

Pedagogical Tapestries

Paired-Course Collaboration and Course Design for Authentic Student Learning

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In this collaborative self-study, the authors examine how well pedagogical values are enacted in two complexly paired undergraduate courses in a large urban teacher education program in the US. The context of the study is a six-year course pairing in an urban teacher education program in the US that is designed to enable students to authentically connect content from “introduction to teaching” and “educational technology” courses. The study explores the instructors’ journey in navigating the complexities of this pairing as they endeavor to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Russell et al., 2001). It also examines how the ongoing paired coursework aligns with the desired goals of all program stakeholders, students, and instructors. We examined these themes through reflections on data collected through student surveys, instructor journals, and recorded weekly meetings. Findings that emerged revolve around the tension between structured and fluid curricula, the impacts on all levels of faculty involved, and insights gained about the continued cross-discipline collaboration. Impacts of this work have evidenced in multiple spheres, including personal, through new insights gained about our own pedagogical values; practical, through direct changes made to the curricula; and theoretical, through the instantiating of new lenses from which to examine and explore successful collegial collaboration.

Introduction

This self-study arises out of the questions and tensions of faculty of different subject areas collaborating together in paired courses to create a more seamless and authentic experience for undergraduate teacher candidates. Paired courses contain different content yet are linked together to streamline or enhance the objectives of one or both (Gaier, 2011). Both authors are full-time clinical faculty in a large public, urban university in Texas. Jane specializes in differentiated and democratic teaching practices and began teaching the introduction to teaching (Intro) course several years ago. Susie has expertise in educational technology integration and has taught and developed curriculum for adjunct and graduate student instructors for the educational technology course (Tech) for eight years. Together, we have been inquiring collaboratively into the shared curriculum and its delivery. This study seeks to examine both the tensions that have arisen and the unique knowledge gained from this collaboration.

