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Teacher Candidates' Collaboration and Identity in Online Discussions

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Abstract

In an online context, without facial, verbal or gestural cues, establishing identities through naming social positions appeared essential to effective written communication for graduate pre-service teacher candidates enrolled in a course on literacy education for elementary students. As they engaged in small group asynchronous discussions about course readings, candidates named their identities and deferred to course authors more often than they referenced group identities, or attempted to bond with one another. They engaged least frequently in disagreeing with one another, or challenging the authority of course texts, creating polite, cordial exchanges in most groups. Male candidates challenged their group members more often, suggesting differences in communication styles shaped their responses. Dialogue journaling shows promise in facilitating learner connection and building a sense of community by facilitating dialogue and decreasing psychological distance between participants who are geographically and temporally separated.

Keywords

asynchronous online discussion, teacher candidates, teacher identity, collaboration, gender influence online

Introduction and Purpose

Integrating communication technology in traditional face-to-face courses is becoming common practice in teacher education. Written online discussion increases social interaction among teacher candidates, and provides a virtual space for engaging in reflection about coursework. At the same time, it provides a space for contemplating and developing a professional identity that draws on multiple roles candidates play “offline” in school and non-school settings. Because universities and schools of education invest an enormous amount in web-based resources to facilitate and enhance learning, it is critical to learn how these resources are being integrated, and to improve on current practice.

This paper reports the results of a qualitative study of teacher candidates’ collaborative writing during dialogue journaling, an asynchronous online discussion in which candidates read and respond to colleagues’ written messages, but at different times (Rovy & Essex, 2001; Sabau, 2005), to yield topic-oriented and detailed discussions. This medium lends itself to lengthier and potentially more conceptually complex writing, and its inherently collaborative nature encourages interaction, reflection and a negotiation of meaning (Brannon & Essex 2001; Garrison 2003; Im & Lee 2003-2004). “...[G]ood learning is collaborative and...understanding comes through modeling, participation in, and reaction to the behaviors and thoughts of others” (Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin & Chang 2003, p119; also see Bandura 1971). However, research to date has not clearly articulated the nature and intended outcomes of collaborative online discussion (Pawan et al. 2003, citing Hara, Bonk & Angeli 2000; Hathorn & Ingram 2002).

Whatever the nature and intended outcomes, collaborative online discussion creates opportunities for regular communication and interaction, promoting learning and a sense of community (Rovai & Gallien 2005) and a context for reflecting on a professional teacher identity (Wade & Fauske 2004; Wade, Fauske & Thompson 2008).

Theoretical framework

Because of the social nature of online reading, and writing to colleagues about, course texts, asynchronous communication is inherently – and simultaneously – discursive and political. Candidates use language in particular ways (Table 1) to show status, deference, solidarity, bonding or disagreement (Gee 2004) in relationship to the text and to one another, as they select content to reflect on and write about. The meanings constructed in these texts are negotiated, based on potential meanings that reflect how words and phrases get used in specific contexts. These meanings are steeped in theories about how the world works, and what is normal from the perspective of individuals’ and communities’ ways of using “words, deeds, objects, tools, and so forth to enact a certain sort of socially situated identity” (Gee 2004, p40; see explanation of discourses, Gee 1999; Strauss & Quinn 1997). This study analyses how “discursive politics,” or the power to use language to select content, frame perspectives, form socially situated identities and construct beliefs and theories, were brought to bear on the process of making meaning as teacher candidates dialogue-journaled about literacy teaching (Sujo de Montes, Oran & Willis 2002; Wade, Fauske & Thompson 2008).

Table 1

Discursive Political Moves within Interactive Online Dialogue Journals

Discursive Politics	Description
Status	Making declarative statements about identities and the roles and relationships of individuals; constructing identities for individuals in light of their social worlds relevant to teaching
Deference	Capitulating to ideas in course readings
Solidarity	Showing allegiance to a group; expressing group identity
Bonding	Making social connections; building on ideas from dialogue-journal partners; posing and responding to partners' questions; expressing sympathy or empathy; expressing agreement
Disagreement	Questioning or contradicting course readings or dialogue-journal partners; offering dissimilar or challenging ideas

Dialogue journals were products of discursive, language-based, social processes. Discourse encompasses the entire social process of the production and interpretation of texts; it includes the actual written texts, interactions that include the production and interpretation of texts and social conditions of production and interpretation (Fairclough 1989). Discourse embeds an inherent relationship between language and power. From the selection of content on which to reflect to the social relations between the people who are communicating and the roles they occupy, power is always being asserted and negotiated. Online dialogue journaling, because of its collaborative nature, can be a place for examining the relationship between discourse and power. Through the “constitutive nature of discourse” (Fairclough 1992, p55), the journaling process constructs the social positions people use while creating dialogues about the social worlds they find relevant to teaching. And because the relationship between discourse and power is dialectical, the social conditions of text production and interpretation likewise influence the discursive process.

