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Teaching Future Teachers: Modeling Methodology while Delivering Content

Jacqueline Witter-Easley

Abstract

Teacher educators apply research-based methods for fostering their students’ literacy skills across disciplines, such as those needed to both comprehend and use writing to learn information in content-area texts. Intentional instruction of comprehension skills leads not only to enhanced understanding of a given text, but also to increased use of comprehension strategies while reading new texts. This article serves three purposes: it will describe effective comprehension strategies, discuss how to apply those strategies the information conveyed in their text books, and develop a mindset of intentionality to enable future teachers to make connections between the activities and the content.

Introduction

Educational theory is the cornerstone upon which teaching methods are built. Teacher candidates must learn and understand research-based theories in order to maximize their future students’ educational experiences. Teacher educators understand the significance of conveying these theories to their teacher candidates. In addition to conveying general theories, teacher educators work to facilitate the translation of research-based theories into effective classroom practice.

As a teacher educator, I have found this process to be difficult for teacher candidates to understand. When I began teaching reading methods courses, I modeled a variety of research-based literacy strategies by embedding them into assigned text readings and class sessions. I believed that through their participation in such authentic literacy experiences, they would develop their schema (Rumelhart, 1978) about effective teaching methods and access their schema to apply these methods to their own lesson plans and clinical teaching placements. I soon realized, however, that the integration of literacy skills into authentic reading materials and activities was not enough. I noticed that many candidates did not automatically connect these in-class activities to their own lesson plans. I came to the conclusion that I needed to do more than embed and model literacy strategies. I needed to include a key element: intentionality. This means that I learned to pause the authentic activity and intentionally dissect the process that I modeled, its connection to theory, and the research that supports it (Risko, Roller, Cummins, Bean, Block, Anders, & Flood, 2008). By adding intentional discussions to the methods, I now teach to both sides of the teacher candidates’ mindsets: the traditional-student mindset (one who participates in the activity and acquires content knowledge), and the future-teacher mindset (one who dissects the activity through the lens of theory and research). As Ball and Forzani (2009) note, “Helping students learn academic skills and content requires not only strong knowledge of that content but also the capacity to make the subject accessible to diverse learners” (p. 501). One way I have found to ensure that the students understand both mindsets is through a handout of a t-chart. I label the left side of the chart with the name of the activity and the right side as “Research-based theory”. The students fill out the chart as both the activity and follow-up discussion progress, thereby creating a resource that both describes how to implement the activity as well as the theoretical foundations upon which the activity is based.

Teacher educators of all content areas must effectively deliver content (theories, pedagogy) while modeling best literacy practices to help their undergraduate students access that content in text books and articles (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In turn, teacher candidates must possess the ability to dissect these experiences so that the underlying theory becomes evident and the activity is executed effectively in their clinical experience lesson plans and future classrooms. According to Pearson (2009), intentional instruction of comprehension skills leads not only to enhanced understanding of a given text, but also to increased use of comprehension strategies while reading new texts. When connecting this information to the preparation of teacher candidates, I have learned that I cannot simply assign text chapters to read without modeling literacy strategies that will foster the active construction of meaning from those texts. In this paper, I describe a variety of activities I’ve used in my own reading methods courses. They demonstrate both authentic literacy methods that I’ve embedded and modeled into my content lessons, and intentionality-of-purpose discussions for all phases of a class session: before, during, and after reading and discussing a text.

Authentic Pre-Reading Activities

Writing Notebooks

The act of writing provides the human brain with time to simultaneously process and reflect upon new concepts. By taking time at the beginning of a class session to engage students in writing about a given topic, query, or experience, teacher educators are not only modeling appropriate teaching techniques, they are also ensuring that their students will have accessed their schemata about the topic and bring forward relevant ideas to the
class discussion. Furthermore, the act of writing allows the students to think critically, and expand upon their initial thoughts with increased depth of analysis. This is time well spent! I have implemented a variety of “quick writes” (Daniels, Steineke, & Zemelman, 2007, p. 30) into my students’ writing notebooks.

- **Writing from a List** (Buchner, 2004)—This is an excellent strategy that is a twist on traditional brainstorming lists. I begin by posing a question or statement to the class related to upcoming content (such as, “Why should we start each school day by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance?”). The students make a list of at least five reasons in their notebooks. By setting a specific amount, I am requiring the students to think beyond their first, most obvious, ideas. They have to dig deeper to finish the list. Next, I instruct them to reread their lists and circle the one item they believe to be their most important reason. Note that they most likely selected a reason near the bottom of their list—evidence of the power of effective brainstorming practice. Finally, I tell the class to write out their selected reason at the top of the next page, in a complete sentence, and then expound on it in paragraph form. I often call on volunteers to read aloud their paragraphs and frame the class discussion around them, interjecting key points throughout the session.

  Intentionality of this activity—After a while, I pause the class discussion and ask, “How did I guide you to think deeply about this topic?” I scaffold this dissection of the activity by having the students enumerate the steps involved in the lesson and describe the purpose behind each step. We then note the reasoning behind setting a required amount of ideas to the list and connect this to the benefits of creating disequilibrium and fostering deeper thinking through guided brainstorming sessions.

- **Read-Aloud Reactions**—I often read aloud a short text (or excerpt) that is related to the education profession and/or class session’s topic. This allows me to model the importance of reading aloud to students of all ages. Next, I pause and have the students write in their notebooks one of the following: a) free-write response to the text; b) response to an open-ended question about the text (such as a prediction); c) two items of new information; or d) an “aha” moment learned in the text. Once they’ve completed their written reactions, I put them into small groups (3 – 4) and have each member share his/her response. After we regroup as a whole class I ask each group to report on the main ideas they discussed. As each group reports, I list their ideas on the board and use this as a frame for the class discussion about the topic at hand.

  Intentionality of this activity—Near the end of the class session, I’ll stop to ask the students to turn and talk to their neighbors about how I moved the students from the read aloud segment to the class discussion. I point out the use of small groups as a type of scaffolding between independent writing and whole class discussion. I often ask, “How did my placement of the small group discussion at that point in the activity impact the overall class discussion process?” Describe the benefits of effectively using small group discussions to: maximize student involvement, create community, develop creative thinking, enhance discourse skills, and optimize time on task.

- **Quotables**—As students file into the classroom, I post on the board a quotation from a notable article or the upcoming text chapter. Next, I direct the students to write a question they have about the quotation. I arrange the students into small groups (3 – 4) and have them pass their papers clockwise to the person next to them. On command, each student is to read the question and write their own response. After a set period of time, they pass the notebook to the next person who must write a new response (no “ditto” or “I agree” allowed). This continues until the original authors receive their notebooks back and have time to read through all of the responses. We then meet back as a whole group and several students share their questions aloud, while I list these questions on the board. This allows me to set a purpose for reading. I direct the class to think about either their own question or one from the board as I read aloud the article or segment. They should also read through their peers’ responses to their questions in light of having heard the context and lead a discussion about the article, focusing on the quotation’s meaning in relation to the course content.

  Intentionality of the activity—As the whole-class discussion unfolds, I ask the students to describe the benefits of passing their questions around their small group and receiving written responses. Often, I flip the perspective on this question by asking about the benefits of having them write a response to each question—especially after several peers wrote answers to the question and they could not simply respond with “ditto.” What type of thinking did this phase of the activity require? Furthermore, how does the act of writing a question about a statement challenge students to think critically? My goal in this phase of the discussion is to facilitate the students’ understanding of how to frame class discussion that is not teacher-centered, but rather student-centered with teacher guidance so that the class moves steadily toward higher-levels of comprehension (Zwiers, 2008). In this way, discussions become tools for constructing ideas and creating new knowledge (Mercer, 2000).
**Academic Language**

Vocabulary knowledge and comprehension of text are reciprocal literacy processes (Stanovich, 1986). As teacher candidates read through their text books, they encounter academic language and must learn this terminology of the education profession in order to comprehend the text and, ultimately, apply it to their future classrooms. Furthermore, teacher candidates must understand and experience effective strategies for teaching vocabulary so their future students will apply these strategies to their own reading.

- **Bull’s Eye Words**—Before class, I post on the board a list of key words from an upcoming article or chapter. Next, I divide the class into small groups and give each group a stack of self-sticking notepads. One or two members of each group will copy down the list of words, one word per sticky note. Meanwhile, I make a bull’s eye target with three concentric circles on it for each group. Group members will go through each word and discuss whether they know it very well, are somewhat familiar with the term, or do not know it at all. Once they’ve sorted the words into these three categories, I instruct them to arrange the words onto their group’s bull’s eye target by placing the words they know very well in the center (bull’s eye), those they are familiar with in the middle ring, and those they do not know at all in the outer ring. This is similar to the use of Knowledge Charts (Blachowicz, 1986) in that students rate their own knowledge of a set of words. Once all of the groups have completed their bull’s eye targets, I will lead a discussion of the words, focusing primarily on those that the students have placed on the outer ring (those they do not know at all).

Intentionality of the activity—After reviewing the key words with the students, I ask them whether they all knew the meaning of the words they placed in the bull’s eye before meeting with their group. Most often, several of the words would have been learned through the small-group discussions and by collaborating with their peers. I guide them in reflecting on how this type of structure enabled them to increase their learning of content beyond traditional methods of looking up vocabulary words in a dictionary and writing them in a sentence. As the discussion progresses, we focus on my role and how I maximized use of time on task (focusing primarily on words that the group struggled with the most—those in the outer ring). I make sure to guide the students into understanding how this activity will assist them in reading the upcoming article or chapter: the new vocabulary has now been learned and they will be able to access their schema when they encounter these words during their independent reading of the text.

- **Word Sorts**—When a text book chapter contains a significant amount of academic language, I create a list of those terms that students will encounter and divide the class into small groups. I provide blank index cards and tell the students to copy down the list, one word per card. The small groups must then review the words and consider which words are related, then sort them into groups. Next, each group must decide on a label for each category of words and use a blank index card to write the label (in a different colored marker), placing it at the top of its word group. Finally, allow time for a “gallery tour” by having the class quietly walk around the room to view each group's word sorts. I often use my iPad™ to take digital photos of the sorts and project them on the whiteboard to review and discuss. I facilitate the discussion so that the accurate meanings of the words are conveyed and important connections are highlighted in the upcoming text.

Intentionality of the activity—I typically ask the students questions about this activity that cause them to become aware of their own learning processes. This allows me to emphasize their cognitive processes that evolved during the collaborative sorting phase, the labeling phase, and the gallery walk. For example, I have asked, “How did viewing your peers’ word sorts provide depth of experience with the new vocabulary words?” I often make a list on the board as students share their answers aloud so that we have a frame of reference for our discussions. In addition, I guide the students in examining the teacher’s role during the final whole-class discussion of the word sort photographs. I may ask, “How did the instructor ensure that you learned the new words?” Or, “How could you (the teacher candidates) use this activity with your own students?” The use of word sorts (Zuttel, 1998) allows teacher candidates to gain first-hand experience in the benefits of this seminal reading and spelling method for students of all ages.

**Authentic Reading Activities**

**Structured Bookmarks**

When students are assigned a text to read independently, instructors expect them to arrive in class the following day ready to discuss it. In my experience, I’ve found that effective comprehension occurs when readers interact with the text, mentally engaging with the content as well as monitoring their thinking about the information (Pressley, 2000). Unfortunately, this does not often happen for our students when we simply assign a text. The troubling question I have asked myself is, if my education students do not engage and interact with text as they read, how can I be sure they’ll be equipped to teach their future students to do this? One way that I have accomplished this is by teaching students an academic language and reading process, focusing on my role and how I maximize use of time on task (focusing primarily on words that the group struggled with the most—those in the outer ring). I make sure to guide the students into understanding how this activity will assist them in reading the upcoming article or chapter: the new vocabulary has now been learned and they will be able to access their schema when they encounter these words during their independent reading of the text.
the process of interacting with the text is through the use of structured bookmarks. Following are several examples of bookmarks I have created and used with teacher educators that effectively engaged them with the text and set a purpose for reading and learning key content. I describe the intentionality of the bookmarks’ benefits at the end of this section.

- **Anticipation Guides** (Allen, 2004)—Traditional anticipation guides are created to facilitate pre-reading skills by posing statements for the reader to react to before reading the text. This increases student engagement with the text because the anticipation guide’s statements activate schemata that are needed in order to comprehend the information. By reacting to the statements on the bookmark, education students have more of a personal investment in the text’s material. Furthermore, the statements should challenge potential misconceptions about key content so that the reader will need to monitor his/her own thinking while reading the text. Anticipation guides on bookmarks should include 2 – 3 statements related to the main ideas and essential content of the assigned text. I have found this bookmark to be most effective when used before reading an article or chapter that focuses on a topic of which teacher candidates tend to have preconceived notions. To make this bookmark, I developed statements about the text’s content (see Figure 1). For each statement, I created a two-column chart labeled “before reading” and “after reading.” I included a Likert scale response key (A = strongly agree; B = agree; C = disagree; D = strongly disagree) and instructed the students to read the statements in class (before reading the assignment). Next, I tell them to fill out the first column, “before reading” by noting their level of agreement with the statement and writing their reasoning for this level. I direct them to put the bookmark in their text to mark the assigned chapter and tell them to fill out the “after reading” column for each statement when they finish reading the assignment. Finally, I use these bookmarks as a springboard to the discussion during the subsequent class session.

**RESPONSE BOOKMARK**—Pages 418-437

Respond to the following statements both before and after you read Chapter 2.

| A = strongly agree | B = agree |
| C = disagree | D = strongly disagree |

1. Literature-based reading programs can be used with all students, including struggling readers.

| Before Reading: | After Reading: |
| , because: | , because: |

3. The process of selecting literature to use in my classroom is an overwhelming task.

| Before Reading: | After Reading: |
| , because: | , because: |

4. Characteristics of authentic multicultural literature include:

| List your ideas before reading: | After Reading: |

**Figure 1**

- **Personal Perspectives**—When I find an article or text topic that reflects a current issue in education, I create these bookmarks because they immerse the reader into the perspective of people who would be impacted by that issue. Typically, I’ve created bookmarks that focus on one of three different roles: teacher, principal, student. Each bookmark includes the main topic from the upcoming text or article assignment. Before reading the article, I instruct the students to look at their own role on their bookmark and fill in their responses, from this perspective, to two items (on the bookmark): “needs” and “concerns.” Next, I tell the students to place the bookmark with the reading assignment and use it while reading the text (homework). After the reading, I assign the students to fill out the bookmark’s final two sections: “text statements” and “your reactions.” Their reactions must be written from the perspective of their bookmark’s role (teacher, principal, or student). During the following class session, I use their completed bookmarks to discuss the assigned text.

- **Reading Between the Lines**—I have found that
teacher candidates do not typically reflect on their own inferential thinking processes (Herrmann & Sarracino, 1993; Risko, Roskos, & Vukelich, 1999). Their inability to do so has impacted the quality of their lesson plans about inferential questioning and thinking. I developed a bookmark adapted from Zwiers (2004) to guide them in developing their self-awareness of their own inferential thinking about text, while also providing them with a concrete framework to use for teaching this abstract skill to their future students. To prepare it, I developed three inferential questions about an assigned text. I created a 4 x 4 chart in landscape layout for the bookmark and labeled column 1 “Questions”, column 2 “The text says…”, column 3 “I know that…” and column 4 “Therefore…”. I inserted each question, one per box, in column one (see Figure 2). In class, I reviewed the three questions and instructed the class to keep them in mind as they read the assigned text on their own. Next, I reviewed the heading of column two and told them to note textual information that addresses each question and fill it out as they read. For column three, they must think and write about what they already know about that information. For column four, they must draw their own conclusion by using the text information combined with their own background knowledge. During the following class session, I frame the discussion from their responses on the bookmark.

- Double-Entry Bookmarks (Tovani, 2000). I have often found that it is difficult to model the process of metacognition. By creating a bookmark that focuses the readers’ attention on the author’s writing and their thoughts about the content, I have embedded this process into my classroom practice. This bookmark contains two columns, the first labeled “Quotation (p. #)” and the second labeled “Reaction.” Before reading the text, I instruct the students that as they read, they will highlight statements, words, or phrases that resonate with them and copy them down in column one. Next to each statement, in column 2, I tell the students to write their reactions to it. To scaffold this process, I describe and list sample reactions, such as: “This reminds me of…”, “I don’t understand this statement…”, “I wonder why the author said…”, “I agree with this…”, etc. They will meet with a small group during the following class session to share their quotes and reactions. During their small-group discussions, I circulate the room and note quotes and reactions that are most relevant to the main ideas from the text. I use these notes to frame the whole-class discussion and activities.

Intentionality of the bookmark activities—When implementing bookmarks into the class reading assignments, it is most effective to discuss their benefits to learning near the end of the term. I direct the students to keep the bookmarks in their text books for the semester so that we can review them collectively. To begin the discussion, I often ask, “How would you describe your level of engagement when reading the text while using these bookmarks?” By listing their ideas and mapping them into comprehension processes (such as: schema activation, critical thinking,

### Reading-Writing Connections (Ch. 11; Vacca, et al.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions:</th>
<th>The text says…</th>
<th>I know that…</th>
<th>Therefore…</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How are reading and writing related?</td>
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<td>How would you incorporate the writing process into your classroom’s</td>
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<td>Writing Workshop?</td>
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<td>Compare Guided Writing to Guided Reading and Guided Modeling. Why is</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guided Writing important?</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2
etc.), I guide the students to understand that their engagement was likely heightened and more conducive to higher levels of comprehension because each bookmark activated their schema, encouraged them to monitor their thinking while reading, and slowed their reading pace in order to attend to the items required on the bookmarks.

This discussion facilitates the teacher candidates’ discovery that such activities, when thoroughly planned and implemented, allow the teacher to control the students’ reading rate and engagement with the text—despite their reading the text without the teacher’s presence. Finally, I continue the dissection of these tools by describing the various whole-class discussion activities that ensued after each bookmark was completed during the term. To sum up the discussion, I provide a t-chart handout for students to fill out independently, with the left column labeled “bookmark activity” and the right column labeled “comprehension processes”. Students should fill in the chart as each bookmark is reviewed and discussed.

Authentic Post-Reading Activities

Posters

When teacher candidates experience the use of student-created posters as powerful learning tools, they, in turn, will more likely implement this strategy in their future classrooms. This authentic activity connects to the real world by encouraging the students to create a visually appealing chart that conveys critical information to a real audience: their peers.

- **Content Area Word Walls**—After reading and discussing a text, I assign the teacher candidates to create a graphic organizer for the academic language and/or key vocabulary they learned while reading the chapter or article and display them in the classroom. I typically divide the class into small groups and have each focus on specific sections from the text to create a graphic organizer that suits their section’s purpose (i.e., flow charts for cause-effect information; Venn Diagrams for compare-contrast information; word sorts for descriptions of various topics; etc.). Before displaying their posters, each group should have time to teach their poster’s content to the class.

- **Persuasive Posters**—After reading an article or excerpt about a current educational issue, I have the teacher candidates work with a partner or small group to brainstorm questions they have about this issue. After sharing the questions with the class, I guide the groups in framing their questions into surveys. Once each group has settled on a quantifiable survey question related to the article’s issue, I tell the groups to go into the campus community and ask their question to their peers, faculty, and staff, requiring a minimum of 30 responses. When they meet back in the classroom, I provide materials for creating a poster and tell each group to display their questions and the survey results in a visually appealing and accessible manner on their posters. Finally, I spend the remaining class time (or begin the next session) having each group discuss and present to the class their poster’s question, why it is relevant, its statistical results, and their analysis of the results’ implications for future teachers. We then display the posters in the hallway for the campus to view.

Intentionality of the posters—The creation of posters vs. taking notes or writing independently in notebooks is a powerful component of the learning process because through this activity, students must review their notes, collaborate with peers to organize their notes into meaningful contexts, and then present their information to the public. I have noticed that when students present information to the public, whether it be their peers or the community-at-large, they tend to increase their effort into making the information understandable, factually based, and interesting to read. They put in this extra effort because they are writing for both an authentic purpose and a real audience (Barnes, 2018).

By shifting the purpose to creating content that their peers will value, teachers engage their students in truly authentic literacy. The students take pride in their work and feel accountable to the community to present them with credible information conveyed in a visually appealing way. If teachers only ever assign research papers, tests, and graded notes, the students will only write for their teachers—not a real audience. This is true for students of all ages, but made very evident to teacher candidates when they have the opportunity to reflect on their own output of effort into projects with a real audience. I have encouraged such reflection through freewriting about this experience and their writing notebooks and then building a discussion from their notebook entries.

Online Publications and eBooks

According to Vacca et al., (2015), “[s]upporting students’ writing of electronic texts is one of the important reading-writing-technology connections that can be made in the classroom” (p. 338). Integral to the successful implementation of this process is the provision of similar experiences for teacher candidates in their own coursework. For example, after reading a variety of texts related to a principle unit of course study, I have assigned the teacher candidates to create a book with a familiar format, such as an alphabet book, or a “top ten” book. Each student (or pair of students) worked on one topic from the unit and developed their page for the class book. After
peer-editing and revising, I published their work into a class book and distributed copies to the students. This could be accomplished with online publishing, too—either as an eBook or through a self-publishing site. It is very powerful to have the class create a book and have an “Author Event” on campus—complete with author talks and signatures available to the attendees! I plan to further the publishing experience by creating an online Teacher Education Journal. My goal is to create a scholarly journal that publishes teacher candidates’ research papers, creative writing related to education, essays, poems, reflections, and artwork.

Intentionality of publishing activities—After celebrating the students’ published works, I ask them to describe in their writing notebooks their personal insights into participation in writing projects that resulted in authentic publications. I allow time for individuals to share their notebook entries with the class and guide them in understanding how the writing process was implemented in this activity. We share these entries as a whole group, discussing the benefits of writing for a real audience and the increased level of comprehension, authentic application of course content, and powerful reading-writing connections that were made manifest through this project. We typically close the discussion with a brainstorming session about creative publication venues to use with their future students.

Conclusion

Teacher candidates are excellent students. They’ve been students for more than half their lives and they know how to complete work, study for tests, take notes, and participate in class discussions. The real challenge for teacher educators lies in creating authentic classroom activities that teach content while also modeling effective pedagogy and methods in a way that moves the teacher candidates from the traditional-student mindset into the future-teacher mindset. The most common approach to creating that teacher mindset is to provide clinical experiences in real classrooms. However, without guidance from the education professor during in-class activities, teacher candidates tend to create lesson plans that reflect their own schooling experiences more than those modeled for them in their methods courses (Darling-Hammond, 2008). The education professor must not only model authentic teaching processes through content instruction, s/he must also intentionally dissect the activity so the teacher candidates will shift into the future-teacher mindset and confidently implement similar activities into their clinical experience lesson plans. Through this triage of in-class modeling, mindset-shifting discussions, and implementation into their clinical experiences, the teacher candidates will develop their abilities to think metacognitively about their strategic use of various teaching methods. Through the years of my own experience as a reading methods professor, I have witnessed increased usage of the literacy strategies in my students’ lesson plans that I have not only embedded into my content instruction but also intentionally discussed. The teacher candidates articulate their instructional approaches in their lesson plans clearly, and demonstrate their readiness to shift into their professional teaching roles as they transition into their student teaching semester.

Literacy processes are integral to the learning of all content areas. Teacher educators will increase their teacher candidates’ abilities to foster higher levels of comprehension and communication skills among their future students by embedding the modeling and intentional dissecting of authentic literacy methods across all content areas and grade levels. This is possible when teacher educators select authentic texts (articles, excerpts, textbook chapters) and teach the content of these texts through the use of research-based literacy activities throughout the learning segment: pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading. My goal has been to provide examples of authentic literacy activities for teacher educators to use as a starting point for embedding them into their own content area methods courses. Through my descriptions of discussing the intentionality of the activities, I aimed to encourage teacher educators to consider the development of their students’ mindset shift. As teacher educators implement these activities, they will likely develop their own unique methods for intentionally integrating literacy methods into their courses while setting aside class time to dissect the activities and connect them to their students’ clinical experience lesson plans.

References


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**About the Author**

Jacqueline Witter-Easley is the Dean of the Division of Professional Studies at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where she also serves as an associate professor in the Department of Education. At Carthage, she teaches courses in the methods of teaching reading and language arts in both elementary and secondary classrooms, as well as courses in children’s literature, creative arts instruction, and diagnosis of reading difficulties. Dr. Witter-Easley is a former elementary teacher and assistant children’s librarian. Her research interests include integrating children’s literature across the curriculum, visual literacy, and culturally responsive literacy instruction.