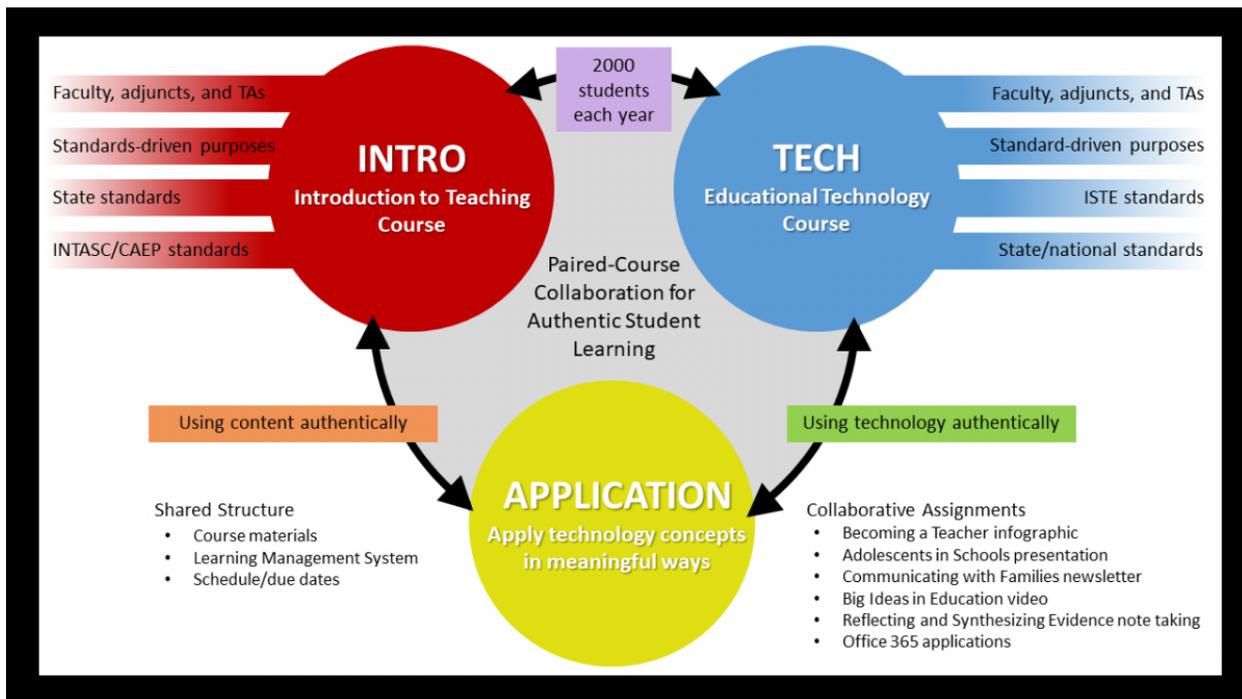
Context of the Study

As part of a larger grant-based reform effort (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018) focusing on inquiry-based program improvement and supporting a “culture of evidence” (Dwyer et al., 2006), this collaboration began by focusing on student experiences in these paired courses.

Reform drivers of this collaboration sought to bridge the gap between theory and practice and gaps among faculty members within a teacher education program (Russell et al., 2001). Existing gaps among faculty in colleges of education (Burgan, 2009) are mitigated by this work, as inquiry-based investigations into practice results in collaboration (Devlin-Scherer & Sardone, 2013; Fullan & Scott, 2009) and improves coherence for teacher candidate experiences. Paired courses, in particular, provide a “synergetic partnership between courses that can have exponential results in student learning that may not have happened without the pairing of courses” (Gaier, 2011 p. 25).

Figure 1

Illustration of the relationship between the Intro to Teach and Ed Tech courses.



These efforts encouraged us to formally and systematically investigate the ongoing practice of collaboration between Intro and Tech (see Figure 1). The courses are first-semester requirements for secondary level-focused pre-service teachers seeking state certification. There are typically three to four sections of each course taught in fall and spring 16-week semesters, impacting approximately 200 students each year. Multiple faculty at all ranks, including full-time and contingent faculty (adjunct and graduate student instructors), teach in these courses, and instructors may change from semester to semester. Susie serves as lead curriculum coordinator for Tech, while Jane is the most tenured person teaching Intro.

Tech emphasizes assessment, productivity tools, and ethical issues for the effective integration of technology into school curriculum. It is grounded in the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Standards for Educators (2017), which specify competencies in using technology to support student achievement and participating responsibly as educators in the digital world. Intro

introduces future teachers to the theoretical and political foundations of education in the US and society's expectations of educators and students. The courses are aligned to state and national standards, providing introductory information about instructional strategies and lesson planning, design of classroom environments, and challenges of equity, access, and excellence (CAEP, 2013).

The classes were initially paired in 2012 as an effort to mirror and equip future educators to be able to integrate instructional technologies as part of their teaching practices (interview, Jan 2020). Like many other teacher preparation programs (Cooper et al., 2018), the stand-alone educational technology coursework was viewed as falling short of authentic integration of knowledge and skills. Continuous collaborative efforts were seen as necessary to mitigate the theory-practice split with purposeful strategic opportunities to enact technology skills while constructing theoretical knowledge about teaching. The practical pairing of these courses includes six shared assignments in which students express their burgeoning knowledge of themes (Intro) in newly learned technologies of Tech. Student work is graded by instructors from both classes. The collaboration also involves shared course materials, Learning Management System course sites, scheduling, and due dates.

Objectives

The authors began this study to create a fresh perspective on how well the established curriculum of the paired courses is fulfilling course established goals (Loughran & Northfield, 1998), as the following journal excerpt illustrates:

Is there really any strengthening of connection ... what our goals are, to have students use these in meaningful ways in the classroom, or is it just more busy surface work for them and us? (journal, August 2019)

As an initial provocation (Pinnegar, 2009) for this study, this quote shows the discontent with aspects of the course pairing. This ongoing and dialogue about coursework led us to ask —

- What are the constraints and supports for individual instructors in linked courses to enact their values?
- What insights on our practice, both individually and collectively can we gain through our collaboration, and how does this improve future implementation of paired courses?

