

# **Pulling on the Threads of Our Teaching Practices**

## **Course Redesign and Strands of Relationships in Context with/for Teacher Candidates**

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Teaching in the 21st century is complex and challenging; teacher education is incrementally knotty and demanding. Many competing agendas result in tangled conversations that reveal competing perspectives, needs, and understandings. It is easy, we find, to add more ‘stuff’ into teacher education programs and our courses, in our attempts to provide teacher candidates with everything they might need to be good educators. However, it is less easy to remove ‘content’ and even more difficult to restructure our courses and programs. Over the past year, we, as two teacher educators, have both worked to reconsider our own thinking and practices, to better understand where we need to change and how we need to adapt our own practices and thinking (Hopper & Sanford, 2018; Sanford et al., 2019). Our goal, in this collaborative self-study, is to untangle the knotty discourses and follow the significant common threads as we redesign two courses to meet the needs of today’s teacher candidates. Our research focus has centred around the question: as we redesign our teacher education courses, how does our thinking about, and our practice as, teacher educators change, as we critically reflect within a collaborative community focused on responding meaningfully to our teacher candidates (TC) and to our profession?

This self-study shares interweaving autobiographical and current case study stories of two experienced university instructors as they redesigned and taught their courses whilst working with a critical friend who had responsibility for teacher education program development. We believe that TCs often believe that they are ready to be teachers based on their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975) but at the same time are frightened by the idea of facing groups of students with diverse needs, interests, and expectations (Loughran, 2006). The complexity in learning to teach is further compounded by pressures on teacher education programs to become shorter, packed with more preparation knowledge, and often taught by people who have little connection to schools. In a time where corporate neoliberal values seem to dominate our society, TCs wanting ‘bang for their buck’ believe they should ‘get what they are paying for’, and if they don’t get what they want (even though what they want may not be what they need), some overtly show their displeasure – causing more tangles and knots in their learning. This paper describes our ongoing attempts to create connected, meaningful and engaging learning experiences for TCs, to get at the ‘knots’ of learning to teach (Sanford et al., 2019; Lysaker & Furuness, 2011).

## **Aims of the Study**

The questions of our study surround common themes found in our previous work (Sanford et al., 2015) focused on working in school cultures and promoting TCs to ‘think like a teacher’, as we

attempted to embody theories in our practices that we advocated in our courses. ‘Thinking like a teacher’ advocates a growth mindset that shifts the TC student mindset, perpetuated by university-based course experiences, by getting them to focus on the wellbeing and learning of students they are responsible for, building their own confidence as they continue to learn what is, and how to do, teaching. These themes resonate with Loughran’s call to “walk the talk” (Loughran, 2006) so as to better align theory with practice and to develop theory from practice. In this self-study, we have intentionally unpacked our past experiences, current thinking and shifting practices, as we reflected within our collaborative community on why and how we redesigned our courses. In so doing we explored our shifting assumptions about learning in relation to becoming a teacher. We explored TCs’ learning in our classes, the role of relocating class experiences either into school sites or locating school students into university spaces, and we considered how to enable TCs to recognize their experiences as ‘artifacts’ to be articulated and reflected upon. We asked ourselves how we shape the content of our courses, our assessment processes and critically consider how to “walk the talk” of our learning assumptions.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

As suggested by Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2015), this collaborative self-study draws on methods that are feasible for practicing teacher educators to perform in their day-to-day professional situations. In particular, we draw notes from informal chats, course planning, digital artifacts, and student reflections, and research group meetings we held three times over the term. These meetings were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were colour-coded through an open coding method, labelled by the researchers and their critical friend, then compared and discussed at subsequent meetings, creating a recursive process of reviewing, reporting and reflecting on the shared insights on the courses and the teacher education program in general. The coded process allowed us to discuss common sections of the transcripts, leading to further collective analysis to decide on organizing threads to our course redesign and organizing cognitive principles to our reflections that became themes in relation to our research question.

