Reimagining Online Teacher Education: A Collaborative Autoethnography

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Abstract

Over the past two years teacher education programs across the world have faced unprecedented and unexpected challenges that have led to a rapid reconfiguration of in-person teacher training to online formats. For many, this meant reimagining how practice-based teacher education could be envisioned in an online space and without field experiences in P-12 schools. This collaborative autoethnography critically examined how two teacher educators conceptualized the shift to online education, and their attempts to construct meaningful experiences. Our conclusions highlight virtual modeling and enactments as powerful tools to foster content and pedagogical knowledge, decomposition, collaboration, feedback, and reflection. We posit that carefully crafted practice-based learning opportunities, regardless of delivery mode, benefit preservice teachers.

Keywords: Teacher education, practice-based teacher education, preservice teachers, online learning

The circumstances of the past few years have led teacher education programs (TEPs) to seek alternative approaches to preservice teacher (PST) preparation. For many TEPs, this meant a rapid reconfiguration of in-person training to online formats, resulting in the use of "emergency" techniques (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Murphy, 2020). However, as online instruction increasingly became the new normal, TEPs across the country were tasked with making program-wide adaptations that fulfill state and federal requirements for teacher preparation while simultaneously upholding stakeholder expectations for high-quality preparation (Flores & Gago, 2020). This meant envisioning how practice-based teacher education (PBTE), a widely-used approach that focuses on PST preparation for fundamental

teaching practices (Hurlbut & Krutka, 2020) grounded in advancing justice (Teaching Works, 2022), could be realized in an online space.

While a plethora of research has been conducted on online teacher education (see Carillo & Flores, 2020 for a review), little has sought to understand how TEPs implement PBTE in a virtual environment, despite the recent push for its use in teacher education (Vartuli et al., 2016). In the following collaborative autoethnography, two teacher educators from different institutions deconstruct the social phenomena of teacher education in an online environment, positing that a focus on practice may actually be enhanced in this setting.

Literature Review

The literature review below seeks to provide salient background information on the topic of PBTE, which is a relatively new phenomena in teacher education. In addition, this review will explore how teacher education is traditionally experienced online.

Practice-Based Teacher Education

The field of teacher education has long been criticized for its promotion of teaching practices that do not align with those used in schools (e.g., Green, 2014). In response, many TEPs have shifted towards PBTE, an approach that focuses on the *what* and *how* of PSTs' preparation (Forzani, 2014). A variety of practice-based frameworks have been proposed that center around core practices that are common across disciplines and grounded in advancing justice (McDonald et al., 2013; Teaching Works, 2022); for instance, when novice teachers are exposed to the core practice of "leading group discussions," they learn to position all students as valuable and capable scholars. While PBTE has great potential to advance justice and transform teacher education, few studies provide a coherent vision of its application to whole programs (Francis et al., 2018), and thus it is primarily implemented by individual teacher educators

without a shared language or framework (Grosser-Clarkson & Neel, 2020). One such framework, proposed by McDonald et al. (2013) for use across TEPs, includes the following stages: a) introducing and learning about the activities, b) preparing for and rehearsing the activity, c) enacting the activity with students, and d) analyzing enactment moving forward. They posit that this framework fosters a transfer of pedagogical skills across content areas, and facilitates the creation of a common language for teacher education.

While a host of studies have explored the development of PBTE frameworks across content areas (e.g., Peercy & Troyan, 2017), faculty experience of PBTE implementation (e.g., Hurlbut & Krutka, 2020), and its impact on PSTs (e.g., Vartuli et al., 2016), most of these studies are accompanied by field experiences in which PSTs enact learning. Few studies have explored how PBTE can be imagined without a face-to-face component, such as within online education.

PST Preparation in the Online Environment

Given what we know about effective face-to-face PBTE strategies, it is important to understand how preservice preparation has been conceptualized in an online environment. Carillo and Flores (2020) conducted a review of studies from the past two decades where they highlighted the essential characteristics of online PST preparation, including: a) collaboration and interaction between professors and students; b) co-construction of knowledge, with the professor as the facilitator; c) opportunities for critical and reflective thinking; d) sharing and deconstructing personal teaching experiences; e) videos of classroom practice; f) timely feedback from a variety of sources; g) assessment focused on everyday teaching practices and case stories; and h) use of appropriate and familiar technologies (Carillo & Flores, 2020). While these findings present a great starting point for online PST education, the authors highlighted the urgent need for more attention to specific online pedagogy rooted in equity and justice.

