Section II:
School-University Partnerships in the Context of COVID-19

Teaching Through a Pandemic: Possibilities for Student Engagement Created by University-School-Community Partnership

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Abstract: In this article, the authors examine their collaboration on a joint ELA-art-mindfulness project before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following chronicles the impact of the pandemic on the project and on student engagement, key takeaways from teaching and collaborating during a virtual school year, and the implementation of said takeaways as school returned to in-person instruction. The authors also reflect on their university-school-community partnership and plans for future collaboration.

Keywords: school-university partnerships, community-based partnerships, Professional Development Schools, PDSs, service-learning

NAPDS Revised 9 Essentials Addressed:
Essential 1: A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

Essential 3: A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.

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

Essential 9: A PDS provides dedicated and shared resources and establishes traditions to recognize, enhance, celebrate, and sustain the work of partners and the partnership.

Introduction

When reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on students, some may think of the "learning loss" incurred or the negative effects on students' health and wellbeing. Some may remember the early days of the pandemic and the drastic switch to remote learning, which revealed great disparities in students' access to technology and their education. Some may reflect on how students' lives were affected by personal and financial loss during the pandemic, and how that impacted their attendance and engagement in school.

We - the three authors of this article - are still addressing the many challenges imposed by the pandemic and its impact on our students. However, when thinking back on the "pandemic years," we also reflect on the strength of our university-school-community partnership (Miller & Hafner, 2008) and the possibilities that emerged because of it, which helped to engage our students during and after that challenging period. This is the story of our partnership and the collaborative work we shared in order to get our students (and ourselves) through the pandemic and beyond it.

As an English teacher (Dan), community artist and activist (Lynn), and PhD candidate researcher/mindfulness instructor (Patricia) collaborating on a project before and during the pandemic, we initially were interested in engaging students in a social activist art project that would transform a communal school space. We focused on student agency and empowerment, alongside academic rigor and the structure of Project-Based Learning (PBL). However, Covid-19 greatly shifted our collaboration and project in multiple ways: like millions of other teachers, we had to abruptly shift to remote learning, and we had to continually respond to new challenges that virtual schooling and living in a pandemic presented to us and our students. Though we initially tried to hold onto our project because we thought it would be a good way to engage students remotely, we finally allowed ourselves to let go of it in order to better respond to students' ever-changing needs.

Ultimately, our main question driving our collaboration became, "how do we engage students in meaningful learning during (and after) a pandemic and attend to their well-being?" Below we discuss our partnership and outline five key takeaways from our collaboration during the virtual 2020-2021 school year. We also discuss how we are implementing these takeaways to address the academic and social emotional learning challenges that students are currently facing as we have returned to in-person learning. Lastly, we briefly reflect on our university-school-community partnership and future directions.

Background of the Partnership and Project

The three of us came together through a service-learning program within the department of Education Studies at our local university, which places undergraduate students at schools in the area as tutors and mentors. Patricia was a PhD student researcher who was an instructor with the service-learning program. Dan had been a supervising teacher for the program for numerous years, hosting many undergraduates as they tutored his alternative high school students in his English classroom; he had also invited Patricia to teach yoga and mindfulness to his students. Lynn had been a long-time collaborator with the program, establishing many joint art-inspired projects between the Education department and her art studio/community center.

Before the pandemic, Patricia applied for a small grant that funded arts and humanities projects that encouraged university partnerships with the local community. Knowing his passion for social justice and mindfulness, she asked Dan to be a partner on this project, and they

considered having students in his English classes create social justice and mindfulness-based artwork, which would decorate a communal school space. Lynn was approached for her expertise in designing and teaching arts-based lessons that focused on community activism. Acknowledging that many university-school-community partnerships can often be grounded in asymmetrical power relationships, we purposefully took an egalitarian approach to our collaboration, keeping in mind mutuality, reciprocity, and respect for one another (Strier, 2011). Together, we discussed integrating English, art, and mindfulness, each of us putting forth ideas based on what we were willing to contribute. We made plans for the following school year, which included the use of undergraduate tutors, several field trips to community art spaces, and hosting a school-wide event at the project's culmination. Our university-school-community relationship formed and solidified through the process.