The following research questions were posed:

1. What discursive political moves (establishing status, showing deference, building solidarity, bonding or disagreeing) were relevant for graduate pre-service teacher candidates during collaborative asynchronous online dialogue journaling?
2. How were teacher roles, identities and relationships constructed in online discussions?

Relevant literature

Teacher candidates and their educators can gain much from studying the collaborative discursive practice of online asynchronous communication. Pre-service teachers must develop their capacity to reflect on, evaluate and learn from information about teaching (Darling-Hammond & Bransford 2005), and asynchronous discussion with colleagues fosters reflective thinking and writing (Delfino & Persico 2007; Im & Lee 2003-2004; Jarvela & Hakkinen 2002). Wade and Fauske (2004) examined discourse strategies of pre-service secondary teachers as they engaged in computer-mediated online discussions, and found that candidates aligned themselves with colleagues, established identities as teachers, socialised each other into the discourses of teaching (Gee 1999) and marginalised those who did not follow group norms. Further, an analysis of discourse strategies based on gender revealed that both men and women included, supported,

appeared, personalised and showed receptiveness to the ideas of others. They were also willing to be critical of each others' positions, beliefs, assumptions and ideas.

From the same data set, Wade, Fauske and Thompson (2008) examined a week-long dialogue of two online discussion groups engaged in problem-solving and critical analysis of a case study involving children who were English-language learners, to determine how candidates used strategies to interpret and negotiate discourses on language, race and culture. They also concluded that candidates engaged in reflective practice as they contemplated the issues related to language use and school success for Spanish-speaking students in an English-speaking context, but they did not challenge some of their most basic deficit-based views of children's language and cultural backgrounds. Further, the authors concluded that the candidates' teacher-education program did not provide structural, theoretical or dispositional support to critically examine power and positionality related to either teachers' or children's language, race and cultural backgrounds.

Singer and Zeni (2004) examined pre-service teachers' use of an informal, asynchronous online conversation as a part of a student-teaching seminar, and a source of peer and supervisory support. Using a listserv created for student-teacher candidates in English education, speech and drama programs, along with supervisory and methods faculty members, student teachers wrote narratives about their experiences, new teacher roles and connections between university courses and teaching practice. These candidates engaged in collaborative problem-solving and thinking publicly about issues of pedagogy and their developing teacher identities, while creating an online social context for analysis and reflective practice.

Research context and data collection

In the context of a literacy pre-service graduate teacher education course I taught at an American public college, I implemented an online dialogue-journaling assignment to get teacher candidates to communicate with one another about the course content. Candidates were instructed to use asynchronous discussion to reflect on course readings over the course of a semester. To facilitate small-group discussions (Wade, Fauske & Thompson 2008), all candidates (n = 23: 2 male; 21 female) were randomly assigned to 10 discussion groups consisting of two or three students, and instructed on how to use threaded discussions in *Blackboard* to post their reflections and responses to each other. *Blackboard* is a web-based course-management system that archives texts, stores electronic links to outside sources, stores and provides access to grades and fosters communication between the instructor and students, and among students themselves.

I created 10 weekly discussion-board forums for each small group, and instructed teacher candidates to use topics and discussion questions from the syllabus to guide their reflection and writing, ensuring a diverse range of responses addressing knowledge of literacy theories, assessment and instructional strategies, student learning and teacher professional development.

Candidates were asked to reflect on what they deemed to be significant parts of the readings, and to make connections to fieldwork experiences, as relevant. Dialogue journals were archived on *Blackboard*, and available for revision by authors and comments by dialogue-journal partners. As the instructor, I added myself to each group to mediate the discussion, mentor teacher candidates as needed (Singer & Zeni 2004) and access each group's work for evaluation purposes.

Data analysis and results

Each candidate was required to post an initial entry to course readings, and reply to each group member at least once. There were seven groups with two members each; these groups often wrote four exchanges per journal. There were three groups with three members each; these groups often wrote six to eight exchanges per journal. Journal members in the larger groups often condensed their replies to dialogue-journal partners into one posting. Table 2 summarises the total number (n = 455) of completed dialogue-journal responses for each group.

Table 2: Total Number of Dialogue-Journal Responses

	<i>Dialogue-Journal Group</i>									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Total n = 455	35	67	40	40	40	36	57	60	40	40

As a class, the teacher candidates completed 96.5% of all required dialogue journals. The rate of completion for each group ranged from 87.5% to 100%.