Methods

We used a collaborative self-study approach in order to see the practical alignment of our goals and values (LaBoskey, 2004) to the content of the shared course material, with a direct effort to improve our practice (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998). Pre-study work included the examination of course artifacts and student feedback (Spring 2019) to begin our self-study analysis. These initial analyses were done individually to establish the basis of discussion. We began meeting bi-weekly to dialogue

to make meaning of our individual and co-joined experiences (Hamilton et al., 2016). These meetings provided us the impetus to determine shared interests, questions and goals as we began to understand each others' "personal practical knowledge" (Craig, 2004), as well as becoming more aware of our shared "landscape of teacher education" (Kitchen, 2009). The continued conversations of our "lived experiences" have been an essential basis for the co-construction of knowledge for the purposes of this study and our pragmatic work of these shared courses (Cooper, et al., 2019).

These initial conversations determined the complexity of our individual course experiences, divergent roles, and subsequent values within our work together. We found that they shaped the shared concerns of both participants and determined the scope of the ongoing work. We began the conversations in an open-ended and iterative way, allowing for natural convergences to emerge. These meetings were audio-taped, transcribed when needed, and coded inductively (Charmaz, 2006) and formed the basis of further discussions.

Early in Fall 2019, themes began to emerge as we reflected individually and jointly on the previous work; the iterative reflections ensured trustworthiness to the process. We began a series of joint journaling around emergent themes, including role and value investigations, reflections on purposes of curricular choices, and standardization between the two courses. We shared our personal journals online for asynchronous feedback and comments, which became a basis for further conversation. Resonant themes (Conle, 1996) solidified as we collectively and individually reflected upon our goals and values (LaBoskey, 2004). We developed, shared, edited, and revised interim texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) throughout the research. Our findings are represented through the use of lifelike exemplars (Bruner, 1986) that show how our joined practices work (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002) and are grounded in the authority of the experiences represented (Munby & Russell, 1994).

Outcomes

Through our investigation into the improvement of practice, unique themes and tensions have emerged as a result of our paired coursework and resulting collaboration. Conversations around the improvement of the paired classes include the structure of the curriculum, the pacing of the curriculum, and how to handle change over time. Through these themes, we will interrogate how individual values and goals for practice became points of tension for the enactment of the curriculum within the structure of the paired courses.

Structure of the Curriculum: Rigidity and Fluidity

One identified tension was how structured the course design should be, and how much fluidity can/should be allowed. This tension seems to be exacerbated through both the structure of the shared assignments between linked classes, as well as the added complexities of multiple sections and instructors varying from semester to semester. In an effort to understand the contours of this tension, we further examined its context.

As an introductory course in the teacher education program for all secondary (grades 6-12) certification students, enrollment is often quite large. To illustrate, in Fall 2019, there were four sections of students taking Intro, with two full-time professors teaching 140 students in online and face-to-face classes. Approximately 120 of those students also enrolled in the paired Tech course,

which was taught by two graduate students and one adjunct professor and coordinated by a full-time faculty member. The integration of these classes thus included input from six instructors during that semester, including tenure-track, clinical, adjunct, and graduate student-faculty that have varying degrees of experience and knowledge, particularly in regards to the standards needed for accreditation and teaching practices expected by the local school districts and the state.

The complexity induced by having multiple and varied instructors gave rise to recurring discussions regarding how structured the elements of the classes should be. Jane explained it in this way:

I sometimes feel that if I was not tied to the other class, I could allow more breathing room for my students, that I could change and make decisions on they fly, but I am so respectful of the agreed upon timeline, that I feel rushed and student-focused teaching is not as robust as it should be. (journal, September 2019)

As Susie attended to the needs of adjunct and graduate instructors, she often advocated for a structured approach during conversations about the curriculum. In a discussion regarding assessment, for example, the utility and revision of a standardized rubric was debated. Susie felt that the guidance of a pre-set rubric provided instructors with needed support regarding the grading expectations for a paired course assignment. Jane felt that the rubric was too restrictive and did not fully align with her democratic approach to assessment. Once this tension was uncovered, we began digging deeper into the purposes associated with the values of each individual teaching stance. We grappled with how values of a student-centered teaching style might coalesce with guidelines and such pre-planned grading structures within the paired courses and assignments.

Another tension illuminated in this study was that Jane viewed the a priori timing structure and extensive assignment descriptions as hindrances to her stated pedagogical goals of responsiveness, student choice, and democratic curricular decision-making, while Susie saw these curricular choices as necessary supports for contingent faculty. The problem of how much structure is needed in these paired courses to support all, especially for adjunct and graduate instructors, has led to a rigorous discussion between us over the last several years. As Susie contemplated in our shared journal:

At times, my mind wanders to how we could better equip them for this kind of arrangement, such as doing a kind of PD day at the beginning of the year where we go through the collaborative assignments But, that kind of thing is exactly one of the extended supports that would be dependent on the stability of the beautifully designed assignment. Change one thing about the assignment, and we would then also have to update the training and possibly have to clarify and retrain. (October 2019)

It is clear from this excerpt that her primary concern is providing sufficient support for the Tech instructors. This illuminates differences in the “curriculum maker” role for the courses and how competing values between us surfaced in the deep and extended discussions regarding curriculum.

Our ongoing dialogues led us to at first realize and develop empathy for each others’ needs and roles

within our professional knowledge landscapes (Craig, 2004); and then through our relationships, we began to develop empathy towards the other's position (Cooper et al., 2019). We found that by uncovering the core values regarding what we believed about the purposes of education that were at stake for each participant, we developed insights that could enable us to better coordinate a more seamless paired-course experience for our students.

For example, Jane's goals for the Intro course were strongly theoretical, including:

...connecting theory with practice, moving from a student-mind to a teacher's mind, and multiple deconstructions of individual experiences are no small feat in a class of students who rarely have been taught to critically-think throughout their experiences in high school and/or college. (journal, January 2020)

These contrasted with Susie's purposes, who mentioned goals that were practical and skill-based, as the excerpt below illustrates -

- to teach the pre-service teachers foundational technical skills that they will... use in their beginning teaching practices,
- to convey digital citizenship concepts and practices that they should enact as a professional educator, and
- to develop decision-making skill that can help these new teachers be able to identify instructional technologies... and how to purposefully use them to their greatest potential - particularly enabling them to support and guide their students in learning to use technology tools. (journal, January 2020)

While the purposes mentioned in these excerpts are valuable skills in the complexity of teaching preservice teachers' knowledge and skills of the profession, the emphases in each course are clearly different in kind.

Time: Breadth and Depth

The differing goals and emphases between Susie and Jane are not representations of large shifts in teacher educator understanding but in differing degrees. While these degrees, in theory, are negligible, practicing them with paired course assignments seems to widen them. The courses share six assignments that utilize six different technologies and have unique authentic goals, such as drafting a digital newsletter for a parent-teacher night and constructing an infographic about one's view on becoming a teacher. When the goal of clarity and consistency is emphasized in the collaboration across instructors, the products of this tend to be more structured. An example of this is how an assignment is described to include both Intro and Tech content as part of a single shared handout that is then used by instructors of both courses.

The tension emerged as Jane, whose above stated values are connected to "deconstructing of educational experiences," recognized that the pace of the assignments (almost one assignment per week for the first several weeks) limited her ability to enact stated goals for the course. She needed

time to fully engage students in these critical skills and to facilitate in-depth peer-to-peer and student-teacher feedback in order to deconstruct dialogically and elicit and engage in multiple perspectives (Cooper et al., 2018). This was noted in a reflection from Fall 2019:

....I felt really rushed to make sure that students felt comfortable with some of the structures of the assignments. (journal, September)

When changes are made throughout the semester, this adds qualities of tension between the courses and associated instructors. Unexpected and uncommunicated external factors, like changes made to teacher candidates' observation schedules, technology glitches, unexpected instructor absences, local disasters, and global pandemics (such as the present COVID-19), have impacts on the negotiated course schedules and curricula. This amplifies the difficulty of persisting in the collaborative arrangement. For example, in response to a Fall 2019 change in observation schedules that impacted two of the shared class assignments, this tension is evident in a journal entry:

It seems that every week more and more issues come up regarding the integration of these courses and the efforts to collaborate become ever more stressful. (journal, September 2019)

In a conversation that reflected over this tension, Jane explained her view that there was not enough time to go in-depth into the material and time in the classroom was often lost with housekeeping tasks related to the next paired course assignments:

Jane: It seems like there might be too many assignments.... Susie: We've already gotten rid of some!