## **Findings**

In the following section we frame common strands in the redesigned courses and then analyze each course in light of four organizing threads: (1) “Why change?”; (2) “How to change?”; (3) “Letting go of control”; and (4) “Reflection and Adaptation”. These threads allowed three themes to structure our emerging practices. The first was “Learning about learning” that framed the initial part of the courses and subsequent interactions through readings and course activities/experiences. The next theme, “Relocating and repositioning”, captured the significance of place and our roles in the courses. Finally, “Adapting to our students as they adapt to their students” referred to the “walk the talk” notion where TCs and instructor used artifacts from the course to analyze and understand their own learning.

### ***Common Strands in Our Course Redesigns***

Kathy’s course was located in the first term of a secondary post-degree professional (PDP) program. Tim’s course was focused on the pedagogy of teaching PE and was part of a set of qualifying courses for undergraduate students who wish to enter into the PDP program. The analysis revealed three intertwined strands within the redesigned courses that were in contrast to typical courses

experienced by the students at the university. Both instructors:

- started planning their courses by first seeking out opportunities for TCs to work in meaningful ways with students and teachers from local schools;
- focused on promoting artifact evidence, much of it digital, of learning shared between TCs through integration of digital learning tools emerging in local schools, such as Google classroom, course forums, and digital portfolio assessment processes;
- shifted our grading systems to a mastery focus where the TCs contracted for a B+ grade with options to submit an extension project that would both deepen their learning and benefit their peers in order to achieve an “A” range

### ***Kathy's Course: Why Change?***

Having taught a course on multiliteracies in the secondary teacher education program over many years, but not for the last 3 years, I had previously found myself becoming increasingly challenged and frustrated. I tended to blame the TCs for not appreciating the work in my course, the assignments, activities, and intentions. However, once I had the opportunity to gain some distance during a sabbatical year, I started to deeply explore my beliefs and my frustrations with my TCs. I concluded that blaming them for their ‘failings’ wasn’t productive and I determined to more fully examine my own practices. Additionally, I had taught an intensive month-long Institute at the end of the PDP program the previous June which enabled me to more objectively listen to the TCs’ wishes, concerns, and suggestions – these were much better informed and articulated than they would have been at the start of their program. It was during those conversations and class activities that I heard their desire for changes to the program they had just experienced: more connectedness across the program and with schools, modeling and examples of inquiry-based learning, and clearly articulated purpose for activities and assignments. I was also able to see that, even after a significant practicum experience, they were nervous about engaging with individual high school students, particularly those who expressed disinterest, disrespect, and dismissive attitudes.

**How to Change?** From those experiences, I determined to change my course in significant ways, by: 1) integrating multimodal learning experiences on campus and in schools; 2) selecting readings and texts that were more obviously relevant and applicable to the TCs’ experiences; and 3) working to develop positive relationships with each of my TCs and make real efforts to understand their unique needs, perspectives, and fears. I planned my course in three parts, beginning with a foundational aspect on campus, introducing concepts of multiliteracies through workshops, professional readings, and activities. The second part was spent working with high school students in a lower-income school, working in small groups to create multimodal projects stemming from their own interests, and the final part would take place working in a community with another teacher at a different school and with a museum educator in a project working in groups to reimagine museum exhibitions. This represented a *relocating and repositioning* of the course and my role from teacher to facilitator in relation to complex demands in a school

The first course assignment was a 90-second video created by each teacher candidate, intended to introduce themselves to each other and to me, as well as to share with the high school students they would shortly meet. The most significant readings were two foundational articles introducing multiliteracies, one professional and one more theoretical. These shaped further discussions about the need for multimodal representations of learning throughout the curriculum and connected to workshops using drama and an app called *Comic Life*, introducing them to visuals and technologies to support multimodal representations. We then embarked on our second month, bi-weekly visits to the

high school where they met their high school student partners.