Discursive political moves in dialogue-journal exchanges

In all the dialogue-journal groups, teacher candidates attempted most often to create status (or identities, which includes statements about the roles, relationships and situated activities of individuals identified). Candidates also frequently deferred to course readings more than they engaged in identifying group affiliation (e.g., solidarity). They equally engaged in developing their own relationships through bonding techniques, such as explicitly greeting each other by name and directly posing and answering questions. Least often, teacher candidates engaged in disagreeing with one another or the texts. Intergroup differences corresponded with intra-group differences, revealing a similar pattern emphasising status over all other constructs.

Results from Dialogue Journals 3 and 4 were selected to show intergroup differences as members responded to similar readings (Table 3). Groups 2, 7 and 8 consisted of three members, so it was expected that they would produce more text and more instances of status, solidarity, deference, bonding and disagreement. Groups 5 and 9 consisted of only two members, but they wrote lengthier texts than most other groups, which resulted in higher rates of each discursive construct. These two examples show candidates were nine to 10 times more likely to develop and declare status or identities than to show solidarity or bond. Deferring to text was the next most frequently occurring construct, while disagreement occurred least.

Table 3: Intergroup Differences of Instances of Discursive Political Moves:

Two Examples—Dialogue Journals 3 and 4

Dialogue	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Total
Journal 3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Status	91	150	68	57	129	49	161	119	129	62	1,015
Solidarity	6	8	1	4	14	5	14	12	13	21	98
Deference	61	33	14	8	25	12	45	27	29	21	275
Bonding	10	16	2	3	21	7	18	8	23	9	117
Disagreement	0	1	0	0	1	4	6	0	2	0	14

Dialogue	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Total
Journal 4	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Status	93	90	71	45	139	48	177	100	128	49	940
Solidarity	5	11	4	9	17	4	6	18	15	11	100
Deference	37	25	30	4	22	12	40	30	23	17	240
Bonding	13	9	6	3	25	1	14	11	24	9	115
Disagreement	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	6

These examples reflect a similar pattern of variation in status, solidarity, deference, bonding and disagreement within all groups for Dialogue Journals 1 to 5 and 7 to 10. Results from Dialogue Journal 6 (Table 4), however, show other variations. Five journal groups (1, 5, 8, 9 and 10) made more effort to construct group affiliations in this journal than others. A review of the topic of discussion (book talks and reader responses) and each group's dialogue-journal responses did not explain the elevated levels at which members engaged in signaling group affiliations or solidarity.

Table 4: Candidates Show More Solidarity than Deference to Texts in Dialogue Journal 6

Dialogue	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Group	Total
Journal 6	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Status	81	95	48	61	128	29	103	99	109	70	823
Solidarity	41	12	11	8	31	1	16	31	35	25	211
Deference	36	17	21	11	24	14	17	27	13	18	198
Bonding	12	11	7	6	31	3	12	13	15	6	116
Disagreement	0	0	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	5

Simultaneous construction of status, solidarity and bonding framed by course readings

Teacher candidates’ responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and an analysis of the discursive political moves derived and adapted from Gee (2004). Each sentence was evaluated in relationship to other sentences to determine its discursive purpose by considering form (grammatical features) and function (semantic patterns and relationships of meaning) (Gee 1999; Rogers 2004). Within the context of potentially available meanings, sentences were classified based on their purpose to establish identities and status, show solidarity with social groups, defer to the knowledge of the text, bond with a dialogue-journal partner or disagree with the perspective of the author or dialogue-journal partner. To illustrate the coding strategy, sentences were parsed into clauses and coded for discursive meanings; each sentence could simultaneously serve more than one discursive purpose.

It was expected that candidates would make references to the course texts and use discourse strategies to make connections and build relationships, because the assignment was to collaborate online to discuss course readings. But the analysis revealed just how central identity construction (Gee 2004) was to collaborative writing and knowledge-building online. For example, in Dialogue Journal 6, Donna (all names are pseudonyms) formed her status or identity as a teacher among other teachers in her classroom (line 4), and attempted to bond with Laurie, her dialogue-journal partner, by addressing Laurie directly (line 2).

Bonding with journal partner

1 Laurie,

Identity as a student

2 after I read this chapter

3 I thought of how

Identity as a teacher; solidarity with teachers in her classroom

4 we do this type of work in my classroom.

Donna began her journal response as many candidates did, by relating it to course readings (line 2). However, she used language to situate herself socially as more experienced in teaching (lines 5,

6), and therefore, more knowledgeable and able to deliver answers about how to approach small-group reading instruction.

