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Instructional Strategies to Support Building Preservice Literacy Educators' Knowledge: A Critical Reflexive Praxis Journal

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Abstract

This Critical Reflexive Praxis Journal entry focuses on preparation for the upcoming Fall Literacy Block courses by reflecting on the effectiveness of recent pedagogical innovations. Focused on enhancing pre-service teachers' abilities in elementary literacy education, Nicholas (the author) introduced guided notes and reading introductions as key strategies to improve student engagement and learning outcomes. This reflective journal serves not only to assess these methods but also to determine their future application in the curriculum. The urgency of this evaluative and planning process is highlighted by the limited time available before the fall semester, emphasizing the need for timely revisions. Through this critical examination, he aims to refine these educational tools to better support pre-service teachers in developing essential literacy skills. This approach underscores a commitment to continuous improvement and effective teaching practice in elementary education.

Keywords: teacher education, instructional strategies, guided notes, article introduction, knowledge building

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The end of the spring semester at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln is looming large; as I write this, there are three weeks remaining and, as is my habit, my thoughts have begun to turn toward fall's Literacy Block courses. Part of our Elementary Education program, Literacy Block, is a six-credit course that brings together content and pedagogical knowledge aimed at enriching our preservice teachers' (PSTs) abilities to successfully teach elementary students reading and writing. While I enjoy teaching all my courses, Literacy Block is my favorite - do not tell the others. There is an urgency to the work I relish; I have six credits' worth of time to best equip my students with the skills and knowledge needed to be able to teach their future students how to read and write, a foundational skill set that will reverberate throughout their lives. Teacher educators are navigating increasing challenges, not only in equipping preservice teachers with literacy instruction strategies but also in addressing the broader systemic constraints affecting pedagogical decision-making. Recent scholarship highlights the ways in which political and legislative factors shape what and how teachers can teach, often limiting academic freedom and curtailing professional autonomy (Bhatnagar & Tinker Sachs, 2022). These factors directly impact how literacy educators approach curriculum design and instructional strategies. It is a challenge I always find inspiring, even before the added attention by the Science of Reading (SOR) movement. For the purpose of this critical reflection, I rely on the International Reading Association (n.d.) conceptualization of SOR as "a convergence of accumulated and evolving findings from research regarding reading processes and reading instruction (pedagogy) and how the two are implemented across contexts that interactively bridge cultural, social, biological, psychological, linguistic, and historical bases of learning." Much of this attention on teacher education's role in reading achievement in America stems from current public media projects (see Hanford, 2022 - Present).

I had engaged in reading in both improvement science and knowledge building throughout the spring of 2024. Improvement science is an applied methodology that explores how knowledge can be systematically connected to practice to drive meaningful improvements. Originally developed in fields like the automobile industry (Rother, 2009) and later adapted to medicine (Gawande, 2007), improvement science emphasizes the iterative refinement of practices within a specific system. Central to this framework is the integration of foundational knowledge—such as understanding how grammar influences sentence meaning in writing—with "a system of profound knowledge" (Deming, 1993/2018). This system encompasses an awareness of context, variation, and the interplay of components necessary to implement and sustain improvements effectively. Furthermore, a knowledge-building approach integrates systematic methods to deepen students' comprehension, such as using text sets to scaffold understanding of complex topics (Lupo et al., 2018). This strategy moves beyond teaching discrete facts to fostering connections among multiple texts and ideas.

I introduced two new teaching strategies within my Literacy Block courses: text introductions and guided notes. These strategies were implemented with the purpose of increasing levels of student engagement and improving learning outcomes for my students and, in anticipation of the impending fall semester, I am going to use this reflexive journal entry as a space to reflect on these modifications. This entry will act as a space to evaluate these strategies, why I implemented them and how they fared, and lay out plans for keeping, revising, or abandoning them as well as a space to lay out plans for what I want to do next. This reflection is not simply a pedagogical necessity, but also a logistical one. My summer is tightly scheduled with teaching a children's literature course for the last five weeks of summer, followed by a brief week before fall classes begin. If I do not plan now, there will not be another opportunity.

Through this journal entry, I aim to engage in a critical and reflective practice that not only assesses what has been accomplished but also sets the stage for future teaching enactments. This process is not merely about refinement but is an essential part of my professional praxis.

Reading Introductions

I leverage a variety of articles from practitioner journals to support PST learning across the semester within my course. This serves several pragmatic purposes: it exposes students to a variety of voices within literacy instruction and keeps textbook costs down as students utilize university subscriptions available to them via their student fees. This decision, however, creates additional responsibilities for the instructor. Beyond the need to ascertain the quality and applicability of the texts to the learning objectives of the course, there is the notion of cohesion to wrestle with. While a textbook maintains a cohesive voice, a collection of diverse practitioner articles requires the instructor to act as the mortar between texts to ensure both cohesion and continuity. There is the thought that class time will serve this function, but the very pressing reality is that students are reading these texts on their own and the connections we, as instructors, desire may not be made by students in these isolated pockets of time external to class.

There has been increasing concern paid to the amount of time college and university students spend reading for their classes (Johnson, 2019), and time is indeed important but needs to be considered alongside how students are constructing meaning within these texts. Reading comprehension for students in higher education involves the ability to construct mental models from texts, integrating explicit and implicit information with prior knowledge and experiences (Kucer, 2016; van den Broek et al., 2015). Academic texts, like the practitioner articles I select for class, are inherently complex, demanding not only literal, surface-level understanding but also deep analytical and inferential skills.

The construction-integration model, widely accepted and deeply influential in reading research, distinguishes between superficial processing, where students memorize text data, and deep processing, where they elaborate a text's situational model by integrating it with prior experiences and knowledge (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; Kintsch, 1998). These processing levels draw upon cognitive strategies that range from basic decoding to complex transformations of text content.

My own experiences with my students mirror what is seen in larger research regarding college and university students' reading: their processes typically engage at the literal level of comprehension, and they experience struggle with more complex tasks that require inferential and critical thinking (Barletta et al., 2005; Yáñez Botello, 2013). This challenge is particularly salient among first-year students (Bharuthram, 2012; Livingston et al., 2015) and typically manifests in limited abilities to make text-based inferences as well as understanding the macrostructures of texts, both of which impede the abilities for students to develop a cohesive situational model of the text.

There is a disparity by which college and university students engage in a markedly higher performance at the literal level of comprehension compared to inferential, critical, and organizational levels. This disparity underscores a critical educational concern: students are often only prepared to engage with texts at the most basic level, struggling significantly as the cognitive demands increase (Márquez et al., 2016). As someone working in elementary literacy education, I find this especially concerning. My students are reading to build knowledge and transform their educational practice, as they will soon be working with young readers to develop comprehension strategies. A strong understanding of reading comprehension, and the ability to engage in it effectively, is a critical skill for both.

Grounded in these understandings within a Science of Reading, I created introduction videos for each of the texts I asked students to read throughout the semester. These short videos, less than five minutes long, were to act as preliminary guides to help students navigate the complex concepts they would encounter by explicitly teaching unfamiliar vocabulary and providing guiding questions to support their comprehension throughout the text itself. Videos were recorded with our college's videographer, who provided both recording and post-production, ensuring that each video had a similar feel and took advantage of multimodal elements. I embedded these videos directly into the PDFs themselves; for students using PDF-reading apps that did not support the video embed, the graphic linked to the video housed on Yuja, a university-wide video platform. This allowed me to track views across the semester as viewing these videos was an optional activity for students.

While establishing a direct link between the introductory videos and student comprehension is challenging, certain correlations provide indications of how this strategy both supported and might be adapted to better support my students. During the first eight weeks of the semester, video engagement was high, with each video being viewed by approximately 75% of the class on average. This figure might be slightly inflated if individual students viewed the videos multiple times, although it aligns with the self-reported data collected through exit slips at the end of each class. That students were viewing these videos of their own accord gives some indication of how students perceived their value. However, viewership declined significantly in the second half of the semester, dropping to about 33%. I suspect this decrease may be due to students having developed sufficient background knowledge as the course progressed. Reflecting on this, I noted that the video introductions for later articles maintained the same format as earlier ones. It is plausible that these later videos offered less value to students who had already

acquired the necessary foundational knowledge to understand the texts. This observation opens up the possibility of repurposing the videos in new ways.

Of the two strategies discussed in this journal, creating text introductions has proven to be particularly time-intensive. This task involved revisiting the texts used in class, analyzing them to identify the essential background knowledge students needed to access the ideas presented, pinpointing unfamiliar vocabulary, and outlining strategies to aid students' independent reading, including connecting article content to concepts already addressed within the class. These insights were distilled into a script, which I then video recorded. Each video was subsequently embedded into the corresponding PDF and uploaded to Canvas, our campus Learning Management System. For a six-credit, 16-week course, there was a total of 68 videos, with each video taking approximately two-to-three hours to produce from start to finish. Given this significant investment, I want to lay out a revision process that prioritizes the effectiveness of these videos in enhancing student learning while avoiding the pitfalls of the sunk cost fallacy, the notion that I have already produced certain videos and, therefore, need to use them regardless of their effectiveness.

A necessary step involves creating video introductions for new articles being added to the course, as well as phasing out the introductions for articles no longer included in the syllabus. I am skeptical that the aesthetic appeal of these videos impacts student engagement as significantly as the content, and I plan to independently film these new text introductions on my own in batches with minimal editing. Additionally, I am reconsidering the sequence in which students engage with the texts. Previously, I assumed, perhaps naively, that all readings should be completed before class. Now, I want to rethink the entire course structure to determine if this approach is optimal for every text. For those readings better suited for post-class engagement, I

will redesign the video introductions to enhance students' understanding and interaction with the material. Moreover, in the latter half of the course, I aim to refine these introductions to connect more profoundly with overarching course themes, moving beyond basic introductions to foster deeper conceptual connections.

Guided Notes

For years, I provided students with class slides, assuming these would help solidify their understanding as we navigated the curriculum. Yet, these slides often merely served as shallow reminders of our discussions, and students frequently expressed surprise at their limited effectiveness in aiding retention. In response, I shifted to guided notes—an educational tool designed to enhance student engagement and improve memory retention. These handouts, prepared by the instructor, outline major lecture points but omit key details, requiring students to fill these in during the lecture. This interactive strategy ensures students remain actively involved, focusing their attention on essential information, which aids in understanding and recall.

Guided notes feature a skeletal framework aligned with the lecture content, with strategically placed blanks and cues that encourage attentive listening. They also include opportunities for students to complete diagrams or phrases that encapsulate critical concepts and facts. This approach not only streamlines the note-taking process by highlighting vital information but also minimizes classroom distractions, allowing students to devote their cognitive resources more effectively to processing the material being taught.