Though we were able to put some of our initial plans into effect, the pandemic stopped our grand project in its tracks. We took some time to reassess what students' needs were, what was possible on the school's virtual platform, and made multiple pivots to better attend to students holistically. By allowing ourselves to be flexible and responsive to what the context of the pandemic demanded, the relationships we formed deepened between ourselves and our students and we were able to form a virtual learning community.

The grant as well as the university service-learning program afforded us opportunities for interactions which Bringle and colleagues (2009) state, "involve complex and dynamic relationships that are necessarily subject to re-negotiation over time and that hold the potential to catalyze significant growth for the participants as well as substantial new work and new knowledge production" (p. 2). The nature of our relationship evolved from three professionals who admired one another's work and were excited to plan and implement a project together, to true collegiality and friendship built on our collective struggles and experiences. The evolution of our relationship grounded us during the uncertainty of the pandemic, provided consistent human interaction and connection at a time when we were feeling increasingly isolated, and reshaped our project and how we thought about teaching, learning, and collaborating. We formed a true partnership embedded with closeness, equity, and integrity (Bringle et al., 2009). It is within this partnership that we formed new knowledge about teaching during a pandemic, and what follows are the lessons we learned from it.

Five Key Takeaways from Teaching and Collaborating During the Pandemic

The following section details what we learned from teaching and collaborating during the pandemic and remote learning. Five key takeaways are explained, along with Dan describing how he has been implementing them after school resumed in-person.

Re-thinking Engagement and How to Assess It

The integration of mindfulness and art activities into the English curriculum served not only to engage students academically, but also to attend to their well-being and social-emotional needs (Henriksen & Shack, 2020), which proved to be equally, if not more, important to address during the pandemic. Eventually we moved our virtual classroom towards a more process-based way of engaging and assessing our students. Instead of pushing ourselves to accomplish our original culminating project and measuring students on completion, we treated each day as its own entity, teaching shorter lessons with smaller milestones and multiple forms of expression. For

example, if we were reading our primary text, *The Four Agreements*, we may *only* have proceeded with a discussion of a quote or two that we had selected in our dialectical journals, as well as designed art and mindfulness activities around those specific quotes. With these smaller milestones, we sought to emphasize how we could engage with each other, and the text, in a way that had immediate applicability.

"Engagement" for us meant providing many different ways to simply learn and to be in the classroom. It meant providing students multiple opportunities and means to contribute, such as unmuting their microphones to speak, writing in the chat, adding pictures or text to the daily Nearpod, or using other Google Classroom and Google Meet features. We encouraged creative ways to bring in our whole selves with embodied forms of learning (Grogan et al., 2014; Wisner, 2013) through various art and mindfulness activities (we provided physical "kits" to students that included all the materials we would use over the year), which brought together our mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual selves into the classroom. Also, taking a trauma-informed approach (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016) to our expectations of students allowed us to be generous in our approach with them and with our own pedagogy, as we considered student engagement. We understood when students couldn't turn on their laptop or phone cameras in class and celebrated them through their profile pictures and the emojis they shared.

Dan: Back in the Classroom

The students and I are in the midst of a transition. I hesitate to call it a transition to "normalcy" because "normal" for me no longer exists. We are transitioning back into a collective, taking things one day at a time. We no longer have the constraints of the virtual classroom, but being together - on the heels of isolation - has its own challenges. We all need to relearn how to coexist and function together. A lot of the so-called "soft skills," like being on-time, working with peers, and academic organization, are lacking. Given these challenges, I am still very much on board with a more "generous" brand of engagement and assessment.

Initially it was almost like "going through the motions." We were physically together but mentally we were in different places. We didn't seem to remember how school was supposed to work. I knew that some of this should be expected, but the pernicious hangover from isolation was well-entrenched. Art and mindfulness would once again become our anchors to the here and now.

I went back to what worked when we were in our virtual classroom. There was comfort in routines. For example, as we did in the virtual classroom, we would start the class with a "thought of the day" or a question directed to the young people. It could be as simple as, "how are you doing today?" Then we would record our responses in a Nearpod, Flipgrid, or as a response to a Google Classroom Question; that way we could check-in relatively quickly with each other. These activities were designed to set a positive tone, fostering a sense of optmism that was based on the notion that "we are in this together." We were all well aware of the fear, anxiety, and dysfunction that the pandemic brought, but we tried to draw our attention to that which we could control, and to the conscious and collective choices we could make.