Identity as a more-experienced teacher than the journal partner

5 Since you do not have experience in a classroom,

6 I can tell you about mine!

Solidarity with teachers in her classroom

7 We have our children

Establishing the status of students as readers

8 divided into four reading groups according to their ability as readers.

Solidarity with teachers in her classroom

10 We do not use numbers for the group

Establishing the status as students as intuitive and varied in reading performance

11 because children are quick

12 to pick up on what group is the lowest and highest,

Solidarity with teachers in her classroom; teacher identity that makes student differences invisible

13 and we feel it is nicer

14 to give the groups names of colors.

Solidarity with teachers in her classroom; establishing the status of students as readers

15 We have the orange, blue, green and red groups.

Teacher identity that makes student differences invisible; establishing the status of students as differentiated learners

16 This way none of the children feel badly about their lack of skill.

(Donna, Group 1, excerpt of Journal 6, initial response)

Donna constructed her identity as a teacher among other teachers through personal possessive pronouns (e.g., *we*, *my* classroom, *our* children) to show affiliation with teachers and students in her classroom. She constructed group affiliation for students as members of reading groups (lines 8, 12, 14, 15) but constructed the role of teachers in her classroom as minimisers of student differences (lines 13, 14, 16) who work together to make curricular and instructional responses to accommodate instruction based on variations in student performances.

Laurie attempted to bond with Donna by addressing and expressing appreciation for Donna's response (lines 1, 2).

Bonding with journal partner

1 I enjoyed reading your response.

2 You mentioned that

Identifying her journal partner's status as a teacher

3 the reading groups in your classroom are labelled by color instead of using letters or numbers.

Establishing her status as knowledgeable about literacy development in young children

4 It is true

5 that young students will pick up increasing numbers or letters associated with levels of ability.

Bonding with journal partner; deferring to more knowledgeable partner

- 6 I think that it is a great idea
7 to mask the means by which children are separated into groups.
(Laurie, Group 1, excerpt of Journal 6, reply)

Laurie referred to students' group affiliation, and to Donna's role and status as a teacher. Laurie appreciated Donna's experience, and throughout the dialogue journal, Donna recognised Laurie's desire to make connections to course readings and classroom teaching experiences, though she had no formal teaching experience. In an explicit assertion of power, Donna established her identity as more experienced than Laurie. Throughout this journal, both candidates explored topics together, sharing developing theories about grouping for instruction, and how to level and match readers to text. Building on each other's comments was a key strategy for bonding and establishing a relationship across distance and time in this virtual online context (Rovai 2001, 2002). The excerpt from Laurie's reply to Donna exemplifies how candidates worked in detailed, thoughtful ways to explore ideas and accomplish multiple discursive purposes (e.g., establish identities as a "more experienced" teacher or a teacher-in-training, engage in bonding to build relationships, show solidarity with other teachers or identify the status of students working in groups).

In the following excerpt, Beth addressed book talks and literature conversations with her journal partner. Beth, who was not teaching, used the course reading as a springboard for reflecting on her role as a classroom observer.

Deferred to course readings

- 1 This week's Routman [2000] chapter about Literature Conversations is especially interesting to me

Identity as a pre-service teacher

- 2 now that I'm observing a seventh grade class's literacy periods as part of my fieldwork.

- 3 From what I've seen so far,

Establishes the status of students as readers

- 4 they don't have literature conversation groups,
5 but they do discuss shared readings as a whole class.
6 Most of the literacy periods are used for independent reading and independent writing

Establishes the identity of the teacher as assessor

- 7 while the teacher conducts reading and writing conferences at the back of the room.

(Beth, Group 9, excerpt of Dialogue Journal 6, initial response)

Beth situated herself as pre-service teacher completing classroom observations required for the fieldwork component of the course (lines 2, 3). She made connections to coursework and readings related to current literacy pedagogy on reading and writing workshops, as she established the identities of the students and teacher as participants who engaged in specific literacy practices (lines 4 to 7). Candidates' pre-service teacher education (e.g., lectures, in-class activities, course readings, course assignments, fieldwork observations), and for some, more-formal teaching opportunities, formed a wealth of experiences that served as the basis for online discussion.

To disagree or not to disagree...

Disagreement occurred least often of all interaction types in every dialogue-journal group, but remained pivotal in reflecting the types of collaborative efforts candidates engaged in to make sense of course readings, and to make theory-to-practice connections. Group 2, composed of three members, two of whom were male, had the most instances of disagreement (Table 5). Groups 1, 4 and 10 did not disagree at all. All groups, except Group 2, had solely female members.

Table 5: Summary of Instances of Disagreement across All Groups

Dialogue Journals	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7	Group 8	Group 9	Group 10
1	0	5	3	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
2	0	3	6	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
3	0	1	0	0	1	4	6	0	2	0
4	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
5	0	7	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
6	0	0	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
7	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
8	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
9	0	4	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
10	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Total	0	31	12	0	8	6	9	2	4	0

A closer examination of the intra-group differences in Group 2 revealed individual member contributions to the range of responses that included challenging the perspective of the authors of course texts and offering contrary or alternative perspectives to dialogue-journal partners. John, who worked as an adult English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, offered more disagreeing statements than the other two group members, Blanche and Steve. Examples are drawn from Dialogue Journal 5, which had the most instances of disagreement of all the journals. Blanche, in her initial response to a member of the group, offered one point of disagreement. During John's reply to both Blanche and Steve, he offered three points of disagreement to each.

In the context of online discussions, disagreements did not reflect arguments, necessarily, and may have appeared benign. However, they were still significant attempts for teacher candidates to explore a range of perspectives, and offer subtle points that varied from the author's or other candidates' voices. It was evident that candidates were not merely following along with published, and therefore sanctioned, perspectives, but were indeed processing the information on their own with meaning.

Though candidates continued to establish identities, show solidarity, defer to course texts and bond with one another in online dialogue journals, the following examples will highlight instances of disagreement (in bold font). Blanche and her colleagues reflected on the best way to teach spelling. Blanche made direct connections to her experience as a child, and reflected on what she had read in one of the course texts. She began with a simple statement that may not seem contrary at first glance, but later on, ran counter to recommended practices.

*Spelling tests are great. In fourth grade my teacher gave us a spelling test every Friday, and it was a great incentive for us to remember how to spell. There were two separate groups, this way the more advanced spellers didn't regress and the less advanced students didn't struggle. I agree with Neil Robinson, on page 412 [of Routman, 2000], that the words in the spelling test should be applied to writing. My teacher, who had us take the spelling test every Friday, would first have us use the words in sentences so we were familiar with the word. I think it is important for the student to be able to use the word in a sentence in order for the word to be remembered. Loretta Martin says she feels spelling tests are unnecessary, if she is able to evaluate her students by just reading their writing. Then I agree with her, **but the challenge of a test seems more sufficient to me.** (Blanche, Group 2, excerpt of Dialogue Journal 5, initial response)*

I returned to the course text to compare Blanche's response to the section to which she had referred.

Second grade teacher Loretta Martin is an excellent spelling teacher, but she does not give weekly spelling tests. She has no complaints from parents, because she informs them exactly how she will be teaching and monitoring spelling—mostly through daily writing and conferencing, whole-class shared writing, and talking about and working with words in various contexts throughout the day. Loretta says that most of her spelling program is informal—mostly word study and word sorts based on what she observes in reading and writing contexts. Loretta is able to successfully teach without a formal program because she is highly knowledgeable about how children learn to spell, able to clearly articulate her beliefs and practices to parents and administrators, and careful to assess and monitor students' spellings and teach at the point of need. Perhaps most important, her students are reading and writing across the curriculum all day long. Publishing for real audiences is a big part of her literacy program. Early on in the school year, spelling and editing—including peer editing—are given high priority and students are expected to proofread and fix up most of their misspellings. (Routman, 2000, pp. 413 – 414)

Blanche stated, "I think it is important for the student to be able to use the word in a sentence in order for the word to be remembered." To Blanche and Routman (2000), integrating knowledge of spelling in writing was important, but Routman went beyond just simply using the word in a sentence. Blanche added, "Loretta Martin says she feels spelling tests are unnecessary, if she is able to evaluate her students by just reading their writing." This was aligned with Routman's perspective, in that Routman painted the picture of a teacher who integrates spelling into a rigorous, comprehensive literacy program that heavily uses writing as a source for spelling instruction and evaluation. However, Blanche's point, "Then I agree with her, **but the challenge of a test seems more sufficient to me**" ran counter to the Routman's main point that spelling should be conceptualised as more than a "challenge". According to Routman, spelling should not just be taught so students can pass spelling tests with high scores. That difference was a point of disagreement.

John replied and disagreed somewhat with the course reading, as well. Eventually, he returned to the point Routman (2000) had made about integrating spelling in children's authentic writing, which disagreed with Blanche's perspective that "a test seems more sufficient".