When the two values - one for students to feel comfortable doing more with technology and the other to iteratively deconstruct ideas - practically meet within this complex environment, the continuum of time is affected. Developing and enacting critical thinking requires time and reflection, both with others and individually (Curtis et al., 2016), and developing confidence and skill in using technology takes iterative practice with varied tools (Gronseth et al., 2010). Both of those things require time, with one area being diverse and pragmatic and the other area ruminating the development of specific incremental skills. The tension over time has contributed to the refinement of goals that enable both to be accomplished.

Interestingly, as the authors were finalizing this paper in Spring 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic forced campus closure, and the courses were converted to fully online delivery for the second half of the semester. We met with all of the instructors for the two courses as a group to discuss the next steps for the online transition. One of the first things we did was cancel the remaining two shared Tech/Intro assignments for our students because of their complexity to implement during this tumultuous time. The group agreed that the targeted objectives could be addressed in alternative solo-course activities. Thus, this exemplifies how such external factors can significantly affect the scope of our collaboration in these courses.

Growth: Sustainability and Pedagogical Change

Both from pragmatic and values perspectives, we have grappled with how to enact change within these courses in the context of the collaborative arrangement. Pragmatically, the courses are large with many interactive and connected components. Reflections on how change, or even just sustainability, of these paired courses have surfaced often:

How do we navigate the tensions of what is possible to complete in these courses and what is practical or sustainable, given the complexities and ranges of experiences that the instructors bring to the classroom. And the students also... what kinds of scaffolding they need. (journal, November 2019)

While the course goals may be stated a priori in the curricula, the implementation of these goals can vary due to differences in how the instructors of the multiple course sections interpret them. Our work together has encouraged rethinking and reconsidering of shared components, including how the goals are evaluated through the shared assessment rubrics. To illustrate, each shared assignment has two grading rubrics – one for Intro and one for Tech. Initially, the two rubrics for an assignment were designed similarly to have ten points divided across five criteria areas with three levels of proficiency. Jane found that the rubric structure did not align with her grading approaches in which she emphasized analysis and application of new learning, and she wanted to remove the rubrics entirely. Susie, however, countered with a position of advocacy for more novice instructors – that the rubrics provided the instructors with needed support in the form of clear guidance and transparency to students regarding their grading.

Resulting conversations led to changes to the rubrics. The criteria were collapsed down to three areas for each rubric, and the performance levels in each area were broadened so that the grading focus could be more on conceptually-based skills, including multiple perspectives and application of knowledge. Greater point ranges allowed instructors to emphasize and encourage deeper student reflection, reiteration, and revision of assignments. Ongoing dialogue about purposes allowed for greater understanding and agreed upon changes to paired course components.

We consider most of the course changes that we have made during this collaboration to be at the level of “tinkering,” that is, slow, incremental changes to the course design over time. The legacy of these joined courses is evident in the electronic and historical remnants of previous versions of course materials and online course sites since 2012. We ask ourselves, “How does change occur, should it occur, and what is the best way to make changes with so many moving parts?” A journal excerpt speaks to these important questions:

Is there a principle related to collaborative design ... that articulates how a collaborative design develops this optimal final product, and then supportive and connective materials and elements are developed around it, and all is well and good, until one of the components of the optimal initial product changes or shifts, and that causes some changes and adjustments to be made to those things around it and then all of the beautiful supports and materials that have been developed around it have to be redeveloped or replaced, and so on. Piecemeal change. Or, at some point, it is decided that systemic change is needed and the entire structure is leveled and rebuilding is

started from the ground up (maybe even starting back at the Analysis/needs assessment phase). (October 2019)

