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Cultivating Dialogic Reflection to Foster and Sustain Preservice Teachers' Professional Identities

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An integral part of teacher preparation is developing preservice teachers' professional teacher identities (Korthagen, 2004; Alsup, 2005; Loughran, 2014), particularly as they transition from university coursework into classroom teaching. Teachers who build professional identities combat feelings of isolation that often lead to attrition (Hoaglund, Birkenfeld & Box, 2014). Engaging in professional communities with peers supports them as they negotiate teaching tensions (Pillen, et al., 2013) and helps them establish and challenge their developing ideologies and values around teaching (Jimenez-Silva & Olson, 2012). Those teachers with strong professional identities enjoy greater self-efficacy and agency (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). As English educators, we (Amber and Katie) believe offering our students learning experiences that foster reflective practice and dialogue with their peers will help them develop professional identities and practices to support their transition into full-time teaching roles.

Like our students, we both were transitioning professionally from our doctoral programs into our first full-time English educator roles when we began exploring dialogic reflections with our preservice teachers. Amber first learned about the dialogic learning log (DLL) assignment from Michelle Falter's

Teaching/Writing invited articles from authors prepared to present at NCTE 2020, but were cut due to COVID program restrictions. We thank the authors of this piece for sharing their work.



presentation in a panel about dialogic writing practices at the 2019 ELATE Summer Conference in Fayetteville, Arkansas (Falter, et al., 2019). A few months later, at the 2019 NCTE Annual Convention in Baltimore, Maryland, Amber shared with Katie how she was using this assignment with her methods students. What began as a side conversation after our shared panel on teacher identity became a more prolonged conversation about how we could both use dialogic reflection as an opportunity for our students to engage with their peers in meaningful dialogue. We discussed how we might help our students explore their newly donned roles as teachers by adapting and applying Falter's DLL assignment and how we could continue to support and learn from one another's efforts. Our ongoing dialogue ultimately led to a joint proposal for the 2020 NCTE Convention, during which we planned to share our initial experiences using dialogic writing with preservice teachers at different points in our teacher education programs. Because of COVID we didn't get the chance to present, but we have continued reflecting on and discussing our students' experiences with this assignment. Through engaging in ongoing professional discussions at conferences and writing together, we have a renewed appreciation for the vulnerable and honest conversations we have in dialogue with each other as two relative novices troubleshooting our teaching challenges and exploring new strategies.

We hope to offer a similar experience for our students by asking them to engage in ongoing dialogue with their peers through their learning and teaching transitions. The goal of the dialogic partnerships, as we set them up in our methods and practicum courses and student teaching, is to create a space for preservice teachers to reflect with their peers in authentic, reciprocal, and context-informed ways. We feel the collaboration helps preservice teachers address the tensions as well as issues they face as they transition into classroom teaching. In contrast to the typical assignment of individual weekly reflections written for a professor or field supervisor, writing reflectively in dialogue with peers invokes the kind of collegiality and problem-solving that teachers practice long after they leave the university. Our shared hope is that cultivating meaningful dialogic partnerships will support and sustain preservice teachers' reflective practice, identity development, and collaborative growth.

This article presents our experiences with implementing dialogic partnerships during English teacher preparation at our two universities. We share how we have each adapted the DLL assignment for an English methods course and student teaching as a means to expand how our students and ourselves engage in reflective practices during formal teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning (Deppler, 2007).

Dialogical Reflections in an English Teaching Methods Course

I (Amber) have integrated ongoing dialogic reflections with the undergraduate preservice teachers in the English teaching methods course I teach at Brigham Young University as a way to decenter myself as the expert in the classroom and to shift students' focus toward practices of reflection and dialogue that I hope will sustain them through their teaching careers. Rather than asking students to write weekly reading responses or teaching reflections to me or discussion board posts to their peers—traditional markers of many university courses—I have adopted the Dialogic Learning Log (DLL) assignment. Instead, I ask students to engage weekly in conversation with each other in pairs or triads to synthesize their learning from course readings, class discussions, field experiences, and other related professional topics or inquiries.