**Letting Go of Control.** It was during the first class at the school that I realized how little control I held over the learning that was to happen over the next few weeks. I worked closely with two high school teachers who became instrumental in co-facilitating the projects, but the TCs themselves were required to take up the role of facilitator of their group, ensuring that their students were being supported in learning. The projects began to centre around mental health/anxiety and climate change. In the second visit, two of my TCs proposed an idea involving a community-based project focused on climate anxiety. Several groups decide to contribute and the “Waste and Climate anxiety” project was born. However, nobody anticipated how quickly it would explode. A local news report described the Wasteland Climate Anxiety project as follows:

*A Victoria home set to be demolished got a spooky makeover this fall when a group of climate activists and artists came together to create a public art project in the Fifth Street house. The Waste Land: Climate Anxiety Haunted House project. Brooks-Heinmann and Gallivan are installation artists in the teacher education program at the University of Victoria. The Waste Land project started after Gallivan pitched the idea of turning pre-demolition homes into experimental public art spaces during a break at a meeting about large art projects at Victoria City Hall. Councilor Jeremy Loveday was on board and connected her with Aryze Development, a local company he felt might participate. Gallivan got the call about a house set to be demolished in December. She was already working with Teacher Candidates from Esquimalt High through one of her courses and she decided the house project would be a “great opportunity” to include the high school students. They chose mental health and climate change as the themes – hence the climate anxiety title. The groups got to work and a call for other contributing artists was put out. Gallivan noted that the number of community artists reached about 50.*

## **Kathy’s Reflection and Adaptation**

From this experience, I learned first-hand the importance of connecting TCs to students and teachers as early as possible, allowing ‘*learning about learning*’ to be an issue for me as the teacher educator and TC as teachers working with high school students. I came to know and respect the work of all of my TCs, see their passions emerge, as well as their commitment to their high school student partners and their projects -- *adapting to our students as they adapt to their students*. I was made more aware that there is a place for serendipity and the importance of trusting the positive intentions of TCs to become inspirational teachers and role models. I would never have been able to conceptualize or develop the a projects like the Wasteland Climate Anxiety project on my own; honouring the interests and expertise of my TCs I was better able to support their meaningful learning.

## **Tim’s Course: Why Change?**

The course I redesigned was focused on teaching approaches in physical education in relation to individual or partner activities. When I previously taught the course over 10 years ago I really focused on the content of the spectrum of teaching styles (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008) and its application in teaching PE. Practically, I focused on the planning and modelling of teaching approaches in an array of sporting areas like golf, dance, tennis and badminton. The course often

consisted of a lecture class followed by a practical class, and then peer teaching before TCs created an outline unit plan. Essentially, I was the expert modelling what the textbook advocated; I often felt pressured to perform and frustrated when TCs did not take up the ideas I had modelled. I tried to innovate, using teacher candidate reflective journals, course listservs, peer teaching using video feedback and examinations that shifted from short answers to essay type responses. My assumption was that learning happened through reflection, practice, reading, and more reflection. In a loosely constructivist approach, I believed TCs learned through becoming aware, from practice sessions that I modelled, and then they tried to repeat. TCs were assessed on a sliding grading scale where a reasonable distribution of marks was expected. I felt like I was always on stage, performing the teaching process for TCs.

As I returned to teach this course, conditions had changed. TCs now came from an array of degree paths, not just education, and the focus was on getting the qualifying courses to enter into the post-degree program to be certified as a teacher. My focus in redesigning the course was not the content, though much of it still applied -- the focus was on an experience that would attract the TCs' attention, focus their interest in relation to student learning, and their intent to teach PE. To do this, the course was backward-planned in relation to a field experience where grade 6 students came to the University to be taught a series of four PE lessons. This created a *relocating and repositioning* focus for the TCs' learning, and offered a place for them to try out ideas from the course.