The quick shift to online learning has resulted in some specificity in online pedagogy, however it is still limited in scope. Moser et al. (2020) utilized a virtual reality program to allow PSTs to rehearse language use and instruction in a safe, online space, finding that the online rehearsals afforded PSTs the opportunity for reflection, feedback, and collaboration with peers. Similarly, Sullivan et al. (2020) engaged PSTs in simulated classroom situations centered around responses to student behaviors after which PSTs debriefed, reflected, and discussed their experiences. Both studies evidenced positive affordances of virtual PBTE; however, there is a need for more research rooted in online practices available to all teacher educators and not just those involving expensive simulation technology.

In sum, the reviewed literature suggests that little research has sought to understand how the scaffolding, modeling, and application of content and pedagogy can be applied to online teacher education. Thus, when teacher educators were forced to transition to online instruction, they did so with little evidence-based guidance. The present study seeks to deconstruct the experience of teacher education in an online environment.

Methods

Employing a collaborative autoethnographic approach (Chang, 2016; Chang et al., 2012), the present study critically examines how two teacher educators conceptualized the shift to online education and their attempts to make meaningful experiences despite the lack of in-person access. Autoethnography is a "highly personal" approach to research, in which the experiences of the researchers serve as primary data in order to "expand the understanding of social phenomena" (Chang, 2016, p. 91). Using a "full" collaborative approach, the researchers worked together from start to finish to gather and analyze data and write about the findings from their experiences (Chang, 2016).

Autoethnography is commonly used in teacher education to examine language identities (e.g., Banegas & Gerlach, 2020; Yazan, 2019) and social justice reforms (e.g., Navarro et al., 2020; Ohito, 2019). To our knowledge, no autoethnographies yet examine how teacher educators conceptualize preparation in an online setting. However, an understanding of the teacher educator experience within the online context allows for a deep understanding of social realities (Chang, 2016). The experiences of the two authors, who share scholar and teacher educator identities but are situated in different contexts with different goals, presents insights that may not be revealed in other methodologies. In this way, the autoethnographic approach provides a unique perspective on online teaching that has yet to be captured.

Researcher Reflexivity

Autoethnographies call for researchers to become the data source, meaning that the relationship between their particular perspective and the research is essential (Patton, 2015). In this section, we present the positionality of each author, both as practitioners and researchers.

Emily is both a graduate student studying Curriculum and Instruction at a large research university and an elementary Literacy Coach. In her dual role she provides coaching to in-service teachers and collaborates with university faculty on research and preparation. Stephanie is a new Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at a university known statewide for its focus on advancing justice through PBTE. Stephanie has a decade of public-school teaching and is an expert in literacy instruction for emergent bilinguals. The present study is situated around her experiences teaching an online Assessment in Early Childhood course. Sharon is a Clinical Associate Professor of Literacy Education at a large research university. She is an expert in literacy, an experienced faculty member, and a former public-school teacher. We situate her

experiences within a children's literature course in a hyflex format, which some students attended in person and others via Zoom.

Data Collection and the Autoethnographic Process

We began our autoethnographic exploration by reflecting on our online teaching experiences during Fall 2020. Over the course of two months, we met weekly to share stories about online instruction, which often included a review of course materials or anecdotal stories that emerged from classroom dialogue. Notes were kept of each meeting to record the discussion and document emergent themes. After several weeks, we began to triangulate (Patton, 2015) our data by synthesizing commonalities in experience. Using notes from each meeting and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2015), Sharon and Stephanie wrote individually about their practices, then met with Emily to read and revise each section for coherence and to decompose our shared social experiences. In the following section, we present our collaborative autoethnography that chronicles our endeavors as teacher educators struggling to redesign our practice to meet the increasingly present force of online teacher preparation.

Findings

The past two years have brought with them many changes, one of which is the reality that online instruction may play a more prevalent role in teacher education than it has previously. Through the autoethnographic process, Sharon and Stephanie discuss the social nature of their move to online teacher education and their shift from survival mode into authentic, high-quality teacher preparation.