Implications

The examination of constraints and supports within the paired course model in our study reveals personal, collaborative, and institutional implications about the improvement of practice for ourselves and our preservice teachers. In order for individuals to want to take the time to engage in such a cycle of continuous collaboration, there needs to be seen the inherent personal value in the meetings themselves. As new instructors are added, they may question how they can enact their own values through such a structure. We surmise that it is worthwhile to dialogue about the needs of multiple stakeholders who are involved in the courses through planned initial discussions that delve into the deeper purposes for instruction and learning. Starting every semester and/or meeting with this type of conversation would likely lead all members to recognize similarities and discordances across their collaboration, allowing for a reduction of inconsistencies.

Our findings highlight the relational aspect of the collaboration. As rich collaborations can be “risky” in the sense of involving vulnerability and developing empathy for divergent perspectives, establishing trust within the team is necessary to reach a level of shared co-construction of knowledge and decision-making (Curtis et al., 2016). Oftentimes, higher education is structured into “silos” of separated expertise (Burgess, 2009), which makes intellectual and personal vulnerability less common. It is a worthwhile area to develop, however, as feeling empathy from others (Kitchen, 2009) has been found to positively enhance responsiveness in teacher education contexts, particularly with less experienced graduate student instructors and adjunct faculty. Some strategies to support this include spending time getting to know each other outside of the collaboration, allowing for personal check-ins, and empathetic listening in dialogue (Cooper et al., 2019).

Expanding professional collaboration in paired courses to include all participating faculty (full-time faculty, course designers, adjunct, and graduate students) allows for inclusiveness in the shared dialogue and decision-making. While prescriptive and detailed instructor materials may be helpful at times, they do not always enhance pedagogies. The small changes enacted through this self-study have been examined from our perspectives, and we acknowledge that improvements might not be as evident to students and others who have not been privy to previous versions of the assignments, rubrics, and other shared course structures. We are working to incorporate greater transparency to our students in regards to the collaborative paired- course design and our pedagogical moves, and we have also begun a process of tracking their feedback collaboratively in online surveys and end of course reviews. Future work may also include inquiry into instructor and student perceptions of the curricular elements that foster the continuance of the integration of the two courses.

Institutionally, teacher education programs in the United States have been asked to respond to growing critiques of quality from multiple sectors (Zeichner, 2017), with requirements to move to more evidence-based program evaluation (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). Authentic person-centered collaboration is seen as antithetical to these externally-based, compliance-driven demands. The collaboration highlighted here represents a link between these two poles. This study started externally-driven in order to enhance program improvement, and the time, space, and incentives created an opportunity for a re-examination of the collaborative practices, relationship, and curriculum of the paired courses. Through this work, we have determined the scope of our inquiry to

the level of individual concerns and as a result, have learned much about our practices. Institutions can consider creating initial incentives, allowing for organic growth, and giving preference to the purposes and values of its members when looking for program improvement. As authentic collections of data and improving paired classes through effective collaboration is program improvement (Lys et al., 2019), collaborations that inquire into teaching and curriculum development are ways that teacher education programs can attend to both the institutional demands of a culture of evidence while simultaneously validating the relational nature of teaching and learning.

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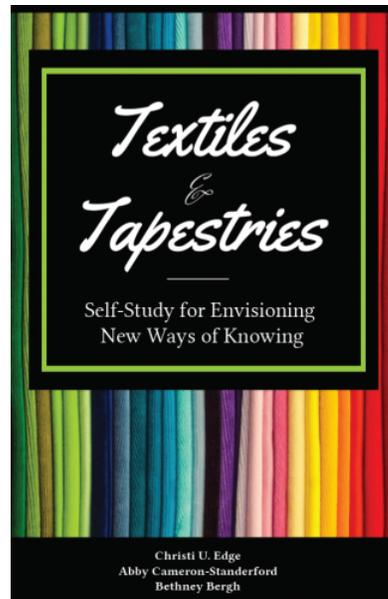
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