**How to change?** As noted in Hopper (2015) the 'contract' grading system enabling TCs to work collaboratively not competing for marks, promoting the Indigenous teaching and learning principle of considering their peers' learning as well as their own. New digital technology tools allowed me to remove lecture-style classes with a series of on-line mastery quizzes associated with course content, freeing up time to explore practical ideas. I also digitally video-recorded aspects of sessions to post on the course Google Classroom system and TC posted videos from their practical classes with peers and middle school students. This use of video allowed TCs to review their own practice and receive feedback before they taught their next lesson.

As I changed my approach at the university from modelling practices for TCs to reproduce to one where TCs instead worked with students from the school, a notable pattern emerged. TCs taught a lesson, reflected with peer feedback, and then debriefed and planned in our next class before teaching again. These debrief sessions allowed the whole class to focus on aspects of teaching such as teaching styles and student learning, task progression, and teacher assessment and student self-assessment (Rink, 2014). Each group had access to each other's planning and resources. This more open sharing and focus on preparing for next class enabled effective teaching and planning processes to develop where each group drove the learning for the other groups.

### **Letting Go of Control.**

A good example of the TCs taking more control was the assessment process the TCs took up. After the first lesson teaching the school students I shared the following quote about the purpose of assessment:

An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information that teachers and their students can use as feedback in assessing themselves and one another and in modifying the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes "formative assessment" when the evidence is actually used to

adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs (Black et al, 2004, p. 10).

After discussing this quote, I shared with the TCs a chart that listed students' names down the column and then learning domains (cognitive, affective, social, and psychomotor) across the top. The TCs had previously listed general ideas for these domains when they initially planned their lessons. However, now they had to recall how each student had learned in their previous lesson and try to note specific examples in the chart. This focused reflection then led to thinking about observing particular students next time, adjusting planning to create situations where students had more responsibility like peer teaching, and considering questions to ask and which students answered. By the third lesson, the charts were full, with repeated comments for many students. In addition, all the groups developed some type of self-assessment process for the students to complete. I did not have to tell TCs how to do this; rather they just did it because it made sense. I realized my role was less to tell TCs what they should do, but rather help them connect to big ideas in the educational field and find ways to realize these ideas.

Assessment in the course also shifted away from instructor control. Each TC created digital artifacts from the teaching experience with their partner in a Google Drive related to building a unit plan (rationale, overview, sequencing, lesson plans, reflections, and assessment processes). At the end of the course, TCs reflected on different aspects of the unit plan in a digital portfolio in relation to the teacher education program competence. For example, Terry, a University basketball player, who had recently decided to become a PE teacher, taught yoga with a female partner to a group of 12 female grade 6 students. He commented on the planning process as "constantly adjusting" as they worked "towards trying to achieve the final lesson."

He realized that planning became a process of learning how to plan yourself to teach in order to read and respond to students. Terry commented, "you lectured and demonstrated the teaching styles which was good but being able to apply this to a group of students...see what each style brings out in the kids...the type of learning that can occur under different styles was amazing."

Terry continued, saying that,

how students learn is as important as what...[for example], we used the divergent style for them, exploring and creating a practice for the other team. Just what it produced I thought was really cool... was the whole of what we were after... going from A to B in their own way.

Terry concluded that "multiple times this semester I have commented that I've gotten more out of this class than probably everything else combined in terms of what I want to do." I realized what he got was not from me, but was from a collective learning process formed within the course, centering on the learning of the middle school students.

### **Tim's Reflection and Adaptation**

Throughout the course, I came to realize that TCs could only learn what they were ready to learn. In the past, I felt I was filling TCs up with what I thought was useful stuff. However, this time, as a result of the four lessons taught and reflected upon, our feedback sessions between each lesson, it seemed that TCs were triggered to improve, to try new ideas. I was learning to adjust to the TCs'

learning to teach and the TCs were learning to adjust to the students in a parallel process. This represented an *'adapting to our students as they adapt to their students'* process which created a space to understand *'learning about learning'* that was most evident in exit interviews that were conducted with the TCs at the end of the course.

