
Pedagogy of Care: Mentoring Preservice English Teachers Through a Creative Reflection Task

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Abstract:

Two teacher educators and two preservice teachers reflect on a culminating creative reflection activity with suggestions for adapting the practice in future teacher education classrooms and implications of the benefits of group reflection practices, particularly in times of crisis. We noted reflection's ability to help students craft an ideal future self, the importance of building community in teacher education courses, the resilience of school-university partnerships even during virtual education, and the use of care as an intentional teaching practice.

KEYWORDS: pre-service teachers, teacher educators, reflection, school-university partnerships, resilience

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

Essential 2: Clinical Preparation—A PDS embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice.

Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation—A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.

Contextualizing Our Practice

In the contemporary school climate—amid COVID, aftereffects of remote teaching, and resulting trauma in both students and teachers—in-service teachers report feeling more stressed than ever (Smith, 2021; Perper, 2020; Fleckman et al., 2022; Yurt, 2022). Clinical teaching experiences have changed in many ways as a result of this stress. Some of the most notable shifts include the evolving preservice teacher (PST)/mentor teacher relationship (Shivers et al., 2022), an increased need for PST supports (Helmsing et al., 2022), and the changed pedagogical reasoning required of both in-service teachers and PSTs (Smith et al., 2021).

As a result of the changes in field experiences, supporting PSTs has necessarily changed, both from the perspectives of their mentor teachers as well as from the perspective of teacher educators. In describing a strategy for supporting PSTs, the teacher educator authors of this piece thought there could be no voices more important to include than their own. To that end, we had two of the PSTs in our class write alongside us to convey the impact of this practice on their identity as both student and teacher. Their voices compose the *impact* section, and their keen eyes added value and a form of member checking through the rest of the article.

The teacher educator authors of this piece work with PSTs studying secondary English at a midsize private university in Texas. We teach in the tradition of Noddings (2012), who argues that care forms the foundation of ethics, and Freire (1963), who literally wrote the book on humanizing Pedagogy as a means for liberation. Good teaching by design must emphasize and support the wellbeing of the students. As we intentionally model teaching strategies in methods courses and PST seminars, we also intentionally model a culture of care through nurturing pedagogy for our PSTs. As we reflect on our own practices as teachers and teacher educators, we realize the vital component that reflection has served in our teaching lives and identities. The literature supports this assertion; reflection enables PSTs to grow in their teaching and to envision their ideal future teaching identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010; Canabate et al., 2018; Dewey, 1903; Gomez, 1996; Ó Gallchóir et al., 2018; Reilly, 2005; Rogers, 2002). Since higher levels of job satisfaction and self-efficacy can have mitigating effects on stress and burnout (Yurt, 2022), the need to adequately prepare PSTs becomes even more vital.

Of the nine essentials described by the National Association for the Professional Development Schools (NAPDS), we were drawn to two which clearly align with our pursuits in supporting our students through a pedagogy of care through a creative reflection assignment: a PDS should embrace the preparation of educators through clinical practice (Essential 2), and that the clinical practice should be guided by a PDS relationship's commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge (Essential 4).

To meet our responsibilities as teacher educators to prepare our PSTs through clinical practice, we responsively engaged in providing impromptu supports as their emotional needs arose. The explanation of our nurturing pedagogy ensues in three parts: first, a description of our supportive practice; second, the impact of this practice on our PSTs, written by them; and finally, a discussion of the implications of our practice in light of the existing literature.

Description of the Practice

Our students were in a junior-level course that serves as the first semester-long clinical experience in their certification area. PSTs met with one another and us, their instructors, on Monday mornings and then taught and observed in secondary ELAR classrooms Tuesdays–Fridays for the duration of the field experience. As they moved through the semester, we noticed that more than in previous years, they seemed overwhelmed, stressed, and defeated. Though they still had much of the same campus supports through site coordinators and experienced mentor teachers, the demands of COVID and other environmental concerns tested the resilience of the PSTs and educators around the state. Because of this observation, rather than a written reflection paper submitted asynchronously on our online learning management software, we planned a culminating reflection activity. The activity featured three main components: connection, food, and reflection.

The first component, connection, was met in two main ways. First, we met with our in-person students in an outdoor picnic space on campus, while our three virtual students joined in via Zoom. Until this meeting, all our interactions were virtual, which felt limited and disconnected. We wanted to emphasize the relationships between the PSTs and with us as the instructors. To that end, we provided seating at tables that allowed for social distancing. We also included computer screens at the tables to ensure the inclusion of our virtual students and promote informal interaction between the in-person and virtual groups. The beginning of our activity was intentionally unstructured so the PSTs could get comfortable and unwind among peers. We immediately noticed a change in behavior. Where on Zoom students were fairly reserved, only offering responses and commentary when prompted; gathering together in person naturally facilitated free-flowing dialogue and laughter that was missing from previous sessions. To continue fostering this fellowship, we provided reflective opportunities through food and creative expression.

