

## Code Blue: A Lesson in Teacher Inquiry In a Professional Development School

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**Abstract:** This article describes how a high school classroom became a true learning laboratory for participants within a Professional Development School. Specifically, the classroom served as a “hospital round,” in which teacher candidates, mentor teacher, and university professor “diagnosed” a student learning issue, “prescribed” a teaching strategy, and made careful observations of the “patient” to see if the prescribed strategy was effective. This “Code Blue” lesson enabled the teacher candidates, mentor teacher, and university professor to engage collaboratively in teacher inquiry, resulting in positive professional development for all participants.

**KEYWORDS:** professional development school, PDS, teacher inquiry, teaching strategy, innovative practice, reflective practice

### **NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:**

2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community;
3. Ongoing and professional development for all participants guided by need;
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants;
5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants
7. A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration;
8. Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings;

### **Introduction**

Imagine this scenario: It is a Tuesday afternoon in a local high school. Twenty-five 10<sup>th</sup> grade students file into a classroom and their teacher organizes the students into small groups. Just after the bell rings, the co-teacher announces, “Good afternoon! As you can see, we’re going to do something a little bit different today. We’re going to try discussing *Lord of the Flies* in a different way – using Literature Circles. I’m going to get you all started; then you’ll get to try it out in your groups.” After the co-teacher provides instructions on how Literature Circles work, the students discuss the novel in their groups with both teachers assisting, as needed. Perhaps this sounds like

a fairly typical high school English class. Except – the “co-teacher” in this scenario was a teacher education professor from the local university. Additionally, six teacher candidates were in the room, observing and taking notes on this class session. After the class ended, the teacher candidates, classroom teacher, and university professor met for an hour to discuss this teaching observation session.

This scenario describes one afternoon within a Professional Development School (PDS). The goal of this afternoon’s lesson was to invite teacher candidates to help solve a real-world teaching problem through inquiry. That is, the classroom served as a “hospital round,” in which teacher candidates, mentor teacher, and university professor “diagnosed” a student learning issue, “prescribed” a teaching strategy, and made careful observations of the “patient” to see if the prescribed strategy was effective. This “Code Blue” lesson mirrors the recommendation put forth by the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS, 2008), which describes the PDS as a “learning laboratory for the development of teacher candidates” (p. 5). One way to create such a laboratory experience is through teacher inquiry, in which individuals study specific instructional practices. In fact, such inquiry is considered a “signature pedagogy” of PDS partnerships (Yendol-Hoppey & Franco, 2014). In this article, we - both the mentor teacher (Jennifer) and university professor (Erinn) - will describe how our classroom became a learning laboratory. We will explain how the Code Blue lesson idea emerged, our goals for this inquiry experience, and how the experience impacted participants.

### **Code Blue Lesson Context**

Our Code Blue inquiry lesson took place in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom within an urban high school in the southeastern United States that serves a population of approximately 1400 students annually. The school’s English department is comprised of nine full-time teachers, six of whom were selected to serve as mentors to teacher candidates during the 2015-2016 academic year. At this time, the school became the pilot site for a new PDS with a local university’s teacher education department. Specifically, the university’s secondary English education program partnered with the high school. During this academic year, six English teacher candidates were enrolled in the program. The candidates completed yearlong field placements within the high school English classrooms and completed two methods courses on-site at the school. Their university faculty member (Erinn) was on-site at the school teaching these courses and supervising the teacher candidates’ placements.

Jennifer served as one of the mentor teachers during this academic year. In spring semester, she became interested in studying her 10<sup>th</sup> grade students’ engagement during close readings of rigorous texts. She invited Erinn and the six teacher candidates to engage in inquiry focused on the question, “How can we design lessons to engage students in actively analyzing and discussing a text?” To answer this question, a teaching strategy was selected, and Erinn tested out this strategy in Jennifer’s classroom while the teacher candidates observed. Student artifacts (e.g., discussion handouts and text annotations) and observational data on the focus lesson were collected. These data were analyzed for emerging themes. Results from these analyses revealed that the teaching strategy did not effectively engage the 10<sup>th</sup> grade student readers; however, the inquiry experience did positively impact the pedagogical beliefs of the mentor teacher, university professor, and teacher candidates.

## Code Blue in My Classroom: A Mentor Teacher's Perspective

Our Code Blue lesson experience begins with Jennifer's descriptions of her classroom situation – the factors and questions that led her to seek new methods and strategies for reaching her 10<sup>th</sup> grade students.

### Students' Symptoms: Acute or Chronic Aversion to Learning?

There I was... a veteran English teacher in a new high school trying my old lessons and my worn-out ideas while the pre-service teacher I was assigned to mentor looked on (and in my eyes, I was convinced, in judgment.) The students from the high school where I worked previously were below grade level and struggling, yet I could get them to perform. But this new group was an enigma. Most students performed at grade level on standardized tests, yet I could not get anything out of them in class.

It was an outlier class—I had several other preps and only one tenth grade class. I was spending too much time prepping for the other classes and always seemed to fall short for this particular class. I was struggling to develop and define a purpose for the class. This was supposed to be a school with high standards, so should I teach more novels, or should I teach shorter texts? Should I push or coddle? I had no clue and am embarrassed to admit that my years of experience went out the window once fifth period began every day. To be clear, I take some of the blame, but not all of it. Many of the students came to me expecting to make good grades without putting forth much effort. Why weren't they performing? Admittedly something was wrong and it was time for an intervention.

### Time to Call the Doctor

I'm fortunate to be in a school that partners with our local university for educational training. The university has an on-site faculty member who supervises secondary English teacher candidates and teaches methods courses on our campus. During the 2015-2016 academic year, six teacher candidates were paired with mentor teachers for a yearlong field placement. Though the candidates spent most of their placement hours within their assigned classrooms, they also observed in other classrooms. I often felt guilty when my teacher candidate came to watch in fifth period. Surely, she was not gaining anything from me. I was embarrassed at what I imagined she must have been thinking about both my class and me. That's when the idea of an intervention came to me. I needed Erinn and her teacher candidates to save me. I started to envision a true laboratory of learning.

Although my husband works in the medical field, I gleaned most of my ideas from old episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER*. I was seeking a cure for the class and dreamed of finding a miracle doctor to save it—and me. I needed an outsider to examine what was going on, to look for any and all problems that had gone unnoticed. I wanted someone to dissect my classroom management. Slice and dice my lessons. Examine the causes for their apathy. Look for symptoms. Diagnose the problem. I approached Erinn about conducting a true lab. I wanted to teach behind see-through glass while the teacher candidates observed in their lab coats, carrying clipboards and jotting down their observations. Erinn would ask them for their opinions and would guide them to the right answer. They would walk in and out, talk with the patients, and present a prognosis.

While we couldn't arrange for see-through glass or lab coats, we developed a Code Blue lesson based on a strategy the teacher candidates had learned in their methods course: tried and true Literature Circles (Daniels, 2002). In this strategy, students are assigned specific "roles" to play as they read, annotate, and discuss a text. For instance, they might play the role of "illustrator" by drawing pictures of significant images or concepts within the text. Or, they might serve as a "discussion director" by creating thought-provoking questions and guiding their peers in talking about these questions. The goal of this strategy is for students to approach reading the text from various perspectives and collaboratively analyze that task in a small-group discussion. The teacher candidates had participated in a novel study using Literature Circles in their methods class and they wanted to see the strategy used with "real" students. Erinn had observed my class several times and she agreed to lead the lesson while I assisted and her teacher candidates observed. They would sit with the students, observing how the students engaged in the Literature Circle activity, and look for symptoms and causes of the underperforming class.

### Observations during Labs

Erinn began with a hook. She followed with standards. She differentiated. She did everything the way the books said to do and the way she and her teacher candidates discussed. She couldn't go wrong using Literature Circles to teach a chapter from *Lord of the Flies*! But here's what astonished me: Erinn and her teacher candidates had designed a great lesson and it wasn't working. I felt vindicated! See, it wasn't me! It's them, I could tell myself. The artsy artist drew his picture: *A pig*. The connector wrote a connection: *Boys fight today*. The quotable quoter found her favorite quote: *Sucks to your ass-mar*. The discussion director led a discussion: *Y'all, can you hurry up and finish?* One student didn't listen because he thought Erinn sounded "like a Yankee." Two students were playing footsy with each other while a teacher candidate sat at their table group! Bottom line: The lesson did not work. Erinn and I had put ourselves on display—true vulnerability—and were asking for feedback from the teacher candidates we mentored. We could no longer be seen as infallible. The lesson was a failure. And that failure is what led to the discoveries – for us and for the teacher candidates.

### Code Blue: Diagnoses from Different Perspectives

Our Code Blue lesson narrative continues with each of us sharing our individual diagnoses of the inquiry experience. First, Jennifer (the mentor teacher) will share her perspective, and then Erinn (the university professor) will share her perspective.

#### Mentor Teacher's Diagnosis

While the Code Blue lesson was taking place, I was able to observe my classroom from a different vantage point. It certainly looks different standing in the back of the room instead of the front. I could tell Erinn was having difficulties engaging the students based on their minimal effort. I had originally surmised that I was not teaching interesting lessons, but that did not seem to be the case this time. After all, Erinn was using tried and true strategies, and the students still seemed disengaged, clearly evident from their somewhat vacant stares or off-topic chatter. I theorized what was going wrong: Erinn was attempting to teach a lesson using Literature Circles, but it had

no meaning for the students. Put simply, all of this - the Literature Circles, the past lessons, the attempts at trying to entice them with games or bonus points—all of it was, in the students' eyes, a waste of time. I put myself in their shoes and imagined what they must be thinking: Why were they drawing a picture? What were they supposed to discuss? Why were they discussing anything? In our attempt to try to draw in this apathetic group, we had tried to provide creativity and a fresh approach; however, we had failed to get them to understand the purpose, the *why*, of what they were learning, thus making *what* they did or *how* they did it rather pointless.

That's not Erinn's fault. That was my fault. I was forced to reexamine what I was teaching and what my purpose was. Why was I even teaching *Lord of the Flies* to begin with? Don't get me wrong, I love teaching that novel, but I had not taken the time to establish the purpose of it when we began. Oh, I had thrown in the standards and I thought I had a purpose, but if I'm honest with myself, my purpose was on paper only. I had tried to tie the novel into their lives and I originally thought it carried meaning for them, so why couldn't they handle the Literature Circles? Maybe I didn't fail in making the novel relevant; maybe I failed in making those skills relevant. The students saw no purpose in leading a discussion because I had not taught them how to have a discussion or why discussions are so crucial in everyday life. I had not taught them how to be creative because I didn't think that was on my list of standards to be covered. I had taught them how to answer the questions, but I hadn't taught them how to ask questions. I was so eager to teach symbolism that I forgot to make them see why learning itself is so important. Even the best lessons are not engaging if they carry no meaning. While diagnosing the students, I was forced to diagnose myself. I had not created any meaning at all in what I was doing. And if the teacher does not understand the purpose, the students certainly don't.

After the lesson, I was eager to talk to the teacher candidates to confirm my findings. I was curious as to whether or not the teacher candidates would blame the Literature Circles strategy, the instructor, or the students' personalities for the lesson's failure? Erinn and I met with the teacher candidates for an hour to de-brief the experience and we collected their observation notes. These notes and our conversations revealed interesting insights. All of the candidates agreed that this type of observation gave them a new perspective on their students. For example, one said that she enjoyed "sitting with the students, not standing up there in the classroom and looking down on them." She explained, "It gave me a new perspective. I haven't sat with high school students since I was in high school." Sitting next to the students and seeing how they reacted to the lesson, this teacher candidate had an "aha" moment about her own role as a teacher. She noted, "When I plan lessons, I think, 'what will students think?' But, sitting there, I realized that's NOT what they think." The teacher candidates realized that when they are teaching a lesson or are assisting their mentor teachers, they easily get caught up in the "big picture" of learning. That is, they focus on the whole class and may not notice how individual students are behaving or whether individual students comprehend the content being taught. By sitting next to the students, the teacher candidates were able to hone in on individual student's questions, behaviors, attitudes, and learning – a microcosm of the classroom environment. The teacher candidates noticed that the students were writing answers on their handouts and completing the work out of compliance only – no meaningful discussion was taking place.

During our de-brief discussion, the teacher candidates next tried to determine why the Code Blue lesson was unsuccessful. Initially, they questioned the pedagogical strategy itself. The teacher candidates had enjoyed using Literature Circles in their methods course, but this strategy did not seem to work with the students. One candidate wondered if the strategy worked in methods class

because, as English majors, they just naturally connected with texts. The 10<sup>th</sup> grade students, however, may not have the same feeling. She said, “Students connect totally differently. We don’t have the same life experiences as our students.” She further noted, “They’re searching for that mystical right answer” rather than discussing a variety of responses. The other teacher candidates agreed that the students just didn’t seem to “get” this strategy.

Similar to my own diagnosis for the Code Blue lesson, the teacher candidates believed that the students needed to better understand the purpose behind using Literature Circles. The problem was not necessarily the strategy itself. As one candidate noted, “Not everyone read...not everyone wanted to talk or participate.” Her peer sighed, “Yeah, and that’s the core issue. What do you do? If students don’t read, don’t do the work? Do you let them fail? I feel like that’s the essential question of teaching - how much do you hold their hands?” By observing the Code Blue lesson and sharing their observations with each other, their mentor teacher, and their professor, the teacher candidates discovered that engaging in inquiry and reflective practice moves beyond simply testing out a pedagogical strategy. It entails carefully analyzing students’ “symptoms” to determine the root cause of an issue. In this case, the candidates moved beyond dissecting the instructional strategy or the lesson plan design. Instead, they critically reflected on the factors causing students’ lack of engagement – the “essential questions” of teaching. They related this lesson experience to their own pedagogical beliefs, to their own roles as teachers, to their own questions about how students learn and grow. And I hope that they saw me, a veteran teacher, willing to put myself and my classroom under a microscope so that I can continue to learn and grow. Sometimes even accomplished teachers need to ask themselves questions, though we are often scared of what the answers may be. This Code Blue lesson emphasized exactly how important it is for all teachers to be fully transparent and vulnerable; for it is only through honest reflection that true development can occur.

### University Professor’s Diagnosis

Similar to Jennifer and the teacher candidates, I did not feel as if the teaching strategy used in the Code Blue lesson effectively engaged the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. I also wondered if part of the lesson’s outcome resulted from my role as the “guest teacher.” As a university professor, I do not often have opportunities to teach in K-12 classrooms. Though I had spent weeks observing in Jennifer’s classroom, I discovered that teaching the students was a different experience from simply observing them. As a result, I now better understand how my teacher candidates might feel when they are “guest teachers” in someone else’s classroom. When students were off-task during my instruction, I was unsure if I should redirect them. *Was that my job? Would I be overstepping my boundaries? Should I rely on the mentor teacher to intervene?* Navigating how to manage students’ behavior when you are not the “real” teacher is tricky. Jennifer and I had not discussed how we might handle behavioral issues in advance. Perhaps I assumed that the students would be attentive and participatory simply because the “professor” was teaching and they were being observed by several teacher candidates. The students were not unruly; these students were simply disengaged. And I was not sure how to handle the situation.

Next, I now better understand how my teacher candidates might feel when their “perfectly planned” lesson flat-lines. On paper and in theory, my lesson plan was solid. In reality, it did not resonate with the students. It was disheartening and frustrating. It was also good for me. This was my first year working on-site as a professor in a high school. As a former secondary English

teacher, I had spent the past eight years teaching methods courses on a university campus. I traveled out to the K-12 classrooms periodically to observe my pre-service teachers. I may have been knowledgeable in educational theories and practices, but how quickly I had forgotten what it was like to keep 25 restless students engaged and on-task. I needed a refresher.

Teaching the Code Blue lesson was a true learning experience for me—a learning experience in vulnerability. In the Code Blue lesson, I planned what I thought would be a great activity, my teacher candidates observed me, and the lesson flat-lined. I was determined to not give up. I wanted to learn from my failures. So, I agreed to be the “guest teacher” in three different classrooms later that semester. Each time, my lesson did not go exactly as planned. High school students are honest. They tell me when they don’t understand my instructions or when the activity I planned is boring. They also tell me when I get it right. I worried about how the teacher candidates and the mentor teacher would perceive me as a result of the Code Blue lesson. I was supposed to be the expert, and I felt like I failed them. That failure helped me see, though, that textbook strategies need to be tested with real students. My diagnosis for the Code Blue lesson (and those subsequent lessons) is that my methods course must be rooted in ongoing inquiry. I must be willing to try, to fail, and to reflect on how to teach it better next time – those same practices I require my teacher candidates to do in my course.

### Concluding Thoughts: Is There a Cure?

Finally, we conclude our narrative by sharing our collective thoughts on engaging in the inquiry process within a PDS. As a mentor teacher and a university professor, we first developed the idea for the Code Blue lesson hoping to find a “cure” for this group of tenth grade students. They were disengaged with instruction; they were off-task. There had to be a cure. We tested out a pedagogical strategy - a best practice – and it did not achieve the desired outcome from these students. While the lesson itself failed, the Code Blue session did not. By inviting the teacher candidates to participate in this experience, we modeled the process of teacher inquiry. That is, we posed the question, “How can we design lessons to engage students in actively analyzing and discussing a text?” To answer this question, we engaged in the following inquiry steps: We chose and then tested out a teaching strategy, collected student data and observational data on the focus lesson, analyzed the data, and reflected on the lesson’s efficacy. Throughout our process, we worked as a team to analyze teaching effectiveness and reflected on how to improve instruction in the future. Our process mirrored the following description of teaching inquiry put forth by Yendol-Hoppey and Franco (2014), “[I]nquiry requires complete engagement as [teacher candidates] dialogue with peers, practicing teachers, and university faculty throughout the cycle” (p. 24).

In theory, engaging in teacher inquiry sounded easy. In reality—and in our “hospital round” environment—engaging in inquiry resulted in moments of uncertainty and vulnerability. In our Code Blue lesson, the teacher candidates helped plan a lesson, watched us teach the lesson, and saw that the lesson did not work. The teacher candidates also saw that we had the confidence and willingness to reflect—to figure out what went wrong and how to learn from it as opposed to taking all of the blame. As we mentor teacher candidates, we often notice that if their lessons do not go as smoothly as planned, they tend to think, *I’m a bad teacher* or *I did something wrong*. In this case, the teacher candidates saw their mentor teacher say, *I’m an experienced and confident teacher, but I need some help figuring out how to better reach this group of students*. The teacher candidates then saw their professor teach an imperfect lesson and say, *Hmmm...I’m still a good*

*teacher, but something went wrong. I wonder what happened, and how can we make it work better next time?*

From this experience, we realized the importance of being vulnerable, of showing our teacher candidates that we sometimes face uncertainty when making instructional decisions. As Yendol-Hoppey and Franco (2014) affirmed, "...participation in inquiry necessitates navigating in an uncertain context, unique student needs, [and] shifting questions..." (p. 24). In our case, we did not know whether our new strategy would be effective and truly meet our students' needs, but we were willing to try. Next, we realized the importance of being resilient, of showing our teacher candidates that we become better teachers by admitting our failures and learning from them. Finally, we realized the importance of being transparent and honest, of showing our teacher candidates that professional development and growth come from analyzing one's students (e.g., their learning needs, personalities, behaviors, skills, attitudes, and backgrounds), from analyzing one's resources (e.g., curricula, materials, standards, assessment data, and strategies), and from using data to make informed decisions (e.g., student responses, assessment data, and observation notes). Most importantly, we realized that the ultimate goal was not to find a cure. A "cure" implies a finite result. A perfect solution. We teach students and mentor teacher candidates. There is no perfect way for doing either task. Thus, we have learned to be vulnerable and embrace the process of asking questions together, seeking solutions together, testing those solutions together, and reflecting and learning together.

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