Uncertainty in a New World

When presented with the prospect of teaching online, we almost immediately realized that we shared a level of uncertainty about how to approach teacher education in this context. In her first semester as a professor, Stephanie's primary worry was that her instruction would suffer without access to real, live children; it is well-established that hands-on field experiences are the most influential part of any teacher education program (e.g., Brown et al., 2015), and two of her three courses were to contain an accompanying field experience around which many assignments were built. Her new university also highly emphasized PBTE, in which "enacting the activity" is a central component. After she learned that field experiences would not be possible, she feared that her PSTs would fail to make critical connections between the underlying theories of education and their enactment in classrooms (Peercy & Troyan, 2017). She also feared that the virtual world would not prepare PSTs for the complexity of teaching, including issues of equity in the classroom (Grosser-Clarkson & Neel, 2020).

Sharon also faced uncertainties, despite being a seasoned Clinical Associate Professor who was very familiar with the courses she was slated to teach. Her worries were centered around the disruption to the well-established rhythm of her courses, particularly that of her favorite course, Teaching Reading Through Children's Literature. This class relies heavily on teacher modeling of the read-aloud process, and Sharon devotes much attention to modeling book selection techniques and the fundamental components of a read-aloud. She employs a gradual release model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) to her instruction, so her PSTs typically engaged in fishbowls, group work, and independent enactment of read-alouds, tasks harder to accomplish in the digital world. Sharon was also worried about the loss of community-building and a "togetherness mindset" that is facilitated by collaborative read-aloud practice (Bates &

Morgan, 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011) and that is central to the development of reflective and critical educators (Baker & Rozendal, 2019). Sharon feared she would be unable to translate the interactive elements of her course into virtual activities.

As we looked through the notes from our conversations, we realized that the trepidation we felt was not actually related to any real, insurmountable obstacles; in actuality, we were either too fearful –or possibly too stuck in our own boxes– to step outside and think creatively. With this realization, our perception of teacher education in the virtual world began to shift.

Creative Thinking

Creative thinking meant that Stephanie needed to repurpose assignments and lessons that relied on in-person field experiences, and Sharon would have to build a digital classroom community. Stephanie began by scouring teaching resources and pestering colleagues for supplemental hands-on methods that would still maintain the integrity of PBTE, to no avail. This led Stephanie to realize that she would have to strengthen the other three areas of PBTE to make the lack of "enacting the activity" less harmful to PST development. To facilitate this, Stephanie designed her own online PBTE framework (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

A Framework for Practice-Based Teacher Education in the Online Environment
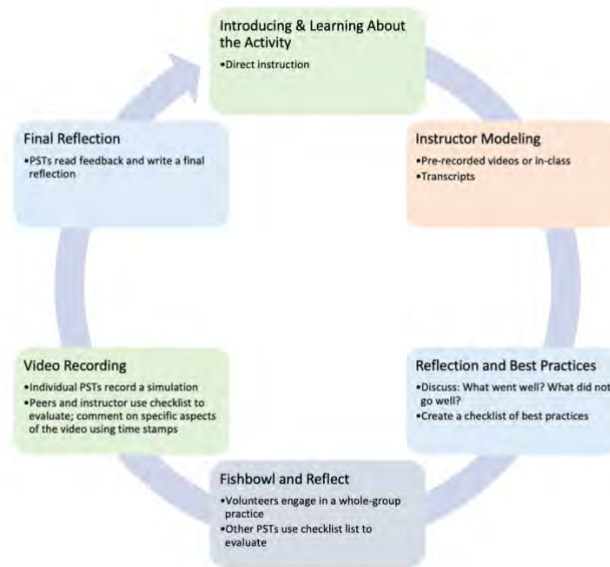
The steps embedded in this framework are considered essential PBTE elements that promote the development of teacher knowledge and advance understanding of inequity in schools (McDonald et al., 2013; Teaching Works, 2022). They also meet what Carillo and Flores (2020) found to be best practices in virtual teacher education, which emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge with the teacher educator as facilitator. Despite this, Stephanie still faced a bit of uncertainty about building her courses and assignments from the ground up.

In revisiting her "old reliable" syllabi, Sharon realized that she would have to completely change her approach. She began by chunking her instruction into smaller segments to cultivate close reading attention to literary elements and illustrations and to support guided selection of stopping points and questions. She, rather uncomfortably, decided to use breakout rooms to engage students in peer rehearsals and to have students record read-alouds via FlipGrid, a video recording app. Our conversations revealed that Sharon was quite obviously not sold on the

efficacy of the new techniques that she had somewhat forcibly adopted. We both virtually walked into the semester on a hope and a prayer, vowing to report on our experiences.