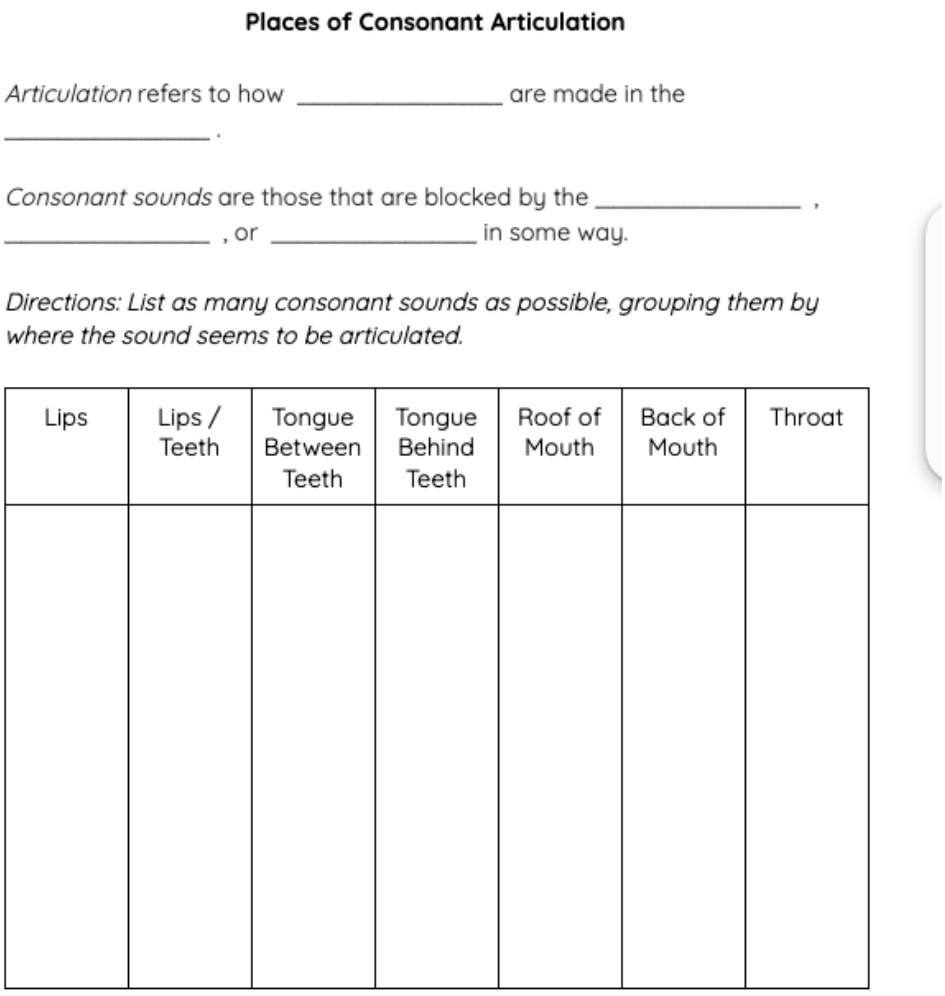
In terms of instructional use, guided notes are versatile tools that can be implemented across various educational levels and learning environments, from elementary classrooms to college lectures, and in both in-person and online settings. The literature suggests that they are

particularly effective for students who may struggle with traditional note-taking methods, including those with learning disabilities. By providing a clear, focused pathway through the lecture content, guided notes help these students stay engaged and retain information more effectively. Studies, such as those by Austin et al. (2002) and Lazarus (1991, 1993), have shown that guided notes improve the accuracy of notes taken by students, enhance the frequency of correct responses on related quizzes and tests, and can even increase overall content mastery. Thus, guided notes not only support the note-taking process but also enhance learning outcomes by ensuring that students capture vital information during lectures.

Guided notes were one of the instructional strategies I enacted during the Fall 2023 as a way to support my students in developing long-term memory of content; I carefully structured course guided notes to align with the key concepts and content within each class section and included a range of devices to increase engagement in the intellectual work of the class session. The devices include fill-in-the-blank exercises, filling in graphics of models and explaining those models, and engaging in discovery activities before moving into instruction. See Figures 1 and 2 for examples of these within my guided notes.

Figure 1

Articulation Fill-in-the-blank and Exploration Activity within Literacy Block Guided Notes.



Places of Consonant Articulation

Articulation refers to how _____ are made in the _____ .

Consonant sounds are those that are blocked by the _____ , _____ , or _____ in some way.

Directions: List as many consonant sounds as possible, grouping them by where the sound seems to be articulated.

Lips	Lips / Teeth	Tongue Between Teeth	Tongue Behind Teeth	Roof of Mouth	Back of Mouth	Throat

Figure 2

Compare and Contrast and Mapping Activity in Literacy Block Guided Notes

Reading and Writing in the Brain

Compare these two concepts:

Biologically Primary Knowledge	*Biologically Secondary Knowledge*
What is it?	*What is it?*
Examples:	*Examples:*

Regions of the Brain Involved in Reading and Writing

Overall, guided notes were noted as a useful tool in students' learning, both in the exit slips students utilized in daily classes as well as in end-of-semester feedback. Mirroring what

research has found, students commented engaging in the guided notes helped them focus on material and allowed class time to both be used effectively as well as move at a reasonably brisk pace. There was also appreciation for the spiraling nature of the course and how that was reflected in the course notes. Developing the guided notes for the entire semester—the overarching file is over 120 pages—required a significant investment of time, but it feels like I am able to move forward with plans to elevate those guided notes, building upon what is already there.