I introduce the assignment at the beginning of the semester and group students (with their input) into the pairs or groups they will work with throughout the semester. I share with my students that my goal is for them to create meaningful spaces for authentic dialogue. I expect them to write and respond to each other on relevant topics or experiences of their choice at least once weekly for ten of the fourteen weeks our class meets during the semester. I acknowledge that requiring the assignment as part of the course, asking them to share their dialogues with me, and giving grades for their participation are all factors that may compromise the authenticity of their engagement with each other. Still, I challenge them to see the DLL as an opportunity to practice reflecting with and responding to their peers as colleagues in preparation for the professional relationships they will develop and lean on as full-time teachers.

My approach to grading the DLL reflects my intent to honor the space as theirs, not mine; at the same time, I do check in on their dialogues throughout the semester to get a pulse on the topics and tenor of their conversations. I keep any of my own engagements minimal and only supportive. I grade the DLLs twice throughout the semester according to the following criteria:

Participation	Weekly logs and responses are completed and published in shared space on time (5 discussions by mid-semester, 10 by the end of the semester).
Content	Logs are thoughtful, meaningful, and reflective. They draw on a range of sources, including course readings, course discussions, field experiences, professional conversations, etc.
Form and Genre	Logs reflect an authentic genre for professional communication; textual and multimodal composition choices reflect the appropriate

	audience (your peers, other teachers) and purpose (to reflect on your readings and experiences with English teaching theories and practices). Logs reflect professionalism in style and mechanics.
Dialogism and Response	Logs engage dialogue partner(s) by invoking questions and responses, thoughtfully engaging in discussion, and probing/challenging/questioning each other's assumptions and conclusions in constructive ways.

The students write mid- and end-of-semester reflection letters to document their progress and participation, discuss positive outcomes and challenges of their discussions, and describe how their dialogic reflections may inform their future teaching practices.

Since I have included this assignment as part of my methods course, 28 preservice English teachers have participated. They have primarily opted to use Google Docs as their shared reflection space, one partner posting early in the week and the other responding toward the week's end. Some pairs and groups have found success experimenting with using Marco Polo and FlipGrid to record and post videos and responses to each other. I ask for access to their conversations, popping in to read (or watch and listen to) their discussions on occasion, and responding only when I feel my input would support or further their dialogues.

My initial observations and my students' reflections suggest that the dialogic logs, at least in the short-term, help them feel validated and understood because they know they are writing for and responding to peers who are going through similar experiences and can offer safety and empathy in sharing and problem-solving together. In their DLLs, students practice articulating and reflecting on their emerging teaching priorities, particularly in situations where their teaching realities came into conflict with their expectations. Knowing there was an audience who would benefit from and respond to their reflections made some students feel compelled to be honest rather than to project feigned confidence. Others felt the assignment was busywork, indicated that they didn't understand its purpose, and wanted more feedback from someone they saw as an expert rather than a peer. Because this is a relatively new teaching practice for me, I do not yet know what—if any—long-term impact it has had or will have on my students' teaching identities or practices, but I hope to learn more as my research continues.

Dialogic Learning Logs in Student Teaching

I (Katie) implement Dialogic Learning Logs (DLLs) with student teachers at McKendree University, a small private liberal arts college in Illinois. At the beginning of the semester, we meet in person, this year on Zoom, to discuss

expectations for the student teaching semester, a common practice in our department. The students are accustomed to writing weekly reflections to their field supervisor during the three field experiences prior to student teaching. I introduce the DLL assignment to them by sharing how I envision this adapted model for reflecting on their teaching practices. They chose their partners for the semester, and we talk through how their dialogic partnerships might work and the options they have for journaling back and forth to one another. I set the expectation that they write at least one post a week and respond to their partner's post at least once a week. In the pre-semester meeting, the pairs discuss their dialogic journaling plans and even create their shared writing spaces most often using GoogleDocs. We brainstorm as a group potential topics of discussion. I explain the assignment's objective is to dialogue with their partners about the problems they encounter and possible solutions.

I require the pairs to share their documents with me, and I view their dialogues weekly, but I predominantly remain outside of the conversation. However, I connect with students through email several times if they encounter issues that need my support or sometimes just to check-in. Otherwise, they rely on one another as resources and support. One challenge was how to satisfy our program's requirement for weekly reflection grades. I keep weekly grades, using the department's shared rubric for reflections, but I do not post the grades. At the initial meeting, I inform students they can reach out if they want to see their progress, but I feel attaching a grade would discourage meaningful engagement. I do not want them to view this as an assignment but more as a tool for building their teaching repertoire.

