instruction.

Another assignment, microteaching, consisted of students leading two brief (5-7 minute) teaching demonstrations throughout the semester during which their peers acted as their secondary students. For these microteaching demonstrations, they could choose a portion of a lesson they previously taught in their residency, were going to be teaching in residency, or another ELA topic of their choosing. Lessons were video recorded and shared with the student so they could view, analyze, and reflect upon their growth throughout the semester. Based on the *Learning Cycle* framework, this is an example of preparing and rehearsing the activity since PSTs practiced teaching a portion of a lesson in a controlled setting (McDonald et al., 2013).

After practicing teaching lessons to their peers, PSTs had a chance to plan, design, and implement a lesson at their residency site as part of a partnership project with a local living history museum, Vermilionville, which served as an opportunity to enact the activity with students (McDonald et al., 2013). As part of the assignment explanation, it was specifically noted that “since everyone’s Residency context will be different, you will have a lot of autonomy with this project,” however, all students were asked to create a digital, asynchronous lesson to engage middle/secondary students in learning about the cultures and history represented at the museum. Following the planning and preparation of an approximately 30-minute digital, asynchronous lesson, the residents collaborated with their mentors so the middle/secondary students could participate in the lesson they created. Later, residents presented an overview of their lesson to their peers and reflected on the experience with a focus on connecting to the students at their residency site, aligning to the *Learning Cycle* framework quadrant of analyzing enactment and moving forward (McDonald et al., 2013). In particular, PSTs were asked “What connections did you make between this project and your current teaching in Residency I? If you were to re-create the lesson based on implementation with students at your residency site, what might you change or keep the same?” By situating the secondary students at their residency site as the intended audience, PSTs designed a lesson with real

students in mind, encouraging connections between what they were learning in their methods course and their residency experiences.

Finally, as part of the methods course, while utilizing Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), residents were tasked with creating a unit plan on a topic of their choosing. While not required, students were encouraged to select a topic they could connect to their residency, including a unit of study they might teach the following semester during Residency II. Throughout the course, they submitted different stages of their unit plan and workshopped with their peers and professor (author) to refine the final product, connecting once again to the *Learning Cycle* framework by preparing for the activity through collaborative planning (McDonald et al., 2013).

Residency I Course

As noted previously, the Residency I course was piloted in Spring 2021 and was intended to help PSTs make connections between their residency and university experiences. Furthermore, through enrollment in the course, the residents were able to frequently connect with their peers during this period of intensive clinical experiences. Specific assignments that were implemented to benefit residents included ongoing reflections, residency discussions, and an observation by their university supervisor who also served as the Residency I and ELA methods course instructor.

Course Assignments

Two ongoing assignments were central to the residency course to ensure PSTs were critically reflecting upon their residency experiences and making connections to university coursework: weekly reflections and residency discussions. Throughout the semester, residents kept a digital journal in which they recorded weekly notes and reflections about their residency experiences connected to a focus topic. Topic examples included: writing and writing instruction, connecting with students' families, classroom culture/environment, and differentiation. Providing a list of topics for residents to choose from ensured that their reflections were focused and connected to key pedagogical practices that could be considered in relation to coursework. Additionally, PSTs also engaged in ongoing, semi-structured discussions with peers who were also in Residency I. Similar to the written reflections, these discussions were rooted in a central topic chosen by the professor. However, these topics were determined based on student survey responses indicating what they were most interested in discussing. Some topics included professional development/connecting with colleagues, co-teaching, and avoiding teacher burnout. Through these ongoing assignments, PSTs engaged in reflection and discussion of their residency experiences, helping them to analyze these experiences and make connections to course content and fellow residents.

A major assignment within the residency course involved PSTs teaching at their residency site as they were observed by their professor, who served as university supervisor. This was a multi-step observation cycle utilized by all university supervisors within the TPP and consisted of a written lesson plan, pre-observation conference form, observation, post-observation meeting, and written reflection. Table 1 includes an overview of the lesson observation cycle based on expectations outlined in the Clinical Experience Handbook (Office of Teacher Clinical Experiences, 2021). This observation served as the first of four formal observations conducted by university faculty throughout the year-long residency. It was a crucial step in bridging clinical experiences within the residency and university coursework since it brought together the co-teaching triad of Resident, Mentor Teacher, and University Supervisor as they worked collaboratively to support the resident improve their teaching. Additionally, by having the university methods instructor serve as the university supervisor and observe the resident within a secondary ELA classroom, they are able to observe the resident as they enact instruction, moving beyond rehearsing the activity (McDonald et al., 2013). Throughout the observation cycle, residents had to carefully consider how their instruction aligned with academic standards, how they would work with students to ensure lesson objectives were met, and areas in which they would like specific feedback to improve future instruction. Finally, this assignment aligns with the recommendation that "university faculty learn about and access preservice teachers' experiences in the field" (Grossman et al., 2009, p. 287).