As I reflect both on the research about guided notes and my students' experiences with them, I am planning several enhancements for the upcoming Fall semester. I want to increase the interactive elements within the notes after noticing sessions where the guided notes provided to students only met the basic requirements to be considered guided notes. While they provided a framework for capturing information during the class session, they lack variety and depth. I want to revise the guided notes associated with these sessions, bringing in a variety of interactive elements to support both engagement and transfer. Additionally, I want to integrate more metacognitive questions that encourage students to connect new information with previously learned content. While I have included such questions in the past, they were neither as frequent nor deliberate as I would like. These revised notes will feature these questions more prominently and strategically as useful tools to promote deeper reflection and integration of knowledge across different class sessions.

As I turn my attention to the clarity and focus on the guided notes, I am aware of the challenges posed by the currently 120-page document. Having gone through one semester of guided notes, a complete working draft allows me to better strategize around how to present complex information in a way that is not unnecessarily overwhelming for students. One of my

key tasks after I revise the content of the guided note file is to enhance and standardize the formatting. During the maelstrom that was Fall 2023, guided notes were created as they were needed and attention to consistent textual features like bolded key vocabulary was not always implemented. This phase will engage in a system of text features that make the document more user-friendly for students, highlighting crucial elements within the notes themselves. Additionally, particularly given the size of the file, I am exploring ways to improve document navigation. By leveraging bookmarking features in Google Docs and PDFs, I plan to introduce, at the bare minimum, a level of in-document navigation. This not only aids in making notes more user-friendly but will also serve as a practical model for students on how to personalize and manage their own sets of guided notes more efficiently.

Larger Pictures: Making Meaning in Literacy Education Teacher Preparation

The increasing focus on the Science of Reading over recent years has not only underscored the urgency of addressing literacy skills in educational settings but also highlighted the importance of systematic approaches within teacher education programs. Literacy educators are tasked with demonstrating their value to stakeholders by equipping pre-service teachers with the skills and knowledge to meet the growing demands of literacy instruction. This urgency has been amplified by reports on student reading capabilities and the challenges faced by pre-service teachers post-pandemic (see Hattie, 2023, for insights on the effectiveness of initial teacher education programs). These developments have solidified my commitment to ensuring that my students master the foundational theories, essential content, and practical applications of reading and writing instruction.

To achieve this, I make a deliberate effort to model how pedagogical decisions are guided by both established research and ongoing assessments of student needs. My approach reflects a

shared responsibility with my students: *I promise I will be student-centered if you [the student] are learning-centered.* This transparency helps pre-service teachers understand my expectations and encourages them to internalize the knowledge and skills they will need in their future classrooms. As these same students work with young readers during tutoring sessions in the reading center, I aim to position them for success by fostering a deep and durable understanding of reading and writing instruction.

The strategies discussed here—text introductions and guided notes—have emerged from this desire to prepare my students to excel in these roles. These tools are designed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, helping students navigate complex academic texts while modeling instructional approaches they can apply in their own teaching. Through text introductions, I provide scaffolding to support comprehension, while guided notes encourage active engagement with course content, building both foundational knowledge and metacognitive skills. These strategies reflect my ongoing effort to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application, illustrating for my students the thoughtful decision-making that underpins effective instruction.

There is always room for refinement in teaching, always a way to better meet the needs of students. While text introductions and guided notes have shown promise, they are part of a broader commitment to continuous improvement. As I reflect on their implementation, I am mindful of the need to balance innovation with efficiency, ensuring that my efforts are directed toward strategies that have the greatest impact on student learning. This journal entry has allowed me to identify next steps for refining these tools and rethinking elements of the course, a reminder that even after two decades of teaching this course, growth remains both possible and

essential. Ultimately, my work reflects the belief that improvement in teacher education is an ongoing process, one that requires both intention and adaptability.

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