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# BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL FIELD EXPERIENCE: COLLABORATING WITH PROGRAM GRADUATES TO DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT AN APPLIED LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN A YAL METHODS COURSE

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## **Abstract**

The author describes the collaboration between a university English Education program and four of its program graduates to design and implement an applied learning experience in which teacher candidates in a young adult literature (YAL) methods course engage in reading conferences with middle or high school students.

**Keywords:** reading conferences, book love, young adult literature, teacher education, collaboration

Let's face it: sometimes field experiences in teacher education programs provide opportunities for teacher candidates to observe and emulate best practice, and sometimes they don't. In fall 2022, I began collaborating with graduates of my middle/secondary English Education programs at Wichita State University (WSU) to create and implement an applied learning experience in my 3-credit-hour young adult literature (YAL) course. The goal: that my teacher candidates would engage in reading conferences with middle or high school students about their self-selected reading.

One of the required texts in my YAL course is Penny Kittle's popular *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers* (2013). In it, she emphasizes the importance of student choice in book selection and argues that too many kids don't read texts we assign in class; instead, they "fake read." She describes how she uses reading conferences "to move students from a fixed-performance frame to a dynamic one through the intentional use of language that imagines they can improve regardless of their prior success" (p. 77). Scholars agree that ample and consistent class time should be available for students' independent reading of self-selected texts (Beers, 2023; Buehler, 2016), and teachers' engagement in conferences with students about their chosen books builds students' reading lives (Bomer, 2011; Kittle, 2013; Paese, 2023). In short, we need to devote more time to choice reading in ELA and less time to required whole-class books.

I wanted to find classrooms where this was happening, so my teacher candidates could experience leading reading conferences that emphasize *book love* and provide opportunities for informal authentic assessment (e.g., listening to students, understanding their needs and interests). Luckily, I've been teaching at WSU long enough that I now have many program graduates who teach locally and who are eager to mentor future English teachers and collaborate with me. Over the past four years, I've had the honor of collaborating with English teachers at Pleasant Valley Middle School (Jessica Arbuckle, Jaden Brown, and Elizabeth Vest) and Wichita North High School (Lara Engle) to provide opportunities for my teacher candidates to engage in reading conferences with

students in classrooms that feature diverse classroom libraries and that emphasize book choice and book love!

In my middle/secondary English education programs, teacher candidates have school-based practicums and internships across four semesters, and these field experiences are scheduled outside of their on-campus courses. For this applied learning experience, I opted to have it occur during our regularly scheduled class meetings (Wednesdays, 12:30-3:20), so the candidates didn't have to find time in their schedule (and coordinate with another mentor teacher) for the experience. I attend to the logistics, so they don't have to. Three times during the semester (after midterm), we use our class time to drive to the school, engage in reading conferences for 20-30 minutes, debrief for 45-50 minutes in an open classroom (or outdoors if the weather permits), and then drive back to campus. I participate in the reading conferences too—if there are enough middle/high school students to go around!

My teacher candidates prepare for their first school visit by composing a pre-service planning paper in which they demonstrate their knowledge of reading conferences based on their reading of Kittle's *Book Love* (chapter 6 focuses specifically on conferences), as well as their knowledge of high-quality, diverse YA books that they can recommend to their students. During the school visit, teacher candidates are assigned to 2-3 students with whom they confer individually, following Kittle's conference framework: monitor a reading life, teach a reading strategy, and increase complexity and challenge (2013, pp. 80-88). They take notes on their conferences (as Kittle recommends), so they can debrief with their peers and me informally immediately afterward and then type up their conferences notes for submission in a Google Form accessible to me and the mentor teacher(s). The form requires the teacher candidates (and me) to submit the following information for each middle/high school student:

- Your name (last, first); student name (first name only); conference date
- Book the student is reading and page #
- What did the student share about their reading experience?
- What books did (or will) you recommend? What books did the student recommend to you?
- What reading strategy(ies) did you discuss or model?
- What else do you want to share about the conference?

In addition, after each school visit, teacher candidates compose a reflection to post on our class discussion board, responding to the following prompts:

1. Describe your experience during this week's reading conferences, noting challenges and successes.
2. What reading strategies did you discuss or model? How did it go?
3. What are your goals for improving your conferencing skills for next time?
4. *For sessions 2 and 3:* What goals were you focusing on, and did you achieve them?

Over the course of three visits with (ideally) the same set of students, my teacher candidates observe their students' growth (e.g., decreased resistance to reading/talking about reading; increased reading stamina; increased excitement about reading) and experience their own increased confidence in leading reading conferences in their classrooms. In fact, over the past four years, several teacher candidates have moved into their final year-long teaching internship with plans to collaborate with their mentor teachers to emphasize in-class choice reading and reading conferences.

I look forward to continuing this collaboration with program graduates to design meaningful applied learning experiences, like this one, that benefit teacher candidates, middle/high school students, and the classroom teachers.

### References/Resources to Consult

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### Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is in her 17<sup>th</sup> year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools. She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at [Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu](mailto:Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu).



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