When we were virtual we did a digital daily journal comprised of 4 sections: "On my mind," "Today", "Feeling Grateful For," and "My Day in a Meme" (courtesy of shelleygrayteaching.com), which gave us another avenue for conversation. Really, I was desperate for any opportunity to get the young people to share how they were feeling, what they were looking forward to, or any other kernel of information we could build upon. Coming back into the

classroom, we continued this ritual, which would help us connect with one another, as well as delve into our key text for the day and ensuing activities. Though I have yet to return to "The Four Agreements," which was a great anchor during the pandemic and virtual learning, we have continued using the same basic plan: journal, read, discuss.

What worked particularly well during the pandemic was coupling an opportunity to express ourselves through art with a text. There was comfort in the opportunity to express ourselves individually. We also made space for our daily mindfulness practice which, too, created a feeling of comfort. This is how I engaged and assessed the students: creating art provided the opportunity for engagement and completion of activities was the assessment.

Adults Modeling Process Over Product

Learning is the process, rather than product, which is something we strove to model in our co-teaching. What do students learn when they see adults learning something new? One of the things we loved about combining our expertise to teach English, art, and mindfulness is that it allowed students to see us adults as learners, and allowed us adults to experience the vulnerabilities that can come up when learning something new. We were more interested in the skills students would be using in developing their agency (Lindgren & McDaniel, 2012), rather than measuring "mastery" of academic content through a single test, paper, or project; this was especially important during the pandemic, when so many factors were out of our (and our students') control. During class, Patricia would set the tone with a mindfulness activity, which would help us stay present and let go of judgements of ourselves and others in the learning process. Dan would engage the students with a reading or writing activity that would build upon our collective intention for the day. Then Lynn would complement mindfulness and literature by encouraging student expression through art. More important than the activities themselves was the collective impact of three adults working together and maintaining our focus on the development and nurturing of agency.

Dan: Back in the Classroom

In the beginning of in-class learning, we (I) missed out on the modeling piece. We were not allowed to have too many "outsiders" in the classroom post-Covid. I knew the value of our partnerships, but we were hamstrung by the necessary safety protocols. Now it would be just a singular adult modeling the process.

Even without our university partners with us in the classroom, I still went forward with an emphasis on process over product. We have tried to stay in the moment with our learning and our attentiveness to each other. For example, we start every day with a "morning meeting" (an idea from Homeboy Industries*) where we check in with each other and get ourselves oriented to the day. We will do journaling, yoga, meditation, or all of the above. We are constantly reminding ourselves that we matter to each other and that we need one another. Every day is its own "mini unit," if you will. I still do long-range planning. I still design units of study that seek to engage and explore issues of consequence, but I am mindful of the pitfalls of "sticking to the plan at all costs." I try to remain flexible so that I can attend to whatever the most pressing needs of the students are at any given time. For example, earlier in the school year, when we were still reacquainting ourselves with in-person learning, I pivoted from district-mandated curriculum to a lesson based on our notions of "hope." At the time there was a palpable sense of hopelessness*

among the young people. I did not want to offer any false or "hokey hope" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) that things would get better. Rather, I wanted to guide the young people towards an understanding that we are in this pandemic together and that we can rely on each other as material sources of hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). It was necessary and important work, and it was what the moment called for.

Learning is a process for us that takes place every day. I am less concerned with a product that is to be met at all costs. Most importantly, we are present *for each other. We make mistakes together, support each other, and listen to one another.*

Education as Holistic and Interconnected

When we first conceived of our project, we planned English, art, and mindfulness as three separate disciplines that were being housed in one classroom. But after some time, our separate domains became much more integrated and we took a more holistic approach (Hare, 2006) to better support student learning and motivation. For example, Dan was having the students read *The Four Agreements* (Ruiz, 1997), highlighting the theme of "not taking anything personally." Knowing the theme, Patricia led class with a mindfulness activity focusing on being present and not forming judgments, and Lynn led a blind contouring activity, encouraging students to not be concerned with others' opinions of their artwork and to silence self-judgment. There was not much planning of the lesson beforehand, but rather a reliance on our abilities to make connections in real time, trusting each others' expertise in our domains. Being flexible and open to content connections and interrelated experiences ended up being more useful than copious amounts of pre-planning, and allowed for natural interdisciplinary connections to occur.

Dan: Back in the Classroom

At this time I am unable to collaborate in the classroom with my university partners in the pursuit of holistic education, due to new safety protocols as well as time and available resources. But nevertheless, this approach still informs all that we do here, from the different embodied learning activities I embed in my English lessons, to supporting the development of the skills of present awareness and being non-judgmental. The most effective lessons have been those that emphasize all aspects of the self - the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual. We are all rediscovering who we are as individuals and as learners. An example of such a lesson is the "One Pager." For a One Pager, we will have a shared reading of a text (I use poetry quite often for this activity), and then we will react to the text in the following way: cite two excerpts from the text, draft an "I Believe" statement (based on how the text "speaks to us), and create an original piece of art that shows some symbolic significance. In this way, I can have the students interact quickly and efficiently with a given text, yet all the while incorporating different aspects of their whole selves as learners.

Relationships Matter

We all knew that we wanted to create and nurture a space where we all felt like we (ourselves and the students) were part of something greater than our individual selves. We never wanted to lose sight of the fact that we needed each other now more than ever, since the pandemic caused us to feel so remote and isolated from one another. All three of us emphasized relationship-building (Hare, 2006), forming secure attachments with students, so that they would feel safer

taking risks in the classroom - with art, with mindfulness, with English, and with themselves. Dan created a compassionate and supportive environment, allowing time for students to check in about their emotional wellbeing, for moments of joy and lightness, for important discussions about the current political and social unrest in the nation, and also for personal connections to happen with each other and to the ideas we were discussing. All ideas and concerns were acknowledged and valued and us adults were equal participants in the activities. Sometimes difficult subjects were discussed, but humor was always woven into the conversations. We connected to each other and built relationships through our similar human experiences and stories.

Dan: Back in the Classroom

In the wake - or more aptly the midst - of the pandemic, the young people we serve were struck with multiple tragedies. One young lady, a student, was shot and killed by a fellow student. Four other students were arrested for murder in a separate incident. It goes without saying that anything we could say or do in the aftermath seemed inadequate at best. But our school is small, and we have developed and nurtured a culture of caring for our students. Hence we were able to respond quickly and compassionately.

Relationships matter. They matter for reasons that, at times, we cannot fathom. It is not only in the face of tragedy that relationships come to the fore. Relationships matter every day. Our school year has been marked by extreme episodes of sadness and grief. But sandwiched in between are many lesser examples of struggle. Students and adults are only just coming out of isolation, and we are having to re-establish lines of communication and trust that are the real precursors to learning taking place. This has been difficult. The novelty of simply being together has worn off. We must be together with a renewed sense of purpose.

Now that things are relatively calm, I have started reaching out to our university and community partners to dream up new ideas, and that feels good. It feels good to get back to the "unfinished business" of collaboration and collegiality. It feels good to share these goals with the students. It feels good to share the opportunities and projects that are just around the corner.

Strength in Community (and How to Collaborate with Others)

During the pandemic, we were isolated, but we did not have to work in isolation. It was important for us to leverage our pre-pandemic relationship to help guide us through the pandemic together. Developing meaningful partnerships takes time and consistent effort, and we three have developed a strong working relationship over these past few years. Over time, we created and nurtured a community of learners (Hare, 2006), which helped bring us and our students through some tough times. By working in community, it was easier to practice the joy and play in learning, which was much needed during the pandemic. Incorporating daily art and mindfulness through spirited collaborative activities was a way to value and encourage the exploration of moments of joy, as well as personal agency. Connecting with students and connecting with each other was not only for the benefit of our students' wellbeing, but for our own as well. Our collaboration has been reciprocally beneficial and truly joyful, and we hope it is something that we can continue and deepen, for the benefit of the students we serve.