Facing the Virtual World

As the semester ended and we conversed about its successes and challenges, it was evident that our attitudes about virtual instruction had shifted significantly. In the following paragraphs we will provide examples of two specific assignments, one from Stephanie's course and one from Sharon's course, in order to share ideas with other teacher educators and to provide concrete examples of the two assignments that made the greatest impact on our attitudes toward online instruction. This process of sharing specific experiences ensures that the "brilliance of individual stories" is maintained, a central part of any autoethnography (Chang, 2016, p. 94).

Stephanie's attitude toward online instruction began to change as she saw the cycle she designed come to life in her Assessment in Early Childhood Education course, where PSTs were learning how to conduct equitable conferences with diverse families. She first introduced the idea of communicating to families through a series of questions about engagement, families' role in education, and power relationships between family members and teachers. Following this, her PSTs viewed videos where she role-played a mother-teacher conference with family members from a variety of backgrounds and communication styles (Cheatham & Santos, 2011). These recordings were played for the whole class, after which they analyzed the video transcripts in breakout groups and created a checklist of best practices. The second part of this activity took part during the following class period. Using the checklist they had created, her class engaged in a fishbowl simulation of a family-teacher conference. As they took turns, PSTs in the 'audience' evaluated their actions against the created checklist. Then, in an out-of-class assignment, PSTs used a video platform called Swivl to role-play a conference. Stephanie and classmates used

Swivl to leave time-stamped comments on their enactment. The final step required PSTs to read through the comments, re-watch their videos, and write a reflection on the process: what they learned about successful communication, what they would change, and continuing areas of challenge.

Stephanie found the Swivl video recordings, feedback, and reflection to be the most impactful piece of the cycle because her PSTs were able to view their own practice, including how they responded to simulations of individuals from diverse backgrounds, in a way that would not be possible in typical field experience. These videos also led the PSTs to engage in deep reflection (Byrd, 2010), something Stephanie had previously struggled to cultivate. Additionally, Stephanie had the rare experience of being able to directly see how PSTs applied the knowledge that they had learned in class (McDonald et al., 2013). Stephanie realized that her creative thinking about the PBTE cycle had become an absolute necessity to future courses.

Likewise, Sharon's attitude began to shift as her PSTs completed the FlipGrid read-aloud assignment that she had modified for her Teaching Reading Through Children's Literature course. For this assignment the PSTs were asked to select a high-quality children's text, record a FlipGrid video of themselves enacting a read aloud, and then provide peer feedback based on the tenets of a successful read aloud discussed in class. Sharon revealed that she was somewhat shocked, and certainly pleased, to see that the assignment "buy-in" was greater than usual and peer feedback had improved. In previous semesters, when the assignment had been completed face-to-face, peer feedback tended to lack depth. The FlipGrid recordings fostered detailed recommendations about how to improve prosody, different questions that could be asked, and a variety of other topics.

The next step of Sharon's assignment was to have PSTs create action plans that incorporated instructor and peer feedback before the next round of recording. Sharon found that even though the protocol did not require a detailed reflection, most PSTs did so anyway; they noted how a miscue in oral reading disrupted meaning for listeners, how prosody could be enhanced to convey meaning, and suggested stopping points for new questions or student engagement. The abundance of pedagogical thinking far exceeded typical responses and showed that PSTs engaged in real-time reflection as they watched their videos, noted areas for improvement, and decided to re-record based on their findings. She marveled at how their final videos revealed discernable differences in prosodic proficiency, fluid integration of questions, distinct think-aloud segments, and a smoother overall presentation than was commonly realized. Sharon began to see how use of video recordings naturally cultivated deep, authentic reflection, which fostered a higher level of PST buy-in. She also wondered if this practice should become commonplace in her course, regardless of medium of delivery.

Discussion

The collaborative autoethnographic process allowed us to reflect on the social phenomena of adapting our practices to an online environment. We realized that, while situated within different contexts with different goals, we shared a similar fear about operating entirely online that was overcome when we witnessed the multiple affordances of a virtual setting. Specifically, we realized that key elements of successful teacher education were possible and potentially superior in the online environment. Each of these affordances will be discussed below.

Virtual Enactments

Though we began the semester with feelings of trepidation about the effectiveness of our instruction without a face-to-face component, we eventually solved this issue through the use of video simulations. What we did not expect was how powerful this tool would be; specifically, that virtual enactments produced higher-quality feedback, enabling PSTs to gain a deeper understanding of their own practice and how their practice positions students and families in their classroom.

