

Becoming a Reading Arsonist among Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

The theme for TALE's 2015 annual conference was Inspiring and Transforming Literacy. The two keynote speakers at this conference, Donalyn Miller and Steven Layne, spoke clearly to this theme in relation to reading for enjoyment. Donalyn shared her quest with determining answers to the question, "What are the habits of lifelong readers?" Similarly, Steven advocated that teachers have the power to commit "reading arson" as they foster positive reading climates within their schools. As I listened to the messages articulated by these two amazing and accomplished professionals, I was compelled to transform my own literacy practices with preservice teachers. Before I left this conference, I pledged to become a reading arsonist by promoting the three habits of lifelong readers that Donalyn described:

- 1. Provide preservice teachers with time to read.*
- 2. Enable preservice teachers to self-select reading material.*
- 3. Create a space for preservice teachers to share books and readings with others.*

Teachers are extremely influential with modeling personal reading habits among their students. As teachers express their passion for reading, enthusiastically share appropriate excerpts of their favorite part of a book, engage in animated dialogue about books, and model reading at moments of down time, they communicate the value of reading, as well as sheer enjoyment for reading. As teachers continuously engage with these behaviors, they ignite sparks of fire within their students that result in flash fires when two combustible materials converge: a reader with a good book.

Effective literacy teachers must be readers and writers themselves (Draper, Barksdale-Ladd, & Radencich, 2000). Draper et al. reported that agreement with this supposition necessitates that teacher education programs look beyond the literacy habits and attitudes of preservice teachers and examine how

they themselves model literacy practices. Draper et al. posited that teacher education programs emphasize the importance of future teachers to promote literacy among their future students. However, they questioned: Are literacy behaviors being similarly promoted within preservice teachers? Kaya (2014) contended that effective literacy teachers teach reading skills and develop “a love for reading” within their students (p. 43).

Literature has suggested that many preservice teachers arrive at their respective teacher education programs as “unenthusiastic readers” (Applegate & Applegate, 2004, p. 556) who have “limited experience in reading for pleasure” (Bixler, Smith, & Henderson, 2013, p. 249). Nathanson, Pruslow, and Levitt (2008) shared findings that reiterated this sentiment among graduate students, of which many were practicing teachers. Nathanson et al. cited that “college reading courses should tap into not only the minds and competencies of students but their hearts as well” (p. 319).

Inspiring and Transforming Literacy after the Conference

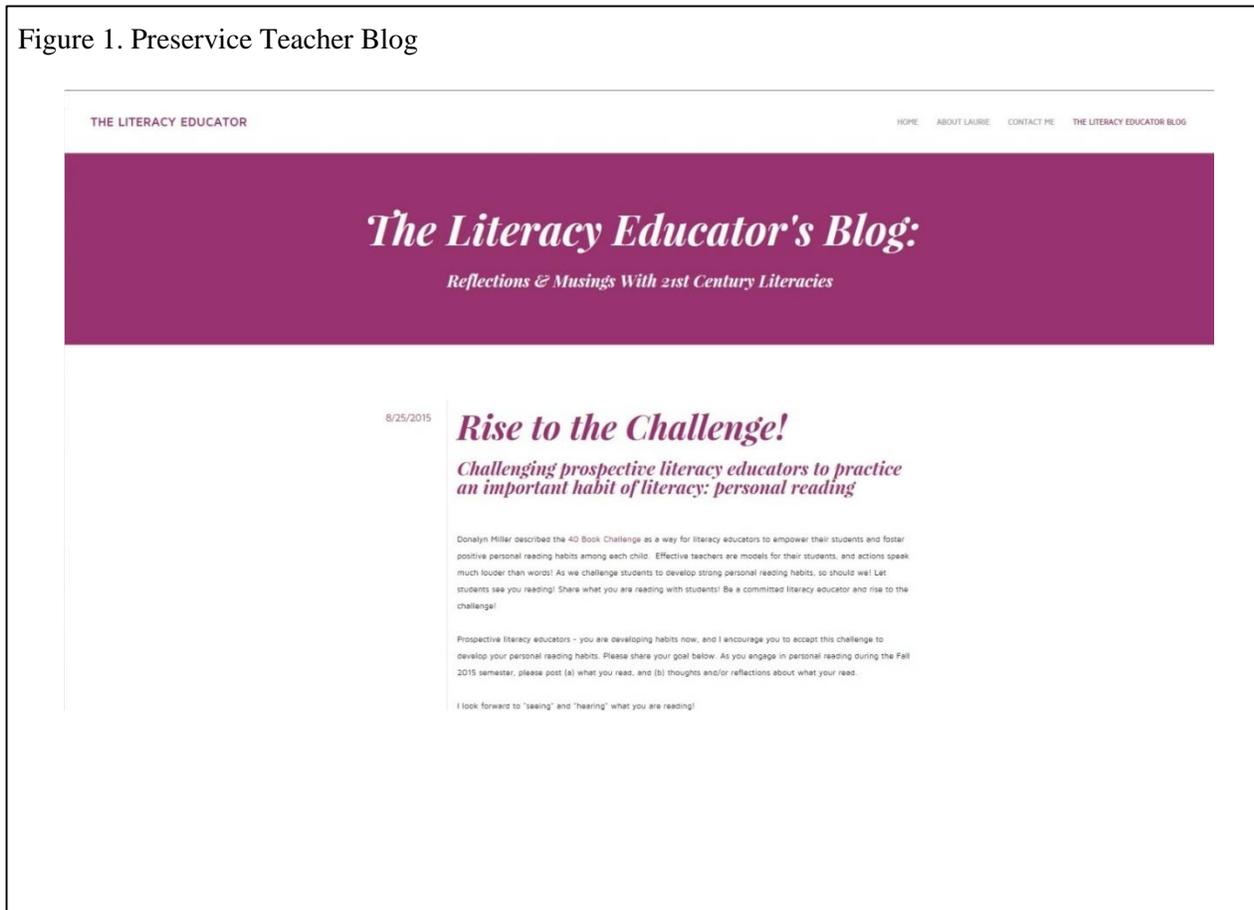
After the TALE Conference, I reflected on my own teaching practices with preservice teachers and asked myself: *Am I tapping into the hearts of preservice teachers and instilling a love of reading for pleasure?* I myself am an extremely avid reader. However, I could not honestly say that I was intentional about sharing this passion with preservice teachers. I knew it was time for me to assume my responsibility as a reading arsonist and encourage preservice teachers to make time for reading for pleasure.