Dan: Back in the Classroom

We were not together every day during the pandemic, but the days where Patricia, Lynn, and I all worked together were by far my favorite days. The students enjoyed those days, too. One

of my educational mantras is "less of me, more of them." In the online world though, this was difficult. It seemed to consistently be "more of me, and even more of me." With Lynn and Patricia, there was an entirely different vibe to the virtual classroom. It was "more of us," and it was easier to facilitate a sense of community between us and the students. Though Patricia and Lynn are not able to continue back in-person, our partnership still affords opportunities for collaboration and community-building.

One thing the students worked on a lot during the pandemic was their dialectical journals. After we read a chapter together we would go into breakout rooms - with the assistance of tutors from the university service-learning program - and we would discuss excerpts from the text. Here we could work in small groups - 2 or 3 students - with a college mentor. This yielded positive results, nurturing both accountability and an opportunity for the university and high school students to engage in dialogue, enriching the dialectical experience. Back in person, we still have those same opportunities to work with our college mentors and to share with each other in small groups and with partners. Dialectical journaling is also still a mainstay, and I am grateful that we can do this in-person and be present for each other, and that our university partnership allows us to have a more personalized learning space where each student is heard.

The need and desire to collaborate with our university and community partners, post virtual learning, has a renewed sense of importance. In fact, these relationships are no longer ancillary (if they ever were): they are absolutely essential. The ideal school that I imagined being a part of, pre-pandemic, was a place that offered much more than common core courses and a handful of electives. In my "radical imagination" (Ginwright, 2016), we are a place that offers wraparound services. We are a place where students can find legal services, health care, and virtually everything they and their families would need to live safely and productively. "Post" pandemic, in the absence of this "dream" (a dream I have not given up!) I am working to reinstitute the sense of community we all enjoyed. I am also looking to institute aspects of my "radical imagination" that no longer seem so radical. For example, I am currently working with a neighboring community college to secure grant funding for a public art project and for an artist in residence. These opportunities were made possible via my relationship with Lynn. Having a dedicated wellness center is also within our grasp. All I need to do is to keep leveraging the relationships we have with our university and community partners.

Radical Imagining: What Next?

Times of radical change provide an opportunity for us to rethink the existing structures within the education system and radically change our practices to better meet students' holistic needs. The pandemic was certainly a time of radical change - from instant school closures to the immediate switch to remote learning and getting technology into the hands of all students. Grading systems were rethought, and other measures of student and school accountability were put on hold. As we continue through the post-pandemic phase, we should continue to rethink radical changes in education instead of automatically adopting our pre-pandemic practices and relationships.

Though these recommendations on student engagement in learning were born out of the pandemic, we should all reflect on what we learned from our experiences and hold onto the positive things that came out of this challenging time. For us three, in addition to these takeaways on student learning, what we gained from this experience is our strengthened university-school-community partnership and what it affords us: deeper professional and personal relationships to help us sustain

our work, and a shared space to reflect on our values and to radically imagine (Ginwright, 2016) possibilities for teaching and learning. The experiences we shared before and during the pandemic forged this transformational relationship (Clayton et al., 2009), and we are committed to furthering the process of relationship (and partnership) development past this single project.

We still meet to reflect on our experiences as well as to dream up new collaborations; during our last meeting it was suggested we give our original project of creating an art piece for a communal school space a second chance. We are discussing funding opportunities to keep Lynn involved in the project, and to bring additional professional artists into the classroom to collaborate with community college teachers and students on public art projects at the school site. She has offered many of her personal connections to local cultural art institutions which has already yielded fruitful results. Patricia has rejoined Dan's classroom to lead mindfulness-based activities, and she is also looking for post-doctoral opportunities to continue her professional career locally so that the collaborations can continue. Dan extends an open invitation to his classroom, always ready to receive visitors, resources, and ideas for projects. After this unstable year teaching back in the classroom, we are starting to regroup so that we can come back together for something new next year. Additionally, to create more sustained cultural change, we also want to, "develop individual partnerships into social networks that achieve a critical mass and develop the capacity to assist many individuals" (Bringle et al., 2009, p. 15). To do so, we hope to involve more teachers and students from Dan's school, community cultural institutions, and undergraduate student tutors in future iterations.

We offer our story to serve as just one example of how to form a university-school-community partnership for the benefit of partners and students. We know that we have taken much away from our partnership, both professionally and personally, and we hope that others will consider forming partnerships along with the possibilities that can come from them.

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