*Although I detest tests, I guess a fun test that gives the students a chance to naturally excel would be a good idea. Putting the words in context as well as [using] visual aids can definitely help the students connect with the spelling. **I just don't like the feeling that goes with the term "test."** To me it is not a very accurate way to assess the student's true ability. In my opinion the true test is an ongoing process of effort, understanding and producing naturally. (John, Group 2, excerpt of Dialogue Journal 5, reply)*

John disagreed immediately with Blanche: "...I detest tests". Blanche appreciated the challenge of spelling tests, which John did not directly counter. He expressed appreciation for her perspective by stating, "...I guess a fun test that gives the students a chance to naturally excel would be a good idea." But he went beyond Blanche's original point that tests should be sufficient for assessing spelling development by adding, "Putting the words in context as well as [using] visual aids can definitely help students connect with spelling." He aligned his perspectives with those expressed in Routman (2000), that meaningful reading and writing, and instruction that goes beyond memorisation and drill, are more helpful for spelling development. While Blanche enjoyed and appreciated spelling tests, John stated in disagreement, "I just don't like the feeling that goes with the term 'test.' To me it is not a very accurate way to assess the student's true ability."

John also wrote a response to Steve's reply. In it, he disagreed with current teaching practices that encouraged learning by rote, or what he referred to as the "banking method", also challenged by the late educator, theorist, and activist Paulo Freire (1997). John made efforts to integrate readings outside of the course in his reflections, and posed alternative perspectives on what good schooling should be. He did not disagree with course texts or his journal partners, but with teaching practices that had been common to his adult ESL students when they were in grade school in their countries of origin. He wrote,

*To me, it's so simple that in order for these children to become successful in life, they must begin with a good foundation. One that is taught by a good role model facilitator. **Not a mindless lecturer who refuses to let go of the banking method.** But be careful! Communities and parents must be involved as well. **Many who have been taught in a different way may not agree to this. However, if explained thoroughly some, if not many, may be won over.** (John, Group 2, excerpt of Dialogue Journal 5, reply)*

John disagreed with teaching assumptions that the teacher is the only source of knowledge, and that students are "blank slates" or "empty vessels" to be filled with knowledge. He critiqued this type of teaching, referring to the "mindless lecturer who refuses to let go of the banking method", and disagreed with community members and parents who advocated for that model. He offered a point of disagreement with institutionalised literacy instruction that is teacher-centred, as opposed to student-centred. He wrote,

*Book groups that promote open-ended questions ([Routman, 2000,] p.179) can turn a teacher-centered classroom into a great setting for Community Based Learning. Routman gives very good, yet, to me, logical tips on how to get started. **I cannot believe the simplicity of the ideas and yet, some schools just don't get it.** Is it because of the way they were programmed? Is it a fear of realizing that, hey, there may be another way and*

if given a chance may be beneficial to both student and teacher? Perhaps it is denial or just plain ignorance. (John, Group 2, excerpt of Dialogue Journal 5, reply)

John's frustration was a point of disagreement with what he interpreted as illogical. Good teaching is simple, he felt, and he could not believe that "...some schools just don't get it". His examples illustrated courage and real engagement with ideas. He raised contrary perspectives with journal partners, but went beyond the limited discussion of the dialogue journals to challenge larger institutional approaches to instruction that he deemed were of ill service to children. What these examples illustrate is the importance of dialogue journaling as a means to share and explore ideas that build on course readings, and to engage the ideas of others. John expanded the discussions to include reflections on educational issues concerning paradigmatic shifts from teacher-centred to student-centred instruction; this illustrates the deepened and critical reflection fostered by asynchronous online discussion.

Discussion

Establishing one's status was a major part of teacher candidates' asynchronous online discussions in this graduate education course on literacy teaching. The nature of asynchronous communication provided ample space for constructing lengthier texts, and therefore, more opportunities to draw on relevant experiences that reflected both identities and socially relevant contexts in which to interpret course readings. The nature of the remote asynchronous online discussion, with inherent physical and psychological distance between communicants (Rovai 2001, 2002), requires explicit attempts to establish one's identity or status in ways that go beyond what is often required in face-to-face communication. Participants in this asynchronous online setting must do more of what we humans often do when we communicate: establish who we are and what we do, or assert socially situated identities that connect to socially situated activities (Gee 1996, 1999, 2004). In this context, where participants can only rely on what is communicated through written language, online, establishing identities (our own or other people's as teachers, readers, writers, high-school or elementary students, parents and so on) makes effective communication possible. We can only read and make sense of each other's messages by interpreting "who is saying what to whom, and about what".

Deferring to the text was essential in this online dialogue-journaling assignment, which was designed to get teacher candidates to reflect more deeply on course readings. It provided another avenue to analyse course content, and deepened engagement through student-only exchanges between candidates (Wade & Fauske 2004). Because all participants were uncertified pre-service teacher candidates, and many had no formal teaching experience, the text loomed large as a source of authoritative knowledge, and therefore anchored candidates' thinking and writing. Candidates who had more experience working with students (adults or children) were most confident and comfortable challenging the text, and each other, but the text remained an important source of literacy theory, content knowledge and ideas about pedagogy.

Throughout the dialogue journals, teacher candidates bonded through the use of agreement, and also by asking and answering each other's questions. And, while bonding occurred far less frequently than establishing identities or deferring to course readings, it was necessary to foster relationship building. Candidates humanised their contact when they addressed each other by name, and as they wrote with group members in mind as a specific audience, they further established meaningful connections with each other in this virtual social context.

Candidates deferred to the authority of the course text often, and rarely challenged the author's perspectives. It is possible many did not believe they knew enough to question the author, or dialogue-journal partners, because they had no formal teaching experience, but their lack of experience in the classroom did not limit their reflection on course readings.

Members of the only group with male candidates varied from all other groups in that the male members, particularly John, offered points of challenge or disagreement to ideas found in the text, other group members' ideas and issues related to schooling and education that went beyond the course. Perhaps the issue of gendered learning styles in asynchronous online environments may be relevant. Whereas Wade and Fauske (2004) found male and female secondary teachers used similar discourse strategies online, Blum (1999) found that male discussants in the online courses dominated the discussions, sought power or status, made impersonal statements, used slang and posted jokes of a sexual nature, while female discussants communicated in an "elegant way", justified their statements and fostered connections that mentioned personal experiences and family. However, male and female participants in this study reflected on particular course content, with clear guidelines for appropriate content. None of the men used profanity or impersonal language, or attempted, intentionally or in effect, to silence the woman in the group. But they challenged each other's ideas more, offered alternative perspectives and went beyond the solely polite conversations prevalent in the discussions of most other dialogue journal groups.

In the context of the dialogue-journaling experience, overall, pre-service teachers were reflective, raised genuine questions and sought understanding through each of their respective experiences. Those with some classroom experience made direct connections to their roles as teachers, and, like their non-teaching partners, found other socially relevant positions from which to interpret course readings. That they raised few points of contention is noteworthy, because true dialogue, which was approximated in this asynchronous online context, goes beyond polite exchanges to include a mental and discursive tussle of ideas that may result in contrary positions or perspectives that serve to develop further exchanges and deeper reflection.

Instructional implications

Online dialogue journaling provided a space for the development of a professional teacher identity (Singer & Zeni 2004; Wade & Fauske 2004; Wade, Fauske & Thompson 2008) and deeper engagement with texts. It shows promise in facilitating learner connection and building a sense of community by facilitating dialogue and decreasing psychological distance between participants who are geographically and temporally separated (Rovai 2001, 2002). In this study, candidates stabilised their relationships through polite, cordial exchanges that reflected their understanding of teaching through teacher and non-teacher identities and relevant social contexts, past and present. They attempted to bond through techniques such as questioning and building on each other's comments. Increased learner participation and critical thinking (Bullen 1998; McDuffie & Slavit 2003; Newman, Webb & Cochrane 1995; Oliver 2001) are key aspects of online learning, and while both occurred in this study, they do not only result from a reduction in contentious perspectives or silencing of disagreements. Perhaps what could strengthen the online dialogue-journaling process is a modeling of authentic writing that raises controversial issues, offers disagreement and reflects divergent thinking, without silencing members of the group who prefer cordial, polite exchanges.

The results of this study cannot be generalised to other teaching contexts, within or outside the United States, but the findings suggest cultural and gendered variations in communication patterns may have influenced participants' responses. As an assignment, dialogue journaling was created to

encourage active exchanges that resulted in deeper reflection, critical inquiry and relationship-building. The exchanges were mediated minimally by the instructor (Wade, Fauske & Thompson 2008), but “teaching presence” (Pawan et al. 2003) was felt through instructor comments on the content and process of each group’s dialogue journals at two specific times: at the onset of the course after the first or second journal, and midway through the course, between journals 4 and 6. In this example, I appear to use discourse strategies of a polite exchange, affirming both the candidates’ developing identities and practices as beginning teachers, but through nudging them to satisfy the requirements for the assignment, I discursively reinforce my role as the instructor and evaluator. For example, I wrote to members of one group:

“Jessica and Gemma, you have really gotten down to the work of thinking as teachers. It's good to be able to ground your ideas in the theoretical concepts of teaching, as you work with children.

The student you are working with, Jessica, will help you grow in your ability to analyze, diagnose, and instruct with appropriate level texts and learning experiences. You have identified one key step, which is...is this book the right level text for this student, given his level of development as a reader, which includes his strengths and needs?