To achieve this purpose, I adapted Donalyn Miller’s (2014) *40 Book Challenge*, which “rests on the foundation of a classroom reading community” that is intended to “expand students’ reading lives” (para. 10). I did not want preservice teachers to view this as an assignment, graded task, or required component for the course in which they were enrolled. Likewise, I did not want preservice teachers to

accept this challenge in the hopes of earning extra credit. Rather, I wanted preservice teachers to view this opportunity as a personally rewarding challenge that motivated them to enjoy the act of reading.

In order to create space where preservice teachers could share books and readings with others, I created a blog on my Weebly website (<http://drlaurieasharp.weebly.com>) and invited preservice teachers to participate throughout the semester (see Figure 1). Then, I went to the library and checked out several books so that I, too, would participate alongside preservice teachers.

Figure 1. Preservice Teacher Blog



Once the fall semester commenced, I sent all preservice teachers enrolled in my courses an online survey. I created this survey using a Google Form, and it served as a mechanism for preservice teachers to introduce themselves to me (see Figure 2). As shown in Figure 2, one of the questions asked preservice teachers to name the book that they were currently reading for enjoyment.

Figure 2. Online survey for preservice teachers.



Getting to Know You! (READ 335)
Welcome to READ 335! I am excited to have you in my class this semester :)

What is your name?
First and last, please!

What grade level(s) & content area(s) do you want to teach?

What is your personal perspective about content area reading?

What questions/concerns do you have about integrating reading into content area instruction?

What book are you currently reading for personal enjoyment?

What would you like to know about me?

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Once I reviewed each preservice teacher's submission, I created and emailed preservice teachers a personalized audio message based upon their responses. If preservice teachers named a specific book that they were reading for enjoyment, I complimented them and encouraged them to continue reading and

participate in the reading challenge. On the other hand, if preservice teachers indicated that they were not currently reading for pleasure, I verbalized personal benefits associated with reading for pleasure, as well as the importance of future teachers modeling reading for enjoyment among their future students. Within the body of each email I sent to preservice teachers, I included the following message:

Hi, [preservice teacher's name]!

Welcome to my class! Please listen to the attached audio file for a personal message related to your survey. Also, I am challenging all preservice teachers to accept a personal reading challenge. Please go to my website, The Literacy Educator (<http://drlaurieasharp.weebly.com>), and access The Literacy Educator Blog. Post a comment that (a) identifies what you are personally reading and (b) sets a goal for you to engage with personal reading this semester. Then, throughout the semester, post updates as to your reading status.

I look forward to a great semester!

Dr. Sharp

In order to prompt participation from preservice teachers on the blog, I made the first post:

Currently, I am reading *The Calligrapher's Daughter* by Eugenia Kim. I love reading literature from diverse perspectives! I am early on in this book (page 48 of 375) and have set a goal for reading 30 minutes - 1 hour every day.

At three weeks into the fall semester, the blog already had 93 posts. A quick inventory of the posts showed 35 people (including myself) were participating in the reading challenge at that time. Participants had each made one initial post that indicated what they are reading, as well as a reading goal that they had set for themselves. Several of the posts were updates regarding participants' status with their personal reading challenge, while other posts created dialogue among participants.

In reading the blog's posts, I can already sense sparks of fire igniting among several preservice teachers. As a teacher educator, I am also beginning to see benefits associated with the creation of an experience that is encouraged, not assigned. Through this reading challenge, preservice teachers are empowered when they choose to participate, select their own books, and become an active participant within a reading community. I have become a reading arsonist among preservice teachers who will continue igniting sparks so that the fire of reading for enjoyment continues to blaze brightly.

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