Supernovas and Superheroes: Examining Unfamiliar Genres and Teachers’ Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Erinn Bentley

Within the field of writing teacher education, scholars and practitioners agree that effective writing instructors (at both the P–12 and postsecondary levels) are not simply cognizant of composition pedagogies, rhetorical theories, and their students’ unique learning needs. Effective writing instructors also regularly participate—themselves—in the practice of writing. As Tom Romano (2007) explains, “Those who teach a craft ought to do a craft. When teachers of writing write, particularly in the genres they teach, they develop their insider knowledge” (p. 171). Realistically, many inservice English language arts teachers do not have an extensive amount of time to write, reflect on their writing, and translate their “insider knowledge” into pedagogical practices. One place where this type of writing-teaching reflection and development may occur, however, is in the postsecondary classroom. This article describes a graduate-level methods course, in which middle-grades and secondary-level ELA teachers completed two projects focused on analyzing, composing, and teaching an unfamiliar genre. This study extends current research regarding the use of unfamiliar genres to improve students’ writing proficiencies (Bastian, 2010; Beckelhimer, 2011; Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan, 2006, 2009) by adapting these projects to a new group of writers: inservice ELA teachers. Using a qualitative research design, this study draws upon Grossman’s (1990) theoretical framework, pedagogical content knowledge, to name and define four specific ways in which the course’s unfamiliar genre projects promoted teachers’ “insider knowledge” as writers, thus affecting their beliefs and practices for teaching writing.

I stumbled upon a metaphor for my writing process, and the metaphor was a supernova. I chose this image because, like a supernova, my paper builds in my head until it’s ready to burst. Then I begin writing, and it’s like an explosion of thought. After I write all that I can, I completely stop and shut down. I close the computer and go dark. . . . Depending on the length of the paper, I can complete it in one sitting, with one burst of energy or inspiration. If it’s a longer assignment, I may have to depend on several supernovas to complete it.

—Tonya, student writer
In this passage, Tonya expresses excitement when describing her process as a writer. She also admits hers is a start-and-stop process; that is, writing is a task requiring bursts of energy and time to “shut down.” Tonya’s metaphor may not seem surprising to most K–12 classroom teachers, who have seen their students nervously stare at blank pages one day and triumphantly turn in polished, completed papers a week later. Writing, after all, is a process riddled with false starts, breakthroughs, creative bursts of energy, and tedious hours of revision work. The writing process, as Tonya asserts, is often like supernova, “building with energy then exploding on the page.” Tonya, however, is not a “novice” writer, describing her experience as a K–12 student. Rather, Tonya—a certified English language arts (ELA) teacher—is relating the triumphs and struggles of her own writing experiences as an adult and as a graduate student.

English education scholar and practitioner Linda Rief (2006) echoes Tonya’s sentiments in stating, “I understand that writing is hard. Everyone who has ever taught it or attempted it understands that. It is time-consuming. It is frightening. It is rewarding” (p. 35). As a writer, I empathize with Tonya and Rief. Writing and teaching writing are both exhilarating and exhausting tasks. According to recent research, teaching writing is also an increasingly vital component to promoting adolescent literacy. In *Writing Next*, Graham and Perin (2007) assert that American adolescents (students in grades 4–12) are currently experiencing a “writing proficiency crisis” (p. 11). Research indicates that student achievement in writing has not made significant gains in the past decade (Applebee et al., 1994; Applebee & Langer, 2009). In fact, according to results from a recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) report, 70 percent of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 are considered low-achieving writers (Persky, Danne, & Jin, 2003). Now, more than ever, administrators, scholars, teachers, and parents are becoming increasingly aware of and concerned about students’ writing skills.

Reports from the National Commission on Writing (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006) and additional scholars (Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007; Persky et al., 2003) concur: quality writing instruction is needed to ensure adolescents succeed in postsecondary educational settings, in the workplace, in civic engagement, and in a global economy. Central to improving adolescents’ writing proficiencies is the need for well-trained writing teachers. However, current scholarship indicates that many inservice teachers feel they have had little preparation to teach writing (Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009); further, many licensure programs nationwide do not require candidates to complete coursework in teaching writing (Nagin, 2006). One way to promote increased pedagogical knowledge among inservice teachers is
through graduate-level coursework. However, recent scholarship on the adolescent literacy crisis (Coker & Lewis, 2008; Kiuhara et al., 2009; Nagin, 2003; Persky et al., 2005) does not specify how such courses might be designed.

As a university instructor and researcher, I believe in a balanced approach to training and supporting writing teachers. That is, teachers of writing should be introduced to both current research regarding composition theories and practical strategies for teaching adolescents. I also believe improving ones’ own writing skills and processes is imperative to writing teachers’ pedagogical growth. Teachers need opportunities to develop, examine, reflect on, and improve their skills and processes as writers. With this balanced approach to writing teacher education in mind, I designed a methods course based on the Unfamiliar Genre Project (UFG), an assignment created by Fleischer and Andrew-Vaughan (2006, 2009). This project, initially developed for training preservice teachers, has proven an effective approach for helping future English teachers learn new genres and pedagogical strategies firsthand. Further, Fleischer and Andrew-Vaughan have modified this project for use within the secondary-level ELA classroom; here, the UFG has expanded students’ concept of genre as well as improved their reading and writing abilities. This project, described in more detail later in this article, formed the basis of this study, which investigates teachers enrolled in a three-credit graduate-level course titled Improving the Teaching of English Language Arts in Grades 4–12.

In this article, I argue that ELA teachers need meaningful experiences as writers—in which they explore unfamiliar genres and reflect on their writing processes—in addition to practical training in writing methodology to expand their pedagogical content knowledge. This article begins with a discussion regarding the concept of genre studies and its relation to teaching writing. Next, using Grossman’s (1990) pedagogical content knowledge as a theoretical framework, I describe how two ELA teachers’ experiences with Unfamiliar Genre Projects affected their beliefs for teaching writing, their knowledge of instructional practices and curricular resources, and their understanding of students’ conceptions regarding writing. Finally, I discuss implications this project has for providing professional development to teachers of writing both inside and outside the postsecondary classroom.

Related Literature
Teaching Writing through a Genre Studies Approach

In both P–12 and first-year composition classrooms, many instructors have adopted a genre studies approach to teaching writing. Simply put, this ap-
proach entails studying genres not as templates or formulas. Rather, genres are viewed as constructions within social situations. As Charles Bazerman (1997) explained, “They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact” (p. 19). In this approach, each genre (whether it is a play, poem, recipe, billboard, or bumper sticker) is worthy of study because each genre represents an interaction involving a purpose and audience; further, each genre represents these interactions through various conventions (i.e., grammar, language, tone, graphics) deemed appropriate by the context. Teachers have generally adopted a genre studies approach by helping students collect samples of a genre, identify the genre’s rhetorical situation, analyze the genre’s conventions, and determine how the genre is used (or not used) within its context. From there, students may analyze ways in which genres conform (or do not conform) to their intended use, how genres are used differently in various contexts, or how genres portray various ideologies. Students may also be called on to compose within chosen genres.

Pedagogically speaking, this approach has allowed teachers to present the act of writing as more than following a long list of mechanical rules. Instead, as students analyze the social and rhetorical contexts in which genres are situated, they see how writing “rules” are not codified, and they learn how to determine appropriate genres for various rhetorical situations. As Andrew-Vaughan and Fleischer (2006) explained, “The long-range benefits [of genre study] are important. . . . As students learn more about the concept of genre, they are more-informed readers and writers, understanding in a real way that various genres have various demands and using that awareness to approach the new as well as the familiar genres they encounter. Further, researching their genre helps students gain confidence that they can take on new writing tasks” (p. 42). According to scholarship within the secondary-level setting, then, using a genre studies approach has promoted students’ development of research skills, critical thinking skills, and dexterity in writing situations (e.g., standardized tests, academic assignments, job-related texts) (Andrew-Vaughan & Fleischer, 2006; Beckelhimer, 2011; Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan, 2009). At the postsecondary level, scholars have also agreed that teaching genre explicitly increases students’ flexibility as writers and encourages them to critically examine the ideologies, power structures, and cultural constructs inherent to specific genres (Bastian, 2010; Bazerman, 1997).
Unfamiliar Genres

Writing teachers (including Andrew-Vaughan, Bastian, Beckelhimer, and Fleischer) not only advocated using a genre studies approach to teaching writing; more specifically, they recommended students focus on “unfamiliar genres.” An “unfamiliar genre” is one that is “truly challenging,” “feels daunting,” or is simply “unfamiliar” to a student (Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan, 2009, p. 64). As each student-writer possesses varying strengths, weaknesses, and experiences, what is unfamiliar for one writer (e.g., haiku) may be familiar for another. Teaching “unfamiliar,” rather than “familiar,” genres has several benefits. First, for novice writers (i.e., secondary-level students and students early in their postsecondary educations), an unfamiliar genre “dispels the stereotype of the gifted writer versus the untalented writer—and the idea that such a designation is unchangeable” (Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan, 2009, p. 13). Focusing on unfamiliar genres levels the playing field; all students begin on equal ground, composing in a genre they have no expertise, experience, or past success completing.

Next, the unfamiliar allows students to approach genres with an open mind. That is, student writers are less likely to be swayed by personal bias or ideologies when analyzing an unfamiliar genre because they possess little to no experience with that genre. Bastian (2011) asserted that all readers use past interactions with individual genres to frame the “overarching idea” of how genres work in any given context (p. 32). This overarching idea of genres, in turn, affects how readers understand and interpret individual genres. In short, readers use what Bastian (2011) termed the “genre effect,” a mental construct that “informs how they view, understand, and perform the conceptual system of genre” (pp. 32–33). Bastian (2011) argued that students, when confronted with familiar genres, often fail to see a genre’s complexity, reducing the familiar genre to the specific purposes from their own experiences with that genre.

Conversely, the lack of familiarity students possess as readers and writers of unfamiliar genres may help them overcome preconceived notions regarding the purposes of genres and stereotypes regarding their own writing abilities. Thus far, research studies have addressed how analyzing and drafting unfamiliar genres affect novice students’ writing competencies (i.e., P–12 students and first-year composition students). Yet, little data has been collected evidencing how a genre studies approach focused on unfamiliar genres affects more advanced writers, such as the teachers of writing. Fleischer (Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan, 2006, 2009), who first devised the Unfamiliar Genre Project for training preservice ELA teachers, believed that
composing unfamiliar genres offers several benefits to soon-to-be teachers.

First, as these preservice teachers struggled to compose an unfamiliar genre, they learned empathy for their future secondary-level student writers. Second, Fleischer’s research (Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan, 2009) indicated these preservice teachers learned an important pedagogical principle: the need for a supportive writing community (p. 162). That is, as preservice teachers reflected on their own writing processes, elicited writing advice from their instructor and peers, and struggled through the UFG project, they accumulated pedagogical knowledge directly from their own experiences as writers. In other words, they learned how to be an effective writing teacher from gaining “insider knowledge” as a writer.

Writing Teachers and “Insider Knowledge”

The connection between teaching writing and being a writer is not a new concept. Writing scholars—including Atwell (1998), Murray (2007), and Romano (2007)—have agreed that effective writing instructors (at both the P–12 and postsecondary levels) are not simply cognizant of composition pedagogies, rhetorical theories, and their students’ unique learning needs. Effective writing instructors also regularly participate—themselves—in the practice of writing. Writing, after all, is an academic discipline that cannot be fully grasped vicariously. Writers (and teachers of writing) must also learn from their own experiences.

Realistically, many inservice English language arts teachers do not have an extensive amount of time to write, reflect on their writing, and translate their “insider knowledge” into pedagogical practices. ELA teachers, in general, maintain substantial workloads. In fact, NCTE (1999) asserted, “teachers of English, on average, work longer hours than their colleagues in other disciplines” based on the amount of time ELA teachers devote to reading, responding to, and analyzing student writing. If many inservice ELA teachers are occupied with teaching and evaluating writing both during instructional time and after school, when might these teachers develop their own writing habits and skills? The National Writing Project (NWP) is one organization that, historically, has successfully provided teachers with a space for writing and with support in developing their skills as writing teachers through the conferences, workshops, and invitational summer institutes sponsored at its 200 sites (National Writing Project, 2012). While the NWP is one resource

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for professional development, not every inservice teacher may have the opportunity or means to participate in this organization.

An additional place where writing teacher reflection and development may occur is in the postsecondary classroom. Thus, with the goal of allowing teachers opportunities to develop their “insider knowledge” as writers and improve their pedagogical knowledge as writing teachers, I developed a graduate-level English methods course focused on analyzing, composing, and teaching unfamiliar genres.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

In this study, I drew upon the work of Shulman (1986) and Grossman (1990) to determine teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge development. First introduced by Shulman (1986), the term *pedagogical content knowledge* refers to the type of knowledge instructors draw upon that is specific to teaching a particular subject matter, such as biology, algebra, or composition. This type of knowledge, then, represents an intersection of subject matter knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge. The concept of pedagogical content knowledge can be traced back to Dewey (1902/1983), who advised new teachers to “psychologize” their subjects for the purpose of teaching. This type of knowledge, then, encompasses an instructor’s complex relationships with students, curricula, and personal teaching beliefs and practices.

In short, Grossman (1990) described pedagogical content knowledge as being comprised of four interrelated components: the instructor’s knowledge and beliefs for teaching a particular subject; the instructor’s knowledge of students’ conceptions/misconceptions of a subject matter; the instructor’s curricular knowledge; and the instructor’s knowledge of instructional strategies (Grossman, 1990, p. 8).

Grossman (1990) and Shulman (1986) recognized the value of pedagogical content knowledge for teacher professional development because this type of knowledge is specific and directly connected to classroom practice. Pedagogical content knowledge, unlike general pedagogical knowledge, encompasses a teacher’s assumptions, beliefs, and practices for teaching a *particular subject matter* rather than teaching in general. Pedagogical content knowledge also goes beyond a theoretical understanding of content-area knowledge. That is, pedagogical content knowledge refers to a teacher’s ability to *teach* a subject rather than to theorize or research that subject.
Methodology

While the goal of this study was to analyze teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge and to determine how teachers’ participation in the Unfamiliar Genre Projects affected such knowledge, to some degree this project was also a self-study. That is, as an educator, I am committed to studying my own pedagogical practices to ensure my courses are relevant to the preservice and inservice ELA teachers I train (Lassonde, Galman, & Kosnick, 2009). The UFG project being studied required both the instructor-researcher and student-participants to reflect on our individual experiences, personal preferences, and ongoing practices as writers/teachers. Therefore, my study served the dual purpose of investigating my course design as well as the growth of my students in conceptualizing their roles as P–12 writing teachers.

Finally, this study was qualitative, employing case study methodology (Cresswell, 2007). More specifically, this study was “particularistic,” or a study in which “the case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might represent” (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). Focused on a small, select group of teachers at a single institution, this study was not meant to represent the experiences of all English teachers enrolled in graduate programs. Instead, this study may provide insight on professional development needs common to many instructors, offering implications for the general professionalization process of writing teachers.

I readily admit that “measuring” the professional growth of teachers is not an exact, quantifiable process. Following other self-study research (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras & Freese, 2006) this study employed open-ended questionnaires, reflective portfolios, and memory work as methods for collecting information regarding teachers’ past experiences with genres, their ongoing writing practices, and their reflections on their writing processes. More specifically, data sources included in-class reflections; lesson plans; UFG project components (see Figures 1 and 2), and a post-project reflection questionnaire (see Appendix). Member checks were used to ensure that I did not misrepresent the teachers’ experiences.

I collected data from all teachers who chose to participate in this study (10 of 14). I analyzed and coded teachers’ written coursework and post-project responses to discern specific themes and performed a cross-case analysis of teachers’ individual case studies (Cresswell, 2007). For this article, I chose to discuss the experiences of two teachers: Tonya, a secondary-level English teacher, and Marc, who teaches middle school language arts. I focused on these two teachers for the following reasons. First, their choice in genres...
reflected a grade-level split among participants. That is, Tonya, like the other secondary-level teachers, focused on a genre from the traditional literary canon. Marc, like most of the middle-grades teachers, studied a sub-genre of young adult literature. Thus, their genre choices represented a trend among participants. Second, I chose Tonya and Marc due to their varying teaching experiences. Tonya, who had earned her initial teaching license just one year before enrolling in this class, had taught ninth- and tenth-grade literature and eleventh-grade summer school. Marc, on the other hand, was in his seventh year teaching sixth- and seventh-grade language arts. Cross-analyzing the case studies of Tonya and Marc, then, provided both an overview of general grade-level trends regarding this project and specific accounts of how the project affected both novice and experienced teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge. In the following sections, I discuss results from this study, including the course context and teacher case studies. Pseudonyms for teachers are used throughout.

Course Context

Improving the Teaching of English Language Arts in Grades 4–12 was a 15-week graduate level course for teachers holding ELA certification in middle (4–8) or secondary (6–12) grades. Of the 14 students enrolled, six were middle-grades teachers; eight were secondary-level teachers. The course met one evening a week from 6:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., and the focal assignments were two interconnected Unfamiliar Genre Projects, displayed in Figures 1 and 2. For the first UFG project, Fleischer and Andrew-Vaughan’s (2009) Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone was the anchor text. Before launching my students into their genre projects, however, I introduced them to a genre studies approach to teaching writing and to the concept of the unfamiliar genre.

We began the semester reading and discussing selections from Nagin’s Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools (2006) and the first three chapters of Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone (Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan, 2009). I assigned Nagin’s text to provide students with an overview of recent research detailing adolescent students’ writing proficiencies, trends in writing pedagogy, standards and assessments for measuring student writers’ achievement, and the growing need for writing teachers’ professional development. Next, Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone provided a theoretical basis for using a genre studies approach. Further, the first three chapters of the latter text described specific examples from Andrew-Vaughan’s teaching experiences, allowing the teachers to envision what a genre studies approach looks like in a “real” secondary classroom setting. As
the teachers and I read and discussed these texts, I also facilitated hands-on genre studies activities. For example, I brought in various genres for teachers to analyze and discuss, such as cereal boxes, Facebook profiles, and authors’ blurbs. On the surface, the genres I provided may not seem “unfamiliar.” However, these ELA teachers, who were accustomed to teaching and reading “academic genres” (e.g., literary analyses, research papers, analytical essays), all commented that they had never viewed such “everyday” texts as “real” genres. The teachers admitted the cereal boxes and other texts we studied in class truly were “unfamiliar.” Further, they noted that these activities helped them feel less anxious when choosing their own unfamiliar genres to study independently.

My second goal early in the semester was to establish a comfortable writing community within my classroom. In addition to analyzing and discussing unfamiliar genres, the teachers and I composed in these genres and shared our drafts with one another. Once students delved into their first UFG project, they would be asked to write in their unfamiliar genre and share their writing during three peer-review workshop sessions. Often student writers (even advanced writers) feel anxious when allowing others to read their work. In fact, on the third night of class I asked my students to complete a brief journal entry describing how they felt as writers; nearly all the students expressed feeling “frustrated” or “having anxiety.” Considering the students’ initial nervousness, I believe beginning the semester with in-class writing activities and workshops helped establish a positive learning environment. That is, all students were in the same, unfamiliar writing situations, so all students felt uncomfortable together. As a result, there were no “gifted” writers in the group; students quickly acknowledged their need for improvement and accepted the advice and support of their peers.

Next, I introduced students to the first UFG project, based closely on the one Fleischer (Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan, 2009) used with preservice ELA teachers (pp. 158–160). The requirements of this project are listed in Figure 1. Completing all components of this project spanned seven class meetings. Students were required to bring to class rough drafts of their project’s introduction components, how-to book, and their own writing within their respective genres. Each of these assignments was peer-reviewed in class before students submitted their final UFG project portfolio.

Immediately following the first UFG project, I assigned students to complete an extension UFG project (see Figure 2). This project focused explicitly on teachers gathering pedagogical resources and designing materials for teaching their unfamiliar genres within their present (or future) ELA
### Unfamiliar Genre Project: ELA Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project component</th>
<th>Component description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>UFG project proposal</strong></td>
<td>Before you begin your project you will provide your instructor with a proposal describing: • your past interactions with your genre (as a reader, writer, student, and teacher), • your interest in studying this genre, and • a rationale for teaching this genre to a specific grade level (or grade band).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>Provide a brief introduction (or definition) for your genre. Imagine your audience as fellow teachers: What pertinent information would you want to know about this genre before planning an instructional unit?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4–6 samples of genre</strong></td>
<td>Find examples of your genre. Ideally, you should find samples that both conform and digress from “traditional” conventions/purposes defining your genre.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Copy of teaching article</strong></td>
<td>Find one or more peer-reviewed teaching articles focused on writing in that genre or teaching students how to write the genre.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Final draft (and 2 or more rough drafts) of your writing in the chosen genre</strong></td>
<td>Throughout the semester you will write multiple drafts of your genre. You will receive feedback on your writing from your peers and instructor. Your “final” draft need not be a polished, perfected example of your genre. The goal is for you to try your best, reflect on your writing process, and revise your piece to make it better.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>10 (or more) journal entries</strong></td>
<td>Journal entries may be handwritten or typed. The purpose of this component is not for you to “fill up space.” The journal is your place to record your thoughts, frustrations, and triumphs while writing within your genre. You might also reflect on how your writing experiences are affecting your beliefs and practices for teaching writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How-to book (targeting an audience of teachers or students)</strong></td>
<td>This is a short book, brochure, slide show, or other medium designed to help others understand how to create your genre. You must choose a target audience and design your book to “hit” that target.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3–4 page reflection</strong></td>
<td>Summarize how working with your unfamiliar genre has affected you as a writer and teacher.</td>
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(Optional: peer review worksheets, rough drafts, other materials from class).

Figure 1. Unfamiliar genre project: ELA teachers. This figure describes individual components students must complete for the first unfamiliar genre project.)
### Unfamiliar Genre Extension Project: ELA Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project component</th>
<th>Component description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Common Core Instructional Activity #1</td>
<td>Design a 20-minute instructional activity related to your genre and aligned to an ELA Common Core standard appropriate for the middle-school or secondary-level classroom. You will be provided with a template for your instructional activity lesson plan.</td>
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<td>In-class teaching demonstration of Activity #1</td>
<td>You will be allowed 20 minutes to lead your peers in completing Common Core Instructional Activity #1. Your instruction will be evaluated by your peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Core Instructional Activity #2</td>
<td>Design a second 20-minute instructional activity related to your genre and aligned to an ELA Common Core standard appropriate for the middle-school or secondary-level classroom. You will be provided with a template for your instructional activity lesson plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class teaching demonstration of Activity #2</td>
<td>You will be allowed 20 minutes to lead your peers in completing Common Core Instructional Activity #2. Your instruction will be evaluated by your peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summative assessment for student learning aligned to CCGPS standard(s) and grading guide for this assessment</td>
<td>With the current focus on assessing and documenting student achievement, we know that every lesson must “count”; that is, we need to ensure our students are reaching attainable and measurable learning goals. Create one summative assessment aligned to one (or more) of the standards used in your two instructional activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Optional: Create one or more formative assessments based on one or more CCGPS standard)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annotated bibliography citing 5 (or more) additional resources related to teaching your genre (e.g., teaching websites, background information on genre/authors, journal articles, books, etc.).</td>
<td>As experienced teachers, we are always looking for fresh ideas or approaches for teaching literature, reading, language, and writing in our classrooms. Conduct research and create an annotated bibliography of resources focused on your genre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching self-assessment</td>
<td>You will complete a brief in-class assessment of your teaching strengths and weaknesses based on your peers’ evaluations.</td>
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**Figure 2.** Unfamiliar genre extension project: ELA teachers. This figure describes individual components students must complete for the second unfamiliar genre project.

classrooms. In addition to these two UFG projects, students also completed other coursework (e.g., assigned readings and responses, in-class activities, short writing assignments). For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the two UFG projects.
Findings: Four Interrelated Components of Pedagogical Content Knowledge

As writers and teachers, students enrolled in this course possessed individual strengths, weaknesses, and experiences working through their UFG projects. To some extent, each project represented a unique experience. However, among the middle-grades teachers and secondary-level teachers, different recurring themes appeared within the respective grade levels. More specifically, Tonya and Marc represent how the UFG projects affected secondary-level and middle-grades ELA teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge in distinct ways. In this section, I will describe Tonya’s and Marc’s experiences with the UFG projects through Grossman’s (1990) framework, contrasting the teachers’ knowledge and beliefs for teaching their genres, knowledge regarding students’ conceptions (or misconceptions) regarding their genres, knowledge of instructional strategies, and knowledge of curricular resources.

Knowledge and Beliefs for Teaching: Rigor and Relationships

Among the teachers enrolled in this course, there was a grade-level split regarding the genres they chose to study. In general, the secondary-level teachers (including Tonya) picked “literary” genres (e.g., Shakespeare’s comedies, Romantic sonnets, Greek mythology, American Modernism). Conversely, the middle-grades teachers (including Marc) leaned toward genres targeting young adult readers (e.g., YA fantasy fiction, YA historical fiction, graphic novels). Not only did teachers from the two grade-level bands choose different types of genres to study, they also possessed distinct rationales for teaching their respective genres. In their UFG project proposals, teachers were asked to describe their past experiences with their respective genre, explain their current interest in the genre, and provide a rationale for teaching this genre to a specific grade level. For Tonya, who chose to study American Modernism, the genre’s rigor was significant. She explained,

I am interested in Modern American Literature, specifically Hemingway’s literature. . . . From the limited information I have concerning Hemingway, I know that he was a complicated man . . . like his writing. On the surface, it seems almost childishly simple until you start analyzing it, and then you realize how brilliantly complicated it is.

The literature produced by American Modernist authors, Hemingway in particular, embody Tonya’s idea of “complicated” and rigorous literary texts, which, she believes, are appropriate for high school ELA curriculum.
Further, Tonya believes, as a secondary-level ELA teacher and graduate student, she needs to better understand these complex texts herself to effectively teach them. In her project proposal, Tonya admitted that she had only read one of Hemingway’s novels, did not enjoy the book, and had never returned to this author. As a result, she felt “ashamed” for having a “gap” in her literary knowledge as an English teacher. Her decision to study Hemingway’s short stories in her UFG project was, in part, “to conquer a fear” and to also expand her knowledge for this part of the ELA curriculum that she had not yet taught.

Unlike Tonya, who focused on an author from the traditional literary canon, Marc chose young adult fantasy fiction as his unfamiliar genre. Marc, who teaches middle school language arts, chose his genre out of curiosity. In his UFG project proposal, he described seeing his students carrying around novels with superheroes, mythic creatures, or science-fiction scenes on their covers. Not familiar with these novels, he wondered why his students found them so appealing. Marc described the UFG project as his opportunity to build a relationship with his students. In his project reflection, he explained

I noticed that most of the stuff I was learning about [my unfamiliar genre] had to do with most of the books that my students checked out of the library. I was able to talk with them about my project, and they gave me more information on the genre than I found online. It made them feel great that they could teach a teacher something.

For Marc, then, the primary motivation for him to study this genre was to connect with his middle school students.

Interestingly, Marc’s desire to build a relationship with his students by studying YA fantasy fiction also affected his knowledge and beliefs for teaching this genre. In one of Marc’s journals, he lamented, “My students hate writing.” Typically his students completed various expository and argumentative essay assignments in his classes. After writing in his unfamiliar genre, Marc discovered he enjoyed being creative and using his imagination. In his UFG project reflection letter, he admitted, “[YA fantasy fiction] would be a beneficial project for the students to work on because it isn’t a typical writing assignment. This is creative writing.” Again, Marc envisions his genre as a means for developing relationships with his students. Unlike Tonya, who is concerned with challenging secondary-level students through complex literary texts, Marc is more interested in using literature and writing to establish student-teacher connections. In sum, he wants to improve his knowledge of young adult literature to connect with his students, read common books, and increase students’ interest in writing.
To some extent, Tonya’s and Marc’s different beliefs for teaching their unfamiliar genres may be attributed to the different curricular and assessment standards in their respective grade levels. Traditionally, middle-grades students have tended to read and write somewhat shorter, simpler texts than their high school counterparts. However, with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, ELA teachers (across grades 6–12) now must ensure students are studying increasingly complex texts as they progress through their secondary-level education. Interestingly, though Tonya and Marc chose vastly different genres to study, they both became more cognizant of text complexity as they composed in their unfamiliar genres and designed lessons for teaching their genres. Further, both teachers’ experiences with text complexity illustrate how their UFG projects affected a second component of their pedagogical content knowledge: knowledge of students’ conceptions or misconceptions regarding their genres.

**Conceptions of Students’ Understanding of Genre: Fear and the Fantastic**

Tonya’s primary reason for choosing Hemingway’s stories as her unfamiliar genre was for her to “conquer the fear” she felt for his literary works. In her UFG project proposal, she said,

> I avoided most of the [American Modernist] authors, especially Hemingway and Faulkner... So, this is very much outside my comfort zone. As I said earlier, I have only read one book by this author and did not enjoy it. I blamed it on being too young to understand it but never returned for another try or for another novel. So, I am nervous but excited about this project.

The fear Tonya felt toward her chosen author initially stemmed from her own experiences as a reader. Tonya believed modern American literature was “intimidating”; she would much rather teach Shakespeare, Romantic poetry, or Victorian literature—genres in her comfort zone.

Tonya’s personal experience with the complexity of Hemingway’s prose also affected her knowledge regarding students’ conceptions of this genre. Her belief can best be summed up: “If it’s hard for me, it’s going to be even harder for my students.” For example, when describing her experiences tutoring 11th-grade students enrolled in a summer remediation class, she commented, “I have to explain everything.” Tonya elaborated, “If students don’t understand the [text’s] language, and they aren’t familiar with this time period, it is very hard for them to understand the literature and know how to read or study such works.” For Tonya, then, text complexity is a key
pedagogical factor. From her experiences as a secondary-level teacher, she knows firsthand that students must feel comfortable with a genre’s language, syntax, and context before they can “connect” to the genre as readers or writers. Anticipating students may struggle understanding her rigorous unfamiliar genre, Tonya carefully reflected on her own experiences working through her UFG project before designing instructional lessons.

In Tonya’s post-project writing reflection, she named two project components as being vital to her development of pedagogical strategies. First, completing the background information on Hemingway helped her better understand his “eclectic life” and how his varied life experiences became the subject matter for his short stories. Next, Tonya explained that writing in the genre is “when it really clicked” for her. She explained, “I started understanding the genre from writing. Having to think about his subject matters and style made it accessible. He did not have a happy life and did not write in a happy way.” As a result of her writing experience, Tonya discovered “Hemingway’s depressed tone,” which she emulated in her own story. Tonya admitted that though this genre was still complex, it was not unmanageable. Instead of thinking “This is too hard,” Tonya realized, “If I can do it, my students can too.” In other words, Tonya drew on her “insider knowledge” as a writer to develop confidence in analyzing, composing, and teaching a genre she previously feared due to its complexity.

Contrasted to Tonya, Marc did not feel intimidated by his unfamiliar genre, YA fantasy fiction. Initially he did feel a bit of anxiety about the UFG project; however, his feelings were not directed toward the genre itself, but toward his lack of interest in that genre. He stated, “I was a little worried about this project to begin with because I thought it was going to be hard to get into since I wasn’t really interested in the topic.” Not having read any YA fantasy novels, Marc based his conceptions of the genre on his students’ understanding or interest in it. He explained, “The audience for this genre seems to be 5th–10th grade boys; because of this [audience] the texts seem to include a lot of action, characterization, magical worlds, and sometimes violence.” Since many of Marc’s middle school students liked these novels, Marc assumed the genre relied more on action-packed plots and “simply told” stories to appeal to readers rather than complex, figurative language (such as what Shakespeare, Romantic poets, or other “literary” authors might use). In other words, Marc’s initial conception of YA fantasy fiction, based on his impression of his students’ reading skills and interests, was that the genre lacked text complexity.

When analyzing and composing in this genre, however, Marc realized that YA fantasy fiction was, in fact, complex. First, as Marc created his
own fantasy story, he noted the importance of descriptive prose. In his UFG project reflective letter, he admitted, “I have improved my use of figurative language. I find I often harp on these skills within my seventh grade classroom, but I very rarely include a lot of them in my own writing.” Not only did this genre challenge Marc to develop his use of imagery and details, he also gained a new appreciation for developing multiple voices or tones within a single text. He explained,

Both characterization and voice are important in this genre. In the short story that I am working on, the boy (in his teens) uses simple language and is highly relatable to the readers of the genre. I also use god-like voices within the text which speak in a different form or tone. . . . The narrator also has a voice in this genre . . . by telling you background knowledge needed to understand the story.

To make his story conform to this genre, then, Marc carefully considered the different ways in which each character used language, tone, grammar, and syntax. Creating a “fantastic” world, he learned, required elaborate descriptions of settings, multiple characters with varying tones, and a believable hero on an extraordinary quest. After gaining “insider knowledge” as a fantasy fiction writer, Marc better appreciated the complexity of language, tone, and imagery used with this genre.

Text complexity, then, emerged as a common theme for both teachers as they tried to envision how their students would perceive their respective genres. For Tonya, this meant helping students overcome the fear of the “hard” text. For Marc, this entailed helping students appreciate the complexity “hidden” in the novels they commonly read for pleasure.

Pedagogical Strategies: Writing as Sustained, Communal Practice

In both Tonya’s and Marc’s UFG reflective letters, it was evident these teachers used the projects to reflect on their own beliefs for teaching their unfamiliar genres as well as empathize with their students’ feelings regarding these genres. The teachers also concurred that the UFG projects affected their approaches to teaching writing. That is, these projects prompted them to view their own writing processes and their pedagogical philosophies in a new way—they now viewed writing as a sustained, communal practice.

Prior to participating in the UFG projects, both teachers admitted that they were not “model students” in regards to their own writing practices.
Tonya, who compared her writing process to a supernova, equated the act of writing to a single burst of energy. She explained, “The assignment is given; I consider the assignment and what I want to write; I sit down and write the paper; I print the paper. I usually don’t rely on drafts, revision, or prewriting.” Similarly, Marc did not consider himself a “process writer.” He admitted, “I’m not a great journal keeper,” and he did not enjoy the journal entry requirement of the first UFG project because he would rather “just write and be done.”

Interestingly, though Tonya and Marc did not begin their UFG projects relishing the thought of drafting, revising, and reflecting on their writing, they both found being part of a writing community vital to their growth as writers and teachers. For Tonya, being a member of a supportive writing community increased her confidence as a writer. Prior to this experience, she confessed, “I fear criticism from others and from myself about my work.” This fear made her reluctant to participate in the first peer review workshop. Her peers’ positive and helpful suggestions, however, affected her view of peer review as a pedagogical strategy. She said, “I would have to say that peer review is a vital part to this project.” More specifically, Tonya appreciated the in-class peer review workshops because she received advice from her peers and discovered new ideas by looking at her peers’ work. She said, “I had a little trouble with the genre writing, but after the peer review, I got such good feedback and ideas that I didn’t have any trouble finishing it. I had a similar experience with the how-to book... after seeing what others had done... I decided to take it in a whole other direction. I like it a lot more now.”

Tonya began to view peer review as a powerful tool for supporting student writers. In her reflection letter, she explained, “Depending on the students, how the peer review is conducted may vary, but I think as long as it’s done maturely and positively that it can be a great way for students to get inspired and get feedback.” Based on her experiences as a writer in an unfamiliar genre, then, Tonya discovered firsthand the benefits of establishing a supportive writing community and expanded her pedagogical knowledge for using such strategies. In fact, Tonya is currently conducting an action research project on the effects of peer review on students’ writing skills and attitudes as part of her graduate coursework.

Like Tonya, Marc found the structure of the course’s UFG projects beneficial to his growth as a writer and as a teacher. With the first UFG project, teachers brought rough drafts of their genre’s background information, their own writing in the genre, and their genre how-to book to class for peer review. For the extended UFG project, teachers designed and taught two instructional activities focused on their genres and received feedback from their peers.
on their lesson plans and instructional materials. The teachers, therefore, drafted, reflected, received peer- and instructor- feedback, and revised five major project components before turning in the assignments for a grade. For Marc, structuring the projects to include peer review workshops forced him to think carefully about each project component and his drafting/revising process. He stated, “I’ve improved my organizational skills and attention to detail . . . by completing each assignment and writing over time.” That is, the pacing and structure of these two projects did not allow Marc (or Tonya) to write in the typical “bursts of energy.” Instead, they each had to slow down, focus on one project component at a time, and realize (based on feedback from their peers and instructor) there was always room for improvement.

In addition to appreciating the project’s pacing, Marc identified the peer review workshops as being significant. He said, “Working in the smaller groups was beneficial because it gave me focused feedback rather than hearing many comments from a larger class.” Unlike Tonya, who used the peer groups to boost her confidence as a writer, Marc stated, “I came into this class after leaving a creative writing class. I felt pretty confident about my writing skills.” However, Marc did want to learn and practice new pedagogical strategies that he could apply to his seventh-grade classroom. He indicated that while conducting the research to design his lessons for the extended UFG project, he found several websites he would like to use in his ELA classroom. Further, by watching his peers lead their in-class lessons, he gained new, practical teaching ideas. In sum, Marc found collaborating with course members to be a key means for expanding his knowledge of pedagogical strategies.

For both Marc and Tonya, the peer review workshops, in particular, emphasized the value of supportive writing communities. The workshops provided them opportunities to receive targeted, personal feedback on their own writing and gain new pedagogical strategies from observing their peers’ demonstrations. Further, they experienced firsthand how to build such supportive writing communities among middle-grades and secondary-level students.

**Curricular Resources: Insider Knowledge**

The final component of pedagogical content knowledge refers to an instructor’s knowledge of curricular resources. As a university teacher and researcher, this component of pedagogical content knowledge was my main impetus for creating the extension UFG project, displayed in Figure 2. Our state would soon adopt the Common Core State Standards, and I wanted
teachers to have an opportunity to investigate these standards and create instructional activities aligned to them. Further, with the increasing emphasis placed on P–12 teachers, in general, to collect, analyze, and report student achievement data, I added an assessment component to the extension UFG project. My goal, in creating these two components, was for teachers to expand their knowledge of curricular resources within their districts (e.g., textbooks, literature anthologies, digital resources, teaching guides) and resources outside their districts (e.g., journal articles, instructional handbooks, author websites, community resources). To facilitate the teachers’ exploration of various curricular resources, I required them to create an annotated bibliography of outside sources related to their unfamiliar genres.

Prior to teachers completing the extension UFG project, I had anticipated most would use the resources listed on their bibliographies as a basis for the two instructional activities they created for their projects. As a writer, I was pleasantly surprised to see that, while teachers did use some outside sources, they also relied on their newfound “insider knowledge” as writers of their genres to design their activities. For instance, Tonya, who was concerned with her genre’s text complexity, designed instructional activities and a formative student assessment to help students interpret one of Hemingway’s short stories. Her activities and assessment focused on distinguishing a text’s main idea and its theme. From first analyzing and then writing in the style of Hemingway’s short stories, Tonya felt this genre’s language conventions might make it difficult for high school students to determine the text’s meaning. She explained, “Hemingway’s writing held much below the surface that the reader has to infer to understand. . . . He also creates his own grammatical rules; he does not follow traditional compound sentence rules because he creates his own pattern in his writing.” Worried that high school students might become frustrated with Hemingway’s unconventional language usage or oblique metaphors, she designed an activity in which students created collages. Using photographs clipped from magazines or online databases, students chose visual images to represent the metaphorical images they interpreted from the author’s words.

Often, Tonya explained, high school students are required to respond to literature by writing essays or essay exams. However, when students are not familiar with the language used by an author, or the students do not feel comfortable using formal, academic prose, they tend to shut down. These students can lose interest in reading, writing, or thinking about literature. An activity involving visual images, rather than written expression, might help students feel more comfortable articulating their ideas.
While preparing her instructional activities, Tonya referred to a few different resources. First, she analyzed several of Hemingway’s short stories to determine the genre’s overall purpose, audience, and conventions. Next, she conducted research on Hemingway’s life to better understand the historical, political, and cultural context in which his stories were written. Finally, she visited educational websites to learn what common themes, imagery, and language conventions from this genre were being taught in other secondary-level classrooms. In terms of designing her specific instructional activities, however, Tonya did not simply adapt materials from another source. Instead, she referred back to her own experiences writing with this genre.

She emphasized, “To teach an unfamiliar genre, you have to be very aware of your writing abilities and faults. You can’t really teach others how to write in an unfamiliar genre if you’re not aware of how you write in the first place.” More specifically, by analyzing this genre, Tonya realized Hemingway “did not write something just for the sake of writing it . . . he made every image and word count.” Next, by writing in this genre, she discovered how challenging it was to focus on a single image and write concisely. To some degree, her initial fear regarding this genre was true: Hemingway’s short stories are complex, rigorous texts. Yet, reflecting on her own process for completing her UFG project and drawing on the lessons she learned firsthand from writing like Hemingway, she designed instructional activities to help student-writers comfortably articulate their ideas regarding theme and develop their own life stories. That is, Tonya’s primary “curricular resource” for designing her instructional activities derived from the “insider knowledge” she gained analyzing and creating her unfamiliar genre.

Similar to Tonya, Marc’s personal experiences with his unfamiliar genre affected his use of curricular resources. While initially Marc seemed interested in YA fantasy fiction as a way to relate to his students, he soon learned this genre utilized language, terms, and tone in complex ways. Thus, Marc created instructional activities and a summative student assessment focused on text complexity. For example, his activities required students to identify literary devices within passages from YA literature. Such devices included personification, tone, imagery, and characterization—the same literary devices used to study texts in the traditional canon. Next, Marc guided his students in using these literary devices within their own writing. By teaching his unfamiliar genre using the same terminology and close reading activities as he does with traditional literary texts, Marc demonstrated to his students that “pleasure reading” is not just entertaining; these YA novels can hold a legitimate place in the ELA curriculum.
Before participating in both UFG projects, Marc may not have taken the time to carefully analyze this genre. Experience from writing in the genre confirmed that using multiple voices, complex imagery to describe these alternate worlds, and creating new vocabulary (or referring to mythic vocabulary) added to this genre’s complexity. Specifically, Marc found the how-to book component of the first UFG project a beneficial tool for developing his instructional activities. He explained, “The How-To Book allowed me to elaborate on characteristics, examples, and descriptions of the genre. This assignment helped me develop a basic outline of the genre to introduce it to my kids in class.” In his how-to book, Marc carefully considered how word choice, audience, voice, and organization “define” his genre. In describing each of these generic components, Marc drew on his own experiences attempting to write a YA fantasy fiction piece. From his “insider knowledge” as a writer, Marc realized the importance of creating new vocabulary to describe his “other world” setting, his hero’s superpowers, and the mythology surrounding his hero’s quest. Marc then translated this “insider knowledge” into his how-to book, a step-by-step guide for composing a fantasy text.

Like Tonya, Marc also consulted outside sources when developing instructional materials for his unfamiliar genre. For example, he analyzed several YA fantasy novels to determine the genre’s key components and conventions and consulted peer-reviewed articles from teaching journals. However, when creating his instructional activities, Marc primarily relied on his experience writing in the genre and his how-to book to determine appropriate student learning goals and pedagogical strategies. Thus, Marc’s “insider knowledge” proved to be a valuable curricular resource for completing the extension UFG project.

Implications

Recent research indicates that teachers, teacher preparation programs, professional education organizations, school administrators, and policymakers need guidance in determining effective pedagogical practices for teaching adolescent writers (Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007; Nagin, 2006). In part, this increased focus on writing pedagogy stems from the decline in adolescent writing proficiencies, as noted by various sources (ACT, 2005; Applebee & Langer, 2009; Graham & Perin, 2007; Kiuhara et al., 2009; Nagin, 2006). The adolescent writing crisis has captured public attention because writing proficiency not only affects students’ performance in academic settings but also their ability to communicate in professional and global settings. As Nagin (2006) asserts, “Today, more and more educators as
well as leaders in all areas of society have come to understand that writing is central to success in and out of school” (p. 5).

Scholars and practitioners must continue to conduct research to determine effective strategies for teaching adolescent writers. Further, strategies for providing professional development and support to P–12 teachers of writing must be developed. This study is one attempt to better understand how teachers develop as writers, how they attain pedagogical content knowledge, and how they might translate insider knowledge as writers into everyday classroom practices. As evidenced in these two case studies, writing teacher development is not precise and easy to quantify. Often, the four components comprising a teacher’s pedagogical content knowledge overlap; that is, knowledge (or lack thereof) in one component affects a teacher’s knowledge in the remaining areas. While this study does not provide a perfect, one-size-fits-all means for providing writing teachers with the pedagogical knowledge and resources needed to combat the adolescent literacy crisis, it does offer the following implications regarding teacher professional development.

Writing (and Teaching Writing) Takes Substantial Time

According to both Marc and Tonya, spending time prewriting, drafting, reflecting, and revising is not always feasible. Busy with work responsibilities, graduate coursework, and other life commitments, they do not regularly spend much time writing on their own or with their students. As Tonya commented, “Unfortunately, a lot of teachers don’t even have time to teach big writing projects or write with students because so much emphasis is placed on end of course tests or other standardized assessments.” Due to time constraints, curriculum requirements, and test-preparation requirements, teachers often find it challenging to incorporate writing assignments and activities into their daily schedule.

Tonya’s and Marc’s writing practices (and teaching practices) are not unusual. In fact, the NAEP 1998 Writing Assessment reports that 69 percent of fourth-grade teachers allocate 90 minutes or less on writing activities each week (Nagin, 2003, p. 12). Similarly, according to the National Academy of Education’s Commission on Reading, “Compositions of a paragraph or more in length are infrequent even at the high school level” (Nagin, 2003, p. 6). These statistics corroborate other research regarding the infrequency with which students write within their classes (Kiuhara et al., 2009), indicating that adolescents, in general, are not spending a significant amount of their school days writing across grade levels or content areas.
As a former secondary-level ELA instructor, I empathize with Tonya and Marc: leading in-class writing workshops and responding to student work are time-consuming tasks. I vividly remember grading stacks of student essays and wondering how I would find time to teach comma usage when I still needed to cover three chapters of a novel and prepare my students for an upcoming standardized test. In short, there is always a substantial amount of content to teach (and assess) and rarely enough time to teach it all. Now, as a university instructor, I had a very similar feeling when teaching the UFG projects in my graduate-level course. On the onset, I knew it would be necessary to devote some instructional time to peer review workshops. Therefore, I designated three one-hour blocks for students to share various components of their first UFG project. For the extension UFG project, I felt it was important for students to not only design instructional activities but also practice teaching these activities; therefore, I allotted three additional one-hour blocks for students to perform peer-group teaching demonstrations. In addition to these sessions, I devoted class time to prewriting activities and revision workshops. Teaching both projects, then, spanned 11 of the course’s 15 meetings.

Seeing the positive experiences Tonya, Marc, and the other teachers had with these UFG projects confirmed it was worth devoting extensive instructional time to teach them. However, I also acknowledge this course design is imperfect. First, while students gained in-depth knowledge of their chosen genres, they were provided only an overview of their peers’ genres. Further, their exposure to genres was limited to the number chosen by course participants.

Overall, coursework and other data collected in this study indicate these UFG projects did increase participating teachers’ knowledge regarding their chosen genres, provide them with an understanding of a genre-studies approach to teaching writing, expand their pedagogical knowledge, and allow them to participate in a supportive writing community. However, the substantial amount of time needed to teach these projects may be a deterrent for some instructors within teacher education programs. Additional research may be needed to determine whether these projects could be used as an ongoing professional development plan taught as a series of workshops within a P–12 district or within a summer writing workshop (i.e., at a National Writing Project site or other location). Additionally, to determine how participating in such professional development affects adolescent achievement in writing, further research is needed tracking writing teacher training models, teachers’ pedagogical practices, and students’ achievement in writing over time.
Need for Flexible and Ongoing Development Models

Next, as a former secondary teacher, I realize that not all P–12 teachers go about the professional development process in the same way. While some teachers enroll in graduate-level coursework, others attend workshops within their schools or districts, attend local and national education conferences, and/or participate in learning communities. In fact, most P–12 teachers’ professional development involves a combination of these, and other, experiences. When considering how to best train and support P–12 writing teachers, then, a flexible model is ideal. The UFG projects described in this study, I believe, are one means for providing writing teachers with ongoing and flexible professional development.

Considering the two teachers described in this study, it is apparent that the UFG projects are flexible. First, Tonya, Marc, and the other teachers enrolled in the course were allowed to choose their own genre to study. Often when teachers attend professional development workshops or enroll in graduate courses, the content is prescribed. In these projects, much of the content was self-selected. Therefore, teachers were able to focus on an area of ELA instruction in which they specifically needed further development. Additionally, the flexible design of these projects allows teachers to pursue various motivations for development. For example, Marc utilized the UFG projects to study YA literature and relate to his middle school students. Tonya, on the other hand, used her projects to better understand rigorous texts she hoped to teach in the future. The UFG projects also are flexible enough to accommodate teachers’ varying background knowledge and experiences, as evidenced in the projects’ effects on Tonya (a novice teacher) and Marc (an experienced teacher). Finally, the projects can be repeated over time as teachers choose new unfamiliar genres to study.

As a researcher, I found a key result of this study best summed up by one of the students in our final class discussion. She described herself as an “expert” in understanding, writing, and teaching sonnets after finishing her two UFG projects. Excited by her newfound knowledge, she decided her personal professional development goal was to choose a new genre every semester and create an UFG project on that genre independently. Her ultimate goal was to slowly build her pedagogical content knowledge for teaching all the genres she had been too intimidated to approach during her first five years as a secondary-level teacher.
For this student, the UFG projects were more than two projects from a long list of assignments required of her as a graduate student. These projects provided her with a new, practical method for improving her content knowledge and pedagogical practices one genre at a time. Once teachers learn how to complete an unfamiliar genre project, they can use this project model independently to learn new genres, learn more about their own writing processes, and determine effective ways to translate their insider knowledge as readers/writers into effective P–12 pedagogical practices. Obviously, not every teacher who experiences the UFG projects will adopt this desire for continued self-improvement. Further, workplace demands often prevent teachers from fulfilling their professional development goals, no matter how well-intentioned and practical those goals are. As a teacher educator, however, I believe these projects have the potential to promote increased pedagogical content knowledge among writing teachers. Further, teachers may use their insider knowledge to provide training and support to other teachers of writing within their schools or districts.

The National Commission on Writing (2006) emphasizes the current need for such writing teacher mentors in schools nationwide. In the 2006 report, *Writing and School Reform*, the Commission states:

> There was also a hope that teacher-led professional development emphasizing teachers as writers could show teachers how to model writing for their students and allow teachers to understand the challenges that students experience learning to write. Encouraging teachers to see themselves as writers and modeling writing for the benefit of their students were recurring themes throughout the hearings. (p. 26)

While a single teacher completing a single project cannot spark the “writing revolution” called for by the National Commission of Writing (2005, 2006), this research study does indicate that studying unfamiliar genres can promote teachers’ insider knowledge as writers. By studying and composing in unfamiliar genres, teachers may learn a development tool to expand their insider knowledge as readers, writers, and teachers beyond the graduate-level classroom. Given the opportunities and support within their local schools and districts, such teachers have the potential for directing teacher-led professional development workshops or peer writing groups, thus promoting increased attention to writing among teachers, students, administrators, and parents.
Appendix: Follow-Up Reflective Writing Response for Teachers

1. Background information: How many years have you been teaching? What grades have you taught? What are your certifications/endorsements?

2. Briefly explain your beliefs, conceptions, or opinions toward your unfamiliar genre prior to studying it in this course.

3. Briefly explain how you feel completing the unfamiliar genre project (project 1) affected or did not affect your confidence as a writer.

4. Briefly explain how completing the unfamiliar genre project (project 1) affected or did not affect your knowledge for teaching writing.

5. Briefly explain how completing the extension unfamiliar genre project (project 2) affected or did not affect your knowledge for teaching writing.

6. What, if any, specific assignments or in-class activities did you find most helpful in completing project 1 and/or project 2? Explain.

7. Please add any additional information regarding specific components of both unfamiliar genre projects and/or your overall experience with these projects.

References


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Candidates Announced for CEE Elections

Later this month, ballots for the 2013 CEE elections will be sent to all CEE members. Candidates for Executive Committee posts (three to be elected; terms to expire in 2017) are Mollie Blackburn, Ohio State University, Columbus; Carol Brochin Ceballos, University of Texas at El Paso; Marcelle Haddix, Syracuse University, New York; Carmen Kynard, St. John’s University, Jamaica, New York; Thomas M. McCann, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb; and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Also on the CEE ballot will be candidates for the 2013–2014 CEE Nominating Committee: Carlin Borsheim-Black, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant; Allison Carey, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia; Susan L. Groenke, University of Tennessee, Knoxville; Jung Kim, Lewis University, Romeoville, Illinois; Mark A. Lewis, Loyola University, Baltimore, Maryland; Michael B. Sherry, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania; Allison Skerrett, University of Texas at Austin; Peter Williamson, University of San Francisco, California.

Members of the 2012–2013 CEE Nominating Committee are Ramon Martinez, University of Texas at Austin, chair; Nelson Graff, San Francisco State University, California; KaaVonia Hinton-Johnson, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia; Sophia Sarigianides, Westfield State University, Massachusetts; and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Teachers College/Columbia University, New York.