TABLE 1
LESSON OBSERVATION CYCLE

Lesson Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A written lesson plan for the class period in which the resident will be observed, including <i>lesson purpose, academic standards and lesson objectives, teaching procedures, assessment information, and approach(es) to differentiation</i> • Can be written independently or in conjunction with mentor teacher • Submitted two days prior to lesson being taught (enough time to receive feedback from university supervisor and revise prior to lesson implementation)
Pre-observation Conference Form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents must identify and/or explain lesson objectives/outcomes, instructional alignment, methods of assessment and how understanding will be monitored, and approaches to meeting the needs of diverse learners • Opportunity for residents to ask for specific feedback from university supervisor regarding a particular aspect of instruction • To be completed by the resident and submitted to the university supervisor prior to lesson implementation
Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University supervisor observes resident teach in their mentor teacher's classroom • University supervisor completes rubric based on Danielson's (2011) Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument, which includes the following domains: 1) <i>Planning and Preparation</i>, 2) <i>The Classroom Environment</i>, 3) <i>Instruction</i>, and 4) <i>Professional Responsibilities</i>; Also provides narrative feedback for each domain
Post-observation Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion between resident, university supervisor, and (optionally) the mentor teacher on lesson observed • Topics to discuss include, but are not limited to: overall lesson success, explanation of adjustments made to the lesson, discussion of any challenges, future areas of focus, and feedback from university supervisor • Occurs within one day of lesson implementation
Written Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A written reflection composed by the resident addressing all components of the lesson observation cycle • Completed within two days following the post-observation meeting

LESSONS LEARNED

Second Implementation: Fall 2021

In Fall 2021, the ELA methods course and Residency I course were taught for a second time, and with a new semester came changes. First, not all students in the methods course had begun residency yet, meaning enrollment in the Residency I course did not mirror that of the methods course. As a result, greater differentiation among residency-specific assignments was needed to account for these differences. While many assignments remained the same or similar, there were two notable changes implemented. First, the partnership project with the local living history museum, Vermilionville, was no longer aligned to the residency experience. Instead, this was modified to be a cross-curricular project between the ELA and social studies methods courses. Since it became a small group project with PSTs at different residency sites or perhaps not yet in residency, it was no longer feasible for this project to be directly related to residency. Another difference was the creation of a new assignment in which students in the residency course took part in a co-teaching demonstration. For this, PSTs worked in pairs to plan and implement a co-taught lesson in which at least two different co-teaching strategies/approaches were utilized. Following the completion

of the teaching demonstration, PSTs received peer and instructor feedback and completed a written reflection. Since the TPP's innovative model utilizes a co-teaching model, this assignment served as an opportunity to practice what was expected within their residency setting within the university classroom.

Major Takeaways

Several things became apparent after two iterations of teaching the ELA methods and Residency I course and serving as university supervisor to the PSTs. First, there is considerable value in students being given structured opportunities to talk about their residency experiences with others at similar points in their teaching journey. Residents wanted and needed to talk with others so they could connect with peers, voice challenges faced, and share ideas. While co-reflection and discussion between mentor teacher and resident are crucial, lack of time can pose a challenge, with residents not always having the opportunity to learn the reasoning behind certain practices (Goodwin et al., 2016). While this calls for further research, providing residents an opportunity to discuss various practices at their residency site within their university coursework helped them to understand pedagogical practices in action and make connections to theory. PSTs also benefitted from multiple opportunities to teach lessons as part of their coursework and within PreK-12 settings. Grossman et al. (2009) called for an increase in opportunities for PSTs to practice enacting instruction. Specifically, they said, “[t]he move from discussing what one might do as a teacher to actually taking on the role of the teacher is a critical one” (p. 283). Through enactment of assignments detailed in this article, PSTs were able to practice teaching lessons within the university setting and implement instruction at their residency site, providing them with more frequent opportunities to take on the role of a teacher.

In Fall 2022, the ELA methods course was taught again. However, due to faculty workload, a different faculty member within the TPP taught the Residency I course and served as university supervisor to both ELA and social studies PSTs. While this led to some changes in instruction and implementation, alignment between the year-long residency and the methods course was still ensured. For instance, students in the ELA methods course still completed the YA literature assignment, delivered microlessons, and planned a unit of instruction. However, the methods instructor no longer observed PSTs teach the secondary students at their residency sites and had fewer opportunities to facilitate discussion about the residency experience. Though the students still had a rich experience in which connections were made between their residency and university coursework, it is important to continually ensure connections are made to the year-long residency and to not fall into the too-frequent trap of being disconnected from practice.

CONCLUSION

By aligning university-based coursework to practical teaching experience through the year-long residency, PSTs were able to make connections between theory and practice, better preparing them for their own classrooms. While there are likely still to be some surprises along the way, novice teachers will be better prepared to begin their teaching career after undergoing a rigorous, extended preparation experience like the one detailed. Since the divide between educational theory and practice has been a long-time concern, it is recommended that teacher preparation programs and teacher educators continue to make intentional efforts to design high-quality university coursework, while ensuring PSTs are being adequately prepared for the realities of today's classrooms and beyond.

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