Stephanie was able to give specific and targeted feedback on videos in a way that would not have been possible if the PSTs had been working in the field; in these situations, feedback comes primarily from mentor teachers and is typically non-specific (McLeod, 2019). Some mentor teachers feel uncomfortable providing even constructive criticism (Tigert & Peercy, 2018), and the goals of the TEP may be unknown to the mentor teacher (Tigert & Peercy, 2018), and thus feedback might not align with the goals of the program. For feedback to be effective, it must be specific and provided within context by a consistent and knowledgeable source (McLeod, 2019). The virtual enactments allowed Stephanie to give rich feedback, thus resulting in PSTs who were more efficacious about communicating effectively and equitably with diverse families (Knoblauch & Woolfolk Hoy, 2008).

For Sharon, her FlipGrid read-aloud assignment afforded PSTs the opportunity to safely provide peer feedback, an essential component of successful online courses (Carillo & Flores, 2020). She reflected on the contrast with in-person read-alouds, where PSTs tended to garner only surface-level feedback from peers that limited their ability to adjust and engage in high-quality reflection of their technique. The FlipGrid read-alouds, on the other hand, eliminated the abundance of generic comments and allowed peers to focus on specific elements, such as

prosody, in a way that allowed PSTs to see more clearly how the practice could be improved (Byrd, 2010).

As we have both transitioned back to face-to-face instruction, virtual enactments continue to influence our instruction and course assignments. Other teacher educators can use virtual enactments with their student teachers in field placements, to highlight both their pedagogy and their interactions with students. This may be particularly beneficial for addressing issues of justice and equity, for which PSTs may require tangible evidence to see and understand patterns. Likewise, in methods courses where PSTs are learning to enact core practices, video simulations with peers and/or avatar students have the potential to address misunderstandings and areas of need before PSTs enter the classroom.

Virtual Modeling

Along with the affordances of video recording, we also realized the benefits of video modeling, which allowed our PSTs to see and deconstruct context-specific examples of high-quality practices, thus building their own understandings of the subtle nuances that make up good pedagogy. Watching videos of teaching has been identified as a key component of PBTE (Hurlbut & Krutka, 2020), but most research has focused on teachers' viewing their own practice instead of how videos situated to particular contexts created by experts (like education faculty) or peers may impact the development of content and pedagogical knowledge. We found this practice to be highly effective because we were able to tailor the use of video to the specific needs of our teachers and the goals of our programs.

Decompositions of practice are widely suggested for fine-tuning teaching skills in PBTE programs (Grossman, 2011), and they typically take the form of transcript analysis of teacher videos (McDonald et al., 2013). In Stephanie's course, her PSTs analyzed transcripts to focus on

their individual interactions with diverse families, through which they reframed their understanding of effective communication and developed a philosophy for equitable teacher-family communication that they later applied to their own practice (Byrd, 2010). Thus, the PSTs were able to actively construct their own knowledge through video modeling (Desimone & Pak, 2017; McDonald et al., 2013) and later apply this learning to their own simulated interactions. Similarly, Sharon found that her PSTs considered each component part of the read aloud before recording for their peers' feedback. Rather than viewing the read aloud as a whole, PSTs decomposed the objective of the task to determine the most impactful points of their piece of literature. This decomposition allowed for deep consideration of stopping points, questioning, and topics of discussion that PSTs may later use in their own classrooms. In our two classes, the decomposition of skills provided a unique space for meaningful reflection.

Continuous teacher reflection is essential and distinguishes great from average teachers, particularly for those who work in diverse classrooms or with families from backgrounds different than their own (Byrd, 2010; Baker & Rozendal, 2019; Gelfuso, 2016). Baker and Rozendal (2019) contend that PSTs have differential abilities to be reflective, so instruction targeting the development of reflective skills is critical. While not the primary focus of our assignments, our PSTs expertly applied their professional knowledge to evaluate their recordings. Stephanie's PSTs noticed nuances in their communication such as body language, eye contact, facial expressions, and language use and reflected on how these nuances would impact families. Sharon's PSTs noted prosody, text introduction, and book handling. Research suggests that PSTs rarely have the opportunities to experience the nuances of teaching prior to their first year of teaching, meaning that they seldom have the requisite professional knowledge to successfully reflect (Gