

**Dr. Robin UMBER**  
**SUNY College at Brockport**

**School of Education and Human Development**  
**350 New Campus Drive**  
**Brockport, NY 14420**

**phone: (585) 395-5550**  
**fax: (585) 395-2172**  
**[rumber@brockport.edu](mailto:rumber@brockport.edu)**

**Helping preservice teachers recognize and interrogate borders they encounter  
during their professional development**

**Helping preservice teachers recognize and interrogate borders they encounter  
during their professional development**

Dr. Robin UMBER, SUNY College at Brockport

**Beginnings and Guiding Questions**

As I have developed an understanding of critical literacy and what it means to help children read texts and the world from critical perspectives, I sometimes find myself failing to do the same with text addressed to preservice teachers. While intent on planning lessons to help my preservice teachers engage their students in critical literacy, I miss opportunities to help them understand the scope of critical literacy in their own educational experiences. By not encouraging them to question the motivations and choices of authors of texts they read about teaching or how each text positions them, I felt I was missing an opportunity to help them understand how texts address and position readers. I also wanted to help students ask critical questions about the topics of our class, since I realized some of these topics related to issues of social justice would be ones my students had not been asked to consider before.

In the summer of 2002 as I prepared to teach a course called *Inquiry into Learning* for teacher candidates in the first phase of our education program, I wondered how often my students read texts assigned by professors and just accepted both the message and the positioning. I wondered if they considered how texts positioned them and if they sometimes dismissed, sometimes accepted the messages in the text based on the beliefs they brought to the teaching situation. I wondered if students responded in what they believed to be the "required" way in class in order to follow the path of least resistance to the end of the semester. (And was that something I would ever really

know?) How did their individual beliefs about what it meant to be a good preschool or primary school teachers influence how they accepted or rejected the messages of our texts? How honest would they feel they could be about their beliefs and ideas about practice that seemed to conflict with the readings that we had for class? These questions ran through my mind as I reviewed our class syllabus and considered how the choice of objectives, course topics, and readings might support or constrain students' ways of interacting with ideas, each other, and me during our class.

I realized that our preservice courses taught students little about interpreting recent research in terms of how it positioned them, nor how it presented particular worldviews. The focus was more on gaining information to present summaries of current research from juried journals than on being engaged in the critique. I steered them away from the popular teacher magazines for such work but never went back to those magazines to discuss concerns about implicit messages, what was left out, and other relevant questions used to critically analyze texts. In doing so, I privileged the journals and books I chose for class and failed to also problematize those "scholarly" sources. I realized that I needed to help preservice teachers become aware of not just what is being written in their fields, but how those authors, often positioned as experts, are positioning themselves and others, as well as trying to draw readers into accepting certain roles or positions.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Gee (1987) discusses the idea of a identity kit that each person has based on past experiences that causes him or her to interpret current experiences in ways consistent with the Discourse communities with which he or she is affiliated. While focusing on

helping students read texts for what is present, missing, and what view is being put forth and why, we need to remember that preservice teachers may not be taking up the reading of professional materials in a critical manner. I believe that this is because such a way of reading has not been part of the Discourse communities with which they are affiliated. Preservice teachers may not be paying attention to how professional literature is positioning them as educators or how the writers and advertisers in those journals and magazines are engaged in positioning. Often preservice teachers assimilate information from articles into schema for what it means to be a teacher or engage students in learning, especially when what they read seems it would be enjoyable for their students. In doing so, they take up certain beliefs inherent in the teaching ideas, sometimes without considering how the implicit beliefs relate to their own or to the way certain ways of knowing are privileged in mainstream society.

The concept of mode of address from film studies that Ellsworth (1997) as connected to education is also important to my thinking positioning. It causes me to consider how teachers are positioned by multiple factors prior to coming to my class and by the texts they read for my class. According to Mayne (1993) mode of address means that a filmmaker assumes some general characteristics of the target audience and designs the film in a way that he or she believes will resonate with that audience. Similarly, the author of a text positions the reader in certain ways based on how he or she envisions the target audience. Furthermore, the author may reflect what he or she believes is a desirable target audience through choice of words and concepts presented in the text.

As a teacher educator, I need to help students consider each text positions them, what a text requires them to accept or assume. My students need to interrogate the text to

uncover who it is positioning them to be and why that position was chosen by the author. As college students begin their education courses, they have certain beliefs about what it means to be a preschool or primary school teacher. Their image of such teachers has been constructed over time through their own experiences and messages about early childhood teachers presented in various forms of text and media in the American culture. As these preservice teachers read about teaching in books, journals, and magazines, their ideas about teaching and their image of the early childhood educator develop. However, how their ideas develop is connected with how they take up or reject the address of each text.

Along with such ideas and images are those these students bring with them about who they are as learners and as teachers. They want to learn the *stuff* that will allow them to be excellent teachers. Therefore, texts that provide them with clear-cut ideas about how to teach are favored by many. My students often take up a particular idea, approach, or author's view as an authoritative discourse, which Bakhtin (1986) describes as an absolute authority that does not allow for dynamic dialogue. There is comfort in the notion that someone has the answer and the way to successfully teach young children. At other times, they seem to take the beliefs about good practice they come with from their own experiences as the authoritative discourse from which they measure all other ideas.

Some students become confused or annoyed when a variety possible ways of thinking or acting are shared with them. They often shun the positioning of a professional who can make informed decisions, because they do not see themselves as professionals or experts at this point in their careers; they are students who need to learn the what and how of teaching from our classes. They want to learn from the experts and mold themselves to fit who the experts say they should be as a teacher of young children.

However, the experts disagree. When faced with conflicting view points of studies that show that very different approaches are successful with children in some area of learning, they are frustrated. Helping these preservice teachers move from accepting an authoritative discourse to engaging in internally persuasive discourse--a way of thinking that begins to develop as individuals begin to assimilate discourses outside of themselves with their own ideas Bakhtin (1986)--is part of what I see as the responsibility of our education program.

### **Examining my practice and my students in the fall of 2002**

Therefore, I set out to better understand how preservice teachers respond to positioning by professional material before and after we have sessions on critical literacy when working with children and after additional sessions on critical literacy related to the professional materials they read. I needed to understand how they viewed what it means to be successful preschool and primary school teachers--what did they see as common traits, characteristics, and goals of these teachers? What types of activities did they think of as going on in "good" classrooms?

I have gathered and analyzed my class field notes and the written work of my students, which were part of our regular class activities. I used these data sources to help me understand how these preservice teachers approached reading professional materials and responded to the positioning and address of our texts throughout the course. I wanted to better understand what type of explicit discussion on my part helped them to understand that they are positioned by professional literature.

When I began this study, I was especially interested in how my students took up

or rejected positioning and messages of professional journal, magazines, and our texts. While I learned about those areas throughout the study, I learned more than I expected about the community created in our class and how that supported critical and open discussions over time. In the rest of this paper, I will discuss how students interacted with and thought about ideas in our textbooks and the professional journals and magazines we reviewed. In retrospect, I feel the most interesting part of the data analysis came from the analyses of classroom discussion around articles or chapters in textbooks. Therefore, a significant amount of discussion will be given to our classroom interactions and my analyses of them.

### **Class Discussions**

Since this is the first course in our education program, many students come with an expectation that I will be telling them what they need to do in order to teach well. For some, this is the first course in which they have been expected to participate in small and large group discussions, engage in reading professional literature and discuss it in peer groups, and to write papers that required them to connect theories, concepts, and practices in course readings to classroom observations. It is also the first time many have been asked to question the norms of society and education. A majority of the students in my class are white, middle class women in their early twenties. Many of them went to school in towns in which almost everyone else came from backgrounds similar to theirs. They have not experienced what it is like to be the Other.

The discussion of my field notes from the first half of the semester that follow provides examples of the types of discussions we had around our texts. These

discussions helped me consider how students were taking of the way I was addressing them through my choice of readings and assignments and statements and questions in class. I wanted to address these students as emerging professionals who were moving from students to teachers. While needing to maintain my role of teacher in terms of choosing how we would attempt to meet course objectives, I wanted students to view themselves as able to direct some of the learning engagements and discussions. I also wanted them to feel they could question my statements or the readings I chose, as well as raise questions about their own concerns without fear of negative response from me or their peers. Because of the power differential inherent in any learning situation, I was especially interested in which students and in what ways my ideas or those contained in the texts I chose were challenged.

### **An unexpected question**

The second class meeting Cathy (all names are pseudonyms) raised an issue about the authors of our readings. She said that since the greater percentage of elementary or early childhood teachers were female, it was interesting that the "experts" we were reading were males. Looking ahead some women were also authors of books or articles we would use, but I found it interesting that this student voiced this concern as her first comment about the week's readings. It took us into a different area of discussion than our "course topic" list implied. We discussed what it means to be an expert, who gets to write articles/books and why. We considered why it might be more difficult for the classroom teacher to take the time to write an article than someone working on a doctorate or working as college faculty. It raised the question of percentage of faculty of

education programs who were male and female versus the percentages of classroom teachers. It also created space for a discussion of classroom teachers versus educational researchers as sources of knowledge. While no one said the educational researchers were too far removed from the classroom, there was general support for the idea that classroom teachers were writing about what they knew and lived everyday, so that information was important and valid. One student suggested that it was valid, but it also depended on if your beliefs about teaching matched with the teachers. If not, maybe her ideas wouldn't work for you. This discussion enabled me to introduce students to a Discourse--as defined by Gee (1987)--of critique earlier than I had planned. I think both the discussion of meanings and the format of the discussion served important purposes in setting a tone for discussion in our class

### **An expert emerges**

As we began to read articles in *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, edited by Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, & Miller (2001) and *Classroom Diversity*, edited by McIntyre, Roseberry, & Gonzalez (2001) students were interested in how teachers worked with students different from themselves. However, most students said they'd gone to school with others who were like themselves and did not understand all of the reasons students from diverse background did not do as well in school. There were not sure how the current educational system privileged some ways of knowing or types of knowledge--weren't some this just general knowledge or neutral?

For example, when I had students take part of our state ELA exam from several years ago another interesting event occurred. We had read about issues of standardized

testing and alternative assessments prior to class. That day several students spoke in favor of standardized testing--how else can we make sure everyone is learning what they're suppose to?--was the general sentiment. We did parts of the test and the same students spoke up about parts that they thought were perfectly reasonable for a fourth grader to do. Others voiced the opposite opinions, questioning the content of the text for the listening activity or the directions/expectations for the writing.

As we read one short text and did the activities that followed, students were still divided. I tried to stay out of the debate and just facilitate the discussion. Then we read a poem, did the activities and came to the final question which asked students to use information in the short text and poem in order to write a position statement on a related, but not directly discussed issue. Students were silent for awhile, and then several tentatively ventured possible answers. We noted the diversity of answers and wondered which one or ones had more credibility in the scoring of the tests.

While we were involved in the critique of the questions, one student, Betsy, raised another issue. She said that the topic itself made the test unfair to some students. Other jumped in with "Why?! Everyone knows about whales! " Betsy countered with, "Not the kids I went to school with!" She had attended a high school at a charter school in an urban setting. She didn't think that humpback whales were something that many of her peers just "knew about" or frankly cared much about. To have to read about whales and deep-sea fishing and then write about issues of commercial fishing in those same waters would not be something that fourth graders would find familiar. All the information they need is not provided and the poem made it even harder to focus on the main idea.

After Betsy made her point, the other students who had been most vocal then

asked her to tell them more about her school and the kids she went to school with and what she thought that meant for white suburban girls soon to be in urban classrooms. I think this discussion helped many of my students learn more about what is meant by tests that are aimed at white, middle class/upper class students than any articles we read or anything I could have said. It was gratifying to see students looking to another student as an expert on a topic once credentials were given.

### **Dissenting opinions are voiced**

Another example occurred the next week when we read an article *in Rethinking our classrooms* by Lisa Delpit (2001) on Ebonics. Students were divided on their thinking about what was appropriate related to how people talk, especially in school. Several maintained that they felt compelled to correct anyone not speaking "correctly" and this would be especially important in school. It was up to the teacher to teach the student the correct way of speaking. I asked by whose standards are we defining "correct", did we talk correctly in class all of the time, was it necessary? Several of these students smiled and said they could see what I was getting at but really, clearly some people had terrible grammar.

At this point, Betsy spoke up. She said that if the kids she went to school with had been asked to speak Standard English all of the time in class most wouldn't have participated. But more than that, they would have been angry that their way of speaking was not accepted. She pointed out that Ebonics does have a grammar system and was not just incorrect English or bad grammar.

There was more discussion from various students, most coming to the decision

that there were some times when kids should be able to speak in their home language if others could understand them, and other times when they had to speak Standard English. They saw their role as teaching the Standard English and helping students understand when and why it should be used. However, Nancy still said she felt that the goal should be to get the students to use Standard English in school. She really couldn't agree that the teacher should accept other forms of English. Several other students nodded in support of her statements. However, Nancy added that there was a lot to consider, and it was a topic she'd have to think more about during the program. She suggested it was something to be focusing on when in field placements.

I was impressed by the range of ideas about the article that students presented in class. Rather than repeating what the article said or agreeing with what I said, students were willing to share their own ideas and perspectives and listen to those of others. Some seemed to be willing to engage in discussion that led them to consider different possibilities than they had initially, as well as voice opinions not supported by the text or my input. Betsy, who clearly agreed with the article, did not rely just on it, but added her own experiences to support her view. Nancy was able to discuss the points she could agree made sense, but she was also able to voice her dissent to the idea presented in the text. Her final comment left the door open. It demonstrated that she was aware that beliefs she held without question had been addressed in a way that caused her to be aware of ideas she had not considered before. Rather than just changing her way of thinking, at least in the class discussion, she was honest in her skepticism of the text and her awareness that the issue was one she'd have to continue to deal with in her career. She took a chance in voicing the first real disagreement of the semester, and I complimented

her on her willingness to explain her view and remain open to exploring the idea.

Throughout this discussion I was both concerned and elated by what students had to say. I was concerned by some of the views voiced about those who did not meet the expectations of the mainstream, yet I was elated that these students felt that they could air their own concerns and views in class. I also was glad that through personal experience, Betsy was able to speak authoritatively about students different from her self and the white middle class norm present in our class.

Betsy crossed a border in her thinking prompted by a change of location in high school when she literally entered into a world different from the one she'd lived in for 13 years. Her experiences helped her to understand and support the concerns and experiences of urban, African-American students from mostly working class families. During the first three classes she had been relatively quiet, speaking up a few times with questions or ideas. During this class and the previous one, we couldn't stop her--not that I wanted to. We moved from a "raise your hand" system (which I did not require, but seemed to come naturally to students) to an open discussion that I sometimes needed to jump in to moderate. She saw herself an expert because of her lived experience and as her past experiences emerged, other students saw her as an expert as well. A few times during that class, as well as subsequent classes, students turned to her and asked her opinion when the readings propelled us into discussions that included experiences of urban, African-American youth. She made it clear she was speaking from her experience in a certain school with a certain group of students. Although she thought some things were applicable in other situations when working with students of color, she wanted to be clear that she was speaking from a particular set of experiences.

I thought this was an important point to build on. We discussed how the authors of the professional books they would be reading in book groups also came from particular perspectives and positions within their race, class, gender, and academic backgrounds. Their stories and insights could provide new information and additional views on teaching, as well as provide general frameworks for thinking. I tried to make the point that specifics related to day to day work with students could not be taken from a book and used "as is," the application of the theory and ideas, even lessons, would differ with each group of students they encountered. No one had a comment or question to my mini-lecture, as I called it. I wondered if they agreed with me.

### **What does it mean to be a good teacher?**

Right before mid-term, I realized that we'd been discussing teaching and reading about teaching, but I did not know what particular perceptions each student had come with about working with preschool or primary school students. Therefore, I set out to understand how they viewed preschool and primary school teachers--what did they see as common traits, characteristics, and goals of these teachers? What types of activities did they think of as going on in these classrooms? In retrospect I should have posed these questions the first week of class and again near the end. However, students' responses provided me with some insights into ideas that students came with, those they'd gotten in their field placement and those they took from class discussions.

Based on in-class writings my students completed mid-semester, there was a wide variety of ways they described preschool and primary classroom, teachers, and goals for their future classrooms. The most common characteristics of preschool or primary school

teachers were patience, energy, organization, creativity, and love of children. Several students used terms and phrases that suggested teachers needed to keep learning, be open to new ideas, and be flexible in how they worked with children. A few less common characteristics that directly connected to prior class readings and discussions involved tolerance; "*energy to teach to children of all racial groups*. This is important because we are teaching *other people's children*"--the first phrase came from the book *The energy to teach* by Donald Graves (2001) and the second from *Teaching other people's children: Literacy and learning in a bilingual classroom* by Ballenger (1998)-- and "The ability to scaffold children's learning."

Students saw goals of teachers as being aware of each student's learning styles and abilities, creating safe classroom environments for learning, and helping students get the "right" foundation. The latter was described in different ways so that "right" ranged from learning numbers and letters to learning how to work together and be a supportive classroom community.

When discussing their future classroom environment most students focused on organization and objects in the classroom. A few included the emotional or social or academic environment in terms of community with equal opportunities for all students and discussions of concerns, needs, and accomplishments. The latter set of responses often used the terms and phrases from the class text, *Life in a Crowded Place* by Ralph Peterson (1992).

Also, students tended to focus on traits, goals, and environmental descriptions that they had coming into the class or added to based upon their current placement--because of what it had or lacked in their view. (While I did not ask students where their ideas

came from, I base this analysis on how students phrased their written work or comments in class such as: When I was in school . . . In my aunt's class . . . My little nephew . . .) However, some were incorporating vocabulary and examples that were connected to our readings and class discussions. Of the 19 students 6 responded in ways that surprised me--3 made connections and included rationales that demonstrated they were taking in much more of the course content than their formal papers conveyed based on not just the ideas, but the vocabulary used to express the ideas. These were students who did not talk often in class. The other 3 students talked often in class and shared relevant and connected ideas, questions, and concerns using the language of the texts. However, in responding to the questions I posed in this and the next in-class response paper, the students seemed to move away from the ideas they had used in their papers and discussed eloquently in class and not make connections to what we had been studying.

This made me think about the importance of having students share ideas written on these sheets with each other in small groups. I did not do this but would like to do so in the future. I also would like to ask students the first three questions about traits, goals, and environment the first or second week and then have them revisit their ideas later in the semester. The majority of students' responses seemed to come from prior experiences, but some stemmed from experiences in our course. I realized I should have posed the questions the first week of class and then much later in the semester to get a clearer understanding of what ideas they had taken from our class.

From considering their views on teachers' roles, goals, and classroom environments, we moved to considering how these and other aspects of teaching were represented in teaching magazines and journals.

### **How do the teaching magazines and journals position readers?**

By the time I asked students to choose an educational magazine or journal to review, we were two-thirds of the way through the semester. We had engaged in many weeks of reading and discussing material that focused on building upon children's funds of knowledge, teaching students who come from backgrounds different from our own, and teaching controversial topics, as well as issues of community development within the classroom. We had engaged in discussions in which students were willing to question the text and each other about views and opinions related to teaching in culturally relevant ways.

I asked students to choose a journal or magazine from a selection of early childhood/childhood journals I had brought into class. I told them these were ones that were commonly read in the field. Once they'd had a chance to skim the texts and choose one, I asked them why they chose the one they did--responses were mostly because of interesting pictures on the cover and inviting layout and graphics inside, or a title of an article that caught their interest. I then asked them to choose one advertisement and one article to read through and write about in response to questions I posed. I asked them to tell me why the advertisement would or would not convince them to suggest their school buy the product. Of the 19 students, 13 said they would suggest purchase of the material because it seemed fun and educational, helped teachers be organized, or other reasons that took their rationales from words in the advertisement about how the item would help students learn.