During my initial implementation of DLL's I had four student teachers, so two groups. The two pairs developed quite differently from one another. One group merely did the minimum requirement of posting once and responding once to each other weekly. Their dialogue was lackluster at best. They did not dig beyond minor classroom management or curriculum design issues, focusing predominantly on the hardships of being student teachers and cooperating teachers' problems. They responded by commiserating more than helping each other find solutions. The other pair delved more deeply into issues like building meaningful relationships with students and among students and giving meaningful feedback to support rather than discourage their students. This pair had shorter but more frequent posts, writing back and forth an average of three times a week each. Their DLLs were more what I had imagined they could be, where both student teachers grew and leaned into one another for solutions to situations they encountered. The dialogue was continual and purposeful; both shared they relied on one another during their student teaching experience through their dialogic learning logs.

Beyond Student Teaching and Into Practice

The most exciting success I (Katie) found was when one of the participants began his first job teaching for a local high school the semester following student teaching. Kent (all student names are pseudonyms) extended what he learned about the value of meaningful peer dialogue and embedded it into his teaching practice. When he began his first job, he found out another student from our program, Simone, would teach across the hall. They both had been in my English methods course together. Unfortunately, Simone was the only English student teacher during her student teaching semester, so she could not participate in DLLs as she didn't have a partner to dialogue with. However, Simone and Kent fostered a rich dialogue as they began to eat lunch together and share their experiences and challenges. Both benefitted from this informal and fortuitous pairing, Kent as a first-year-teacher and Simone as a student teacher. The best part for Kent was it also encouraged a meaningful relationship with his new colleague, Simone's cooperating teacher.

As I observed Simone, I saw the impact the ongoing dialogical relationship was having on all three: Kent, her, and her cooperating teacher. At the end of the semester, they all shared with me how valuable their impromptu collaboration was. The cooperating teacher commented on how incredible it was to engage with and learn from the two younger teachers who had fresh ideas about teaching. Kent became a mentor to Simone, and he was grateful to have someone he knew and trusted as he tried out all he had learned in his own classroom. Both Simone and Kent felt less isolated than many of my student teachers become as they transition from student to teacher. DLLs taught Kent that collaboration and dialogue are vital to teaching practice and that he can learn a lot from discussing ideas with colleagues. Now Kent has a closer connection with a colleague whom I hope he will continue to cherish and foster as he grows as a teacher.

Challenges and Next Steps

As we both move forward and continue to enact DLLs with the methods students and student teachers we teach, we continue to work collaboratively to adjust our practices to improve dialogic journaling for our students so that they might get a richer experience from this work. Writing this piece together has sparked ideas for us on how we might better assign, support, and assess students through the practice of dialogic reflection. One challenge we are still grappling with is how to provide feedback on students' reflections in a meaningful yet non-intrusive way, especially for those students who continue to view the activity as merely an assignment or a means of earning points. We have both made changes for this coming semester to do this more effectively as a result of our conversations. We are also interested in conducting a more formal exploration of how (or if) our students continue the intended practices of reflection and meaningful dialogue with

colleagues and peers once they become full-time teachers. Drawing on Katie's observations of her former student, Kent, we both plan to follow up with more of our students to discover this assignment's longer-term impact.

Our conversation continues—and we invite our colleagues' insight in the spirit of dialogic reflection—as we seek answers to questions that have emerged: How can we make DLLs more natural and authentic rather than a forced “assignment”? How can we encourage our preservice teachers to continue the practice of dialogic journaling and fostering meaningful relationships with their colleagues once they leave the university? How can we enable students to understand the larger purpose of dialogic interactions to encourage and enhance the development of their ongoing professional identities?

As English educators, we hope that practicing reflective professional dialogue ourselves will help us respond to the challenges and opportunities that arise from supporting our students in likewise developing this practice. We will keep adapting and responding to what works and what does not as we learn from each other and our students. We hope to engage in continued dialogue about how we can best support preservice teachers as they transition into classroom practitioners and develop professional identities through dialogic reflective practice.

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