## **Cross-Course Emerging Patterns**

One of the key issues we have encountered throughout our reflections is the importance of considering whose voices need to be heard as we reimagine our courses within a goal of re-imagining our programs. This issue is critical to us as we theorize how to work in the spaces of schools to become "students of teaching" (Dewey, 1904; Loughran, 2006). We are learning through *'adapting to our students as they adapt to their students'* in a recursive process of becoming a teacher/teacher educator. In reference to the threads of our individual stories, we continually returned to the questions of why we should change, how to make changes, and how to enabling TCs to inform these changes.

Through our conversations, we realized how much time and energy was expended in maintaining clarity as we re-wove our strands, took time to talk with TCs, with teachers and their students, and with each other. *'Learning about learning'*, as it happens for those becoming teachers working with school teachers and students, is a complex idea, but we believe that embracing the complexity, recognizing the key role of students' passions within a learning community, embracing a complex challenge, are foundational. This we see as collective, adaptive change and common attractors advocated by complexity learning theories (Hopper, & Sanford, 2018).

Planning was both more focused and more complex as we continued to distill what was important, under what conditions, and when learning should happen, as we relocated our courses into spaces in schools and at the university. The focus became the learning of students and the enabled role of being a teacher. We had to let go of our attempts at controlling the learning environment, recognizing that expertise emerges from many, often surprising, sources. It is hard work to remain flexible and adaptable, always working to untangle our ideas that so easily become knotted and confusing. It was important, we realized throughout this self-study, to make time to seek out trusted colleagues to reveal our struggles, share our successes. By unpacking TCs' comments such as "Multiliteracies aren't useful to my teaching", "do we have to plan and reflect on every lesson", and "we need more classroom management", within a community, we were able to consider those statements in light of our own goals and expertise, as we continually strove to offer powerful and meaningful learning experiences.

## **Conclusion**

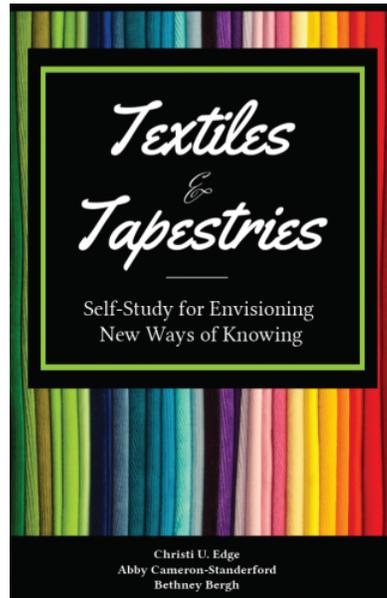
In conclusion, we asked in this self-study, "how does our thinking and our practice as teacher educators change based on our reflections, within a critical and collaborative community, to respond meaningfully to our TCs and to our profession?" The three themes we identified interacted to address this question. *'Relocating and repositioning'* shifted us into a space where we came to better understand how learning happens for those wanting to become teachers and for the students they worked with. Critically we drew on our self-study community in order to help us identify ways of *'adapting to our students as they adapt to their students'* through learning experiences that focused on the processes of *'learning about learning'* with course content emerging from experiences.

We need to transform our teacher education practices collectively and critically to embrace the interconnected complexities of today's classrooms and schools (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2014). For us, it has been getting ourselves into the complex tapestry. Our self-study reflects on how we continue to weave our narratives into this tapestry.

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Sanford, K., Hopper, T., & Robertson, K. (2020). Pulling on the Threads of Our Teaching Practices: Course Redesign and Strands of Relationships in Context with/for Teacher Candidates. In C. Edge, A. Cameron-Standerford, & B. Bergh (Eds.), *Textiles and Tapestries*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from [https://edtechbooks.org/textiles\\_tapestries\\_self\\_study/pulling\\_on\\_the\\_threa](https://edtechbooks.org/textiles_tapestries_self_study/pulling_on_the_threa)



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