Most of those students who would recommend a product noted the colorful

layout, however two students read similar advertisements for software for use by bilingual students. Both said they would purchase the product on the strength of the product description, even though the advertisements were is in black and white-- something both students noted.

Of the six students who would not support purchase of the product from the advertisement, two chose advertisements for a machine that precision-cut paper to help teachers and students with art activities and classroom decorating. One of the students, Michelle, said all of the projects shown could be done without the machine, so it would be a waste of money. The other student, Jodi, said, "I think it is important for kids to cut out their own projects. Sometimes kids think that their work isn't good enough and having a machine like this could make them too dependent."

The second product was for software to assess students' reading ability. While Kerri said it would be interesting to see how the software compared to what she knew about students from daily interactions, she did not see how it could replace a teacher's ability to assess students in many ways over the course of a week or month of school.

A third product was for school supplies from a particular company. Joan said that while the ad had an impact on her because visually it shows that school is about building relationships, as well as "learning," however, she added that learning does not only take place when one uses those school supplies. Upon further consideration, she said the ad would not motivate her to purchase this company's school supplies over another.

The fourth product was in an advertisement was for set of lessons for working with parents of young children. After reading it, Stephanie felt the ad was too vague and did not give any credentials about the author so the reader wouldn't know why they

should trust the author's ideas.

The fifth product was for eMac. Cathy felt that the message that the only way a child can learn successfully was with the product was unfounded and would not recommend it for purchase.

Within their critique of advertisements, I saw students naming various techniques used to persuade a buyer. They seemed comfortable explaining why an advertisement was or was not successful in persuading them to purchase a product. Because I believe there is a parallel to this type of critique and other types of critique of text, responses to this activity suggest that it might be a good place to start the semester and then move to the less familiar territory of critiquing the messages in texts.

When reviewing articles, students were asked why they chose an article and if they would or would not follow the ideas or advice provided. Most students chose lesson ideas and said they would follow them because they seemed reasonable, made sense, or seemed fun and engaging. About three-quarters of the students added rationales to their answer that included that the article had ideas that helped them figure out how to organize some part of the school day they hadn't considered before, lessons that were on topics they'd be likely to cover, gave a teacher's perspective about what she really does, or helped them engage in types of thinking, listening, or discussion that they need to learn to do.

One student, Allison, who rarely spoke in large group and had given somewhat general answers to the other questions, made an interesting statement for this one. She chose an article about young children asking if two men can get married. She said that she read it because she wasn't sure what she would do when confronted with that question

and wanted to hear what someone else did. She learned that it would be important not to ignore it and maybe have students develop negative feelings about the topic and a discussion could help students form their own opinions. She would follow the advice given about how to engage in the discussion.

Another student, Jodi, who was sometimes quite vocal in class and also demonstrated some unique ways of thinking and problem solving, had provided a negative reaction to the advertisement for the di-cut machine. She chose an article on grading because we had not covered that in class, and she was interested in how it worked. She said she would follow the advice because it made sense to her and provided a list on how to prepare to do grades and how to add comments to the grades.

Only one student, Joan did not agree with what she read in an article. She had thoughtfully critiqued the advertisement on school products, making evident her initial emotional connection to the ad, but her ability to move from that connection to assessing the product itself. She read an article on managing misbehavior, which she felt was not the way to go with her future students. She did not care for the idea of a drop box for students to convey concerns and thoughts at the beginning of the day. She would want to make time for voicing concerns, joys, and announcements at the beginning of each school day because it is important to be able to share those with others. She suggested that the drop box might be a way for students to share things they want to keep confidential.

It was interesting to me that students were more likely to have negative critiques of advertisements than articles. I wondered if this stemmed from prior experiences with propaganda and consumerism. While students could see how words were used to sway them in advertising, they did not see words or ideas as the same in the articles. (When I

read the same articles, I found myself questioning content or the author's perspective for six of the 19 articles.)

Considering students' responses to why they read an article, I felt that an underlying message was that these articles got at the specifics of teaching that we had not covered in the course and they wanted to know. I was not surprised by this implicit message. I felt that in the future I might be able to use that sort of interest to further our work with critique. By engaging students in reading the particular of teaching that they wanted to learn in a critical way, I hoped I might be able to help them understand that they needed to be selective in choosing their teaching methods and that more was involved than a good/fun/interesting idea.