When the PSTs entered the courtyard, we encouraged our in-person students to load up their plates on their way to their seats. We offered a mix of comfort foods, like donuts and juice, breakfast sandwiches and fruit. Our virtual students were emailed gift cards to chain restaurants in advance so they could obtain their own breakfast and join us in our time of fellowship. The foods they chose for breakfast affected the first informal reflection in our conversation. Students found the food at the 12 o'clock position on their plates and answered the corresponding questions (see Table 1). Some of the successes shared included gaining confidence in teaching and building relationships with their students. Words of wisdom each tended toward the theme of remembering to breathe and trying to work ahead whenever possible. After a half hour of food and conversation, we brought out art supplies and shared the collaborative Google Slides presentation with reflection questions and an assigned slide for each student.

Table 1.

Food selection and corresponding reflection question

Food at 12:00 position of plate	Reflection question
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Donut	biggest success in teaching this year
Fruit	words of wisdom for future PSTs in this course
Breakfast sandwich	a funny story from your clinical field experience
empty/other	[wild card] pick your favorite

Our PSTs used the Slides presentation and craft supplies to respond to an open-ended prompt reflecting on the semester: visually represent your semester teaching through the mixed media or through an online creation tool. The options of either the provided materials or the online tools was an intentional choice to make the assignment more approachable for our virtual PSTs. After about 15 minutes for creation, the PSTs then took a photograph of their creation and added it to their assigned slide of the collaborative slide deck (see Figures 1–4). The structure of this activity (or lack of structure) allowed for a variety of interpretations to the prompt. One student chose to focus on skill representative words they recognized as essential to classroom teaching (Figure 2). Another harnessed the humor of memes to capture the range of emotions they experienced throughout the semester (Figure 3). Others focused on the relationships between the teacher and the students or the teacher and the school (Figures 1 & 4). The varied responses demonstrate the benefits of truly open-ended reflective tasks for PSTs: differentiation of media as well as of response resulted in artifacts as touchpoints for deep conversation and connection, whether through shared knowledge of popular television shows or discussions about ourselves as multifaceted creatures as modeled by a die.

Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

The following section describes the impact of these reflective tasks from the perspectives of the PSTs who participated in them.

Impact of the Practice—The PSTs' Perspectives

In our program, the spring semester of junior year is the first experience being in the field. Our experience was exciting and stressful all at once, just like trying anything else for the first time. In addition to learning to teach for the first time, we were practicing our teaching in COVID-protocol classrooms with some students in person, some virtual, and some on the roll as virtual but noticeably absent, and a large snowstorm overwhelmed the roads and power grid in Texas, shutting down school and leaving several of us stranded in our homes. By the end of the semester, each of us was exhausted. Despite the excitement and joy of teaching, the workload of trying to balance homework for coursework as an undergraduate student while simultaneously working in K–12 schools was challenging.

At the end of the spring semester, we had a special class where we all came together to talk, reflect, eat breakfast and craft. Of course, the real substance for this activity was the reflection (although the food was a welcome substance, too). The reflection activities and end-of-year breakfast and craft session that our cohort completed at the end of the semester was a great way to reflect on the clinical teaching experience and to gear up for the senior year full-time internship. This time of reflection and fellowship was important in helping to form close relationships. As teachers, we value reflection as part of everyday life. It's one of those good-for-the-soul habits that benefits anyone practicing it. We were lucky enough to experience and practice reflection as part of

our field experience seminar course; it was built in throughout the course and culminated in this final activity so that we could reflect as individuals and as a group. The whole event provided a real sense of comradery—we had all experienced the trenches of being a teacher for the first time while COVID ran rampant on the streets and snowstorms froze our homes—and made us feel connected to one another, reminding us that we weren't ever really alone in our experiences and thoughts. It was so nice to know that more than just my mentor teacher knew what I was going through and to be able to discuss my experience with people in other contexts, grade levels, and campuses. The activity was great because we weren't just celebrating ourselves, we were celebrating and uplifting each other. We were one big disco ball reflecting one another's light. Our cohort of ELAR PSTs has been the strongest support network throughout the challenges of the past two years and stayed consistent even as our campus placements and mentor teachers shifted. The friendships created among our cohort have been so valuable because we are all sharing a similar experience in being a teacher and a student—this experience is one that few can fully understand without being in the position themselves. The many challenges of balancing work and school have been lessened because of the support and encouragement from our PST cohort. Relationship building opportunities like breakfast together, reflection, and other fun activities like crafting have provided opportunities for our cohort to grow closer together.