I truly can enjoy the process you are going through, Gemma, as teaching beginning readers is such an exciting process! It's amazing when they are able to recognize print, produce the appropriate sounds, and make meaning from it, simultaneously! It takes lots of experiences like the ones you are witnessing, of them "pretend" reading. They are well on their way to becoming literate people.

Jessica, for the sake of writing the dialogue journal, ground your comments in specific ideas mentioned in the text. Although you referred to the reading, select a specific section or idea and then, tell us about it. You can, but do not need to quote...but I need evidence that you are thinking about and integrating the concepts and ideas explored in the reading as you shape your comments.”

Perhaps teacher candidates interpreted the instructor’s role as an informed facilitator and evaluator, not discussion participant, which meant there should be no challenges to the instructor’s ideas. Only requests for information or clarification were made to the instructor.

In this study, online asynchronous discussion reduced barriers of gender, race and oral language abilities, but perpetuated other barriers. Some candidates expressed themselves more eloquently, some asked more sophisticated questions and were better at analysis. Some anchored the readings in personal experiences. Others summarised and paraphrased the readings more. They explored original ideas, pursued their choice of topics within a limited selection and constructed texts to reflect their developing understandings. They used each other as resources, and expanded the range of experiences and ideas beyond what they could think of and write about on their own. This is a specific cultural orientation to texts, each other and the teacher. Instructors and mentors would need to increase their awareness about the valued practices and ways of engaging in asynchronous dialogue online that they bring to the course, and what participants are reconstructing in their communication with one another. It is important that instructors think through students' possible ways of responding, even if it challenges students’ backgrounds and is culturally a new way of interacting.

When planning this course in settings other than a North American context, it might be helpful to consider gendered ways of communicating, and communication in mixed-gender contexts. Asynchronous online communication, without visual, oral or gestural cues, relies on text-on-screen to function. This context reduces visual and oral cues and encourages equal gender participation (Wade, Fauske & Thompson 2008). However, it has been reported that men and women engage differently, with men attempting to dominate the discussion or silence others in the group (Blum 1999); these behaviors should be addressed immediately. At the onset of the course, instructors need to establish general expectations for patterns of engagement so that candidates show mutual respect for each partner (i.e., build on each other's ideas, or question and challenge each other's ideas without name calling, profanity or efforts to humiliate or intimidate). Agreement and disagreement are expected. It is important to model right from the start how to engage in written dialogue, and what language is appropriate.

In addition to cultural awareness, instructors offering asynchronous discussion in international or cross-cultural online settings will need to attend to issues of language. In several studies, English was the language of communication. Korean and Finnish students in one study (Kim & Bonk 2002) communicated in English with American students. This was a workable, but difficult, situation for students who were not fluent writers in English, as they found it difficult to express their ideas. Kim and Bonk reported that some non-native English speakers posted fewer comments, but spent more time developing their thoughts, and wrote high-quality reflections. One solution is to permit students in the same country to communicate with others in their first language; cross-cultural exchanges will have to respond to the need for translation and language-support services.

Communication patterns are often shaped by sociocultural contexts and values. Dominance, chattiness and frequent postings were cited for Western students in communication with others (Kim & Bonk 2002); Asian students were cited as posting fewer questions that challenged the authority of the instructor or each other. The Finnish students made fewer, more reflective postings, in contrast with American students, who posted frequent responses and engaged in higher levels of cross-cultural postings. Responses between men and women distinctively indicated men as assertive (e.g., making jokes that were sexual in nature, and asserting dominance through criticism or curt responses), while women were reported as sensitive and relational (Blum 1999). The role of instructors is essential to establish fair and equitable online exchanges among participants in mono- or cross-cultural communities.

By broadening opportunities for meaningful exchange about course readings through regular, interactive, asynchronous online discussions, I, a teacher educator, hoped to provide an online context for supporting deeper engagement and more meaningful exchanges between pre-service teacher candidates; this, I hoped, would lead to a better understanding of the subject matter (Brannon & Essex 2001; Garrison 2003; Im & Lee 2003-2004). Social interaction is essential for meaningful learning (Bransford, Brown, Cocking & Donovan 2000), and in this virtual environment, enhanced social connections added more sources of information and experiences to the course, de-centring the course instructor as the primary source of knowledge, and increasing the power teacher candidates had to actively shape what and how much they learned. Online communication widens the possibility for more meaningful learning in teacher education, based on its potential for increasing student-to-student contact (Rovai 2001, 2002), and providing a space for reflection and interpretation of ideas (Brown & Palinscar 1989; Zeichner & Liston 1996).

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