At this point in the semester I decided it was important for us to discuss educational journals and magazines as well as web sites in terms of how to assess who is providing the information and what it means when you read articles with opposing viewpoints on the same topic. How do you decide which side to believe? We talked about refereed journals, author's purpose and background, why a lesson idea may or may not be good to use in general or in a particular situation, and weighing the validity of opposing viewpoints. This occurred mainly in one class period, though I believed critical reading had occurred, but was not labeled as such, in many classes as, during our discussions we critiqued instructional ideas and underlying theory presented by our textbooks.

After our discussion, I asked students to return to the advertisement and articles from before and review and revise if they wanted to their response to each. I added some questions that related to what we had just discussed. I asked them to consider how they

were positioned by how each was written, to identify techniques used in the ad or words and phrases used in the article that suggest a particular positioning, and to explain if they saw the author of the article as an authority.

My students' reactions to the articles sometimes reflected what I hoped they had gotten from our discussions and sometimes did not. I found that there was a lack of connection between what some students could use from class when explicitly directed to in assignments or when discussing readings as opposed to what they brought with them to this more open activity.

For example, a student I talked about earlier, Cathy, thought that the lesson plan for comparing and contrasting the Lewis and Clark expedition and the first space mission was well done. She didn't know if the author was an authority because it did not give his credentials, but she thought he seemed well informed. Therefore, she also did not think he left out any relevant perspectives in the lesson. While my initial questions when reading the article were: From whose perspective is the Lewis and Clark expedition told? and Were there people opposing the first space mission?, Cathy was content with the facts as presented. Her earlier critique that initial readings were all by male authors and her skepticism to the message in the ad she read had led me to believe she would be considering whose point of view were left out in other situations.

### **My learnings**

Reviewing class discussion and student writings gave me many important areas to consider when planning and teaching, not just this course, but others later in the sequence. With regard to my initial questions about how students interacted with ideas in

texts, what they believed, and if they were able to critique information, I came away with understandings that varied even within a particular student given different learning engagements. I found that some students who were doing very well in their written assignments, did not necessarily apply critical stances to other, less formal and less graded, class interactions. I found that some students who seemed to struggle with course concepts were able to make connections among readings, assignments and activities in ways that demonstrated growth in their understanding of the complexity of teaching. I found that some students were willing to take up ideas from our readings that they had not considered before and others remained skeptical, even while able to write effectively about the ideas and concepts in question. Some overtly questioned ideas that were new to them, but it was likely more students covertly questioned these ideas and were taking a wait and see attitude. There seemed to be less questioning of journal and magazine articles and more choice of and agreement with those that supported a mainstream view when students chose their own articles.

I realized that ultimately, my questions would be difficult to answer even with extensive field notes and written work to analyze. Each student was on his or her own journey of understanding, and I was only seeing a few points in their progress. I began to realize that I would need to rely on students to keep a record of their evolving thinking on the subjects we cover in class and related ideas that they are prompted to think about. Ultimately it would be how each student viewed the world and his or her work based on concepts we discussed that would impact their teaching. In order to encourage them to reflect on their beliefs and their connections to their practice, I need to include a mechanism, such as reflective journals to be part of our class. While we do a lot of

writing, ongoing written reflection on the ideas of the class is not currently part of it.

### **Engaging in a hard discussion**

As we drew near the end of the course, one class discussion provided me with additional insight into how students had developed their thinking during the course.

Nancy had identified her Christian faith as being very important to her early on in the semester. As we read about AIDS and homosexuality as topics in elementary classrooms, I wondered how she would respond in class.

During our discussion on a photo exhibit of gay and lesbian families coming to elementary schools, Nancy said she was having a hard time understanding how she was suppose to act. She couldn't tell her students it was okay to be homosexual because her religion said it was not. She did not hate those people; rather she had compassion for them and would pray for them. It seemed like our readings were suggesting she should say that homosexuality was okay. She further stated she believed such a lifestyle was a choice and so people could change--unlike African Americans who could not change or hide their race. She did not think the connection to Civil Rights movement was appropriate. Several students clearly agreed with her. They seemed to have the same views but had not voiced them until now. I wondered if they were unwilling to do so because our text and my statements were saying that we had to not just tolerate differences but celebrate and accept them.

Other students voiced disagreement with her point, but in very low-key, non-confrontational ways. It was clear everyone felt we were on dangerous ground, but many felt they had to work their way through the conversation. Once Nancy could state a view

that they were pretty sure I disagreed with and meet with other ways of looking at the issue, not ridicule, more students spoke up on both sides. More students participated in this discussion than usually would speak. The conversation was encouraging to me in the sense that students felt they could disagree with the text, with each other, and with me and were able to do it in a respectful manner. Afterwards we debriefed the discussion and several said they were nervous about speaking, yet compelled to. They thought it was the best discussion we had had. I had to agree because we'd heard many voices and points of view.

It made me realize that good discussions involve border crossing, some temporary, as we "try out" a new idea or position in our struggle to understand it, and some transformative as we "take up" a new way of thinking that we had not considered previously, but now accept. At first, students need to be aware of borders that they may not have been able to name before if they are to be able to interrogate them. Given time and effort, a community can develop in which students feel comfortable sharing dissenting ideas and viewpoints. This community can support productive, non-confrontational discussions. With multiple and varied opportunities in class, students can take up the tools of critique and apply them to the ideas they encounter. But I believe that the development of a sense of safety and belonging in the class is crucial to students' motivation to take up those tools.

### **Continuing to study and question borders**

When students first enter my classroom, they are crossing one border, from being the college student to being the preservice teacher. In one of our texts, *Life in*

*Classrooms*, Ralph Peterson (1994) discusses the importance of ceremony in the classroom. The beginning of the year, the entering of the learning environment for the first time can be the scene of an opening ceremony. We have done a time-capsule activity meant to mark the beginning by having students write what they are thinking about being teachers and student teaching at this point in their career. We will give them their personal time capsules back the week before they begin student teaching. However, I want to expand on it this coming semester and have students literally cross a border I have delineated near the doorway, have something symbolic for them as they cross the border and then engage in discussion of the process prior to the time-capsule activity.

I want to follow this by reading children's books with the students to support the discussion of different perspectives at the beginning of the semester. It also is important to read some books with them that have clear agendas and messages and discuss these. I then want to look at opposing views of those same topics and discuss those. I want students to consider how all texts position them. Perhaps, as discussed earlier, I will use the critique of advertisements in teacher magazines early on as a way into the discussion of critique.

I want to discuss the educational texts available in order to begin a discussion of how those texts position readers and how my choice of texts positions students and are extensions of my positions and that of our education department. I want us to enter the reading of our texts aware of the varied influences on them and our discussions. I don't think this will make reading and discussion easier for students. It will likely make it harder, more frustrating and less "finished"--but that is my agenda.

I think it is necessary to help students define their own borders in terms of

understanding how they are situated and what other views of the world they encounter. I want them to be able to voice their concerns and confusions about what we read and discuss when it conflicts with their views. I want students to realize that to cross a border is to take a risk, to move from known to new, to try out ideas, to move forward, to reflect to move on or turn back--but never be quite the same.

## Reference List

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981) Discourse in the novel in M. Holoquist (Ed.) *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Ballenger, C. (1998) *Teaching Other People's Children: Literacy and learning in a bilingual classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bigelow, B., Harvey, B., Karp, S. & Miller, L. (2001) *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Volume 2: teaching for equity and justice*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
- Ellsworth, E. (1997) *Teaching Positions: Difference, pedagogy, and the power of address*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gee, J. P. (1987) What is literacy?., *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry*, 2(1), pp. 3-11.
- Graves, D. (2001) *The Energy to Teach*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Mayne, J. (1993). *Cinema and Spectatorship*. London: Routledge.
- McIntyre, E., Roseberry, A., & Gonzalez, N. (2001) *Classroom Diversity: connecting curriculum to students' lives*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Peterson, R. (1992) *Life in a Crowded Place: making a learning community*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.