Group reflection is more complicated than individual reflection, because when reflecting with others, we had to be vulnerable with our colleagues and step outside of our own experiences to consider things from another perspective. Truthfully, it was something that before this experience we were unfamiliar with. This reflection activity was one in a long string of reflective tasks that helped us to grow in the skill of reflecting on our teaching and our teaching selves, and to check in with ourselves and our peers, encouraging others and taking note of what we needed to experience success and to stay healthy. The culminating reflection breakfast had us all together, celebrating and reflecting as a unit by sharing experiences and thoughts. The reflections we made throughout the semester, including the last big reflection activity we did together in person, contributed to the fond memories we have of that mess of a school year and our confidence in ourselves as teachers moving forward.

Implications and Discussion

We recommend a practice like this one to teacher educators across disciplines and geography but want to underscore that part of what made this reflective activity so effective was its responsiveness to our students. Similar tasks should take into account the needs of the PSTs as a whole group and as individuals. Outside its replicability, the implications of this practice are four-fold.

First, teacher educators can introduce reflection as a means for creating an “ideal teaching self” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010). Students’ reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983) prompts self-awareness and forward thinking, for they are able to intentionally engage how their perceptions have changed, what adjustments they will make going into a new year, and whether or not they feel prepared for their future classroom. This is particularly useful for PSTs as they navigate evolving identities amid communities of veteran teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010). Purposeful reflection allows for deeper

understanding of the PSTs personal commitments in the classroom. For example, the students who created the bear (Figure 1) and “Go Panthers!” illustration (Figure 4) explored their commitment to students and the school community. They emphasized the power of relationships in creating meaningful teaching experiences. The students who created the meme-based piece (Figure 3) and cube (Figure 2) dove into the nuances of their identities as instructors in the classroom and what skills—namely humor, adaptability, and an abundance of effort—they should foster for future classroom success. We certainly will be using this in-person creative reflection rather than asynchronous reflection papers when teaching this class in future semesters.

Second, as emphasized in our PSTs’ description of the impact of the activity, reflection is a community-building practice. This activity underscores the need for relationships and care during clinical experiences. Three specific actions, exemplified in this activity, contribute to the relationships necessary for sustaining a strong partnership during turbulent times. As course instructors, we were attuned to the emotional needs of our PSTs. In other words, we saw they were stressed, and we adjusted instruction to ensure they had space to breathe and unwind. This space was created through intentional fellowship. Not only did we eliminate the separation and disconnect that can be common in classes held over Zoom by meeting for our final class in person, but we also attempted to create a more natural gathering during which we ate and conducted casual, relational conversations outside of a physical classroom space, which further created an informal environment. Because some students still opted to participate in this activity remotely, we worked diligently to break down virtual barriers, recognizing that resilience is nurtured through the cultivation of reciprocal and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Third, virtual PST responses to the reflection activity reveal much about the school–university partnerships’ resilience. Though traditional practices required PSTs to be physically present in the classroom, our partner campuses went above and beyond to accommodate virtual PSTs, who taught in-person students while they themselves were remote. The PSTs planned lessons using online collaborative tools so students could collaborate in real time, removing the barrier of not being able to see student desks or papers easily during classwork. The clinical instructors hosting the PSTs met via video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Teams as well as by phone, text, and email. Site coordinators at each PDS campus checked in with the virtual PSTs and provided troubleshooting for technology with the clinical instructors. The way that we all worked together to support the PSTs and the clinical teacher while navigating the relationship appeared again and again in our reflective conversations (Figure 3 nods to some of these successes and challenges). While the perspectives in this article omit the vital voices of mentor teachers and site coordinators, the crucial role they played in supporting the PSTs was evident throughout the conversations and products in the reflection activity.

Fourth, and most encouragingly, care and, consequently, the hope born from knowing one is cared for, can serve as an intentional teaching practice and can be operationalized through small, intentional actions by teacher educators. Teacher educators must provide spaces in which students can reflect not only on growth and struggles, but on the humorous experiences and positive outcomes occurring in classrooms as well. The breakfast reflection questions provided students an opportunity to encourage each other

and remind themselves that though the struggles of pandemic teaching were abundant, so were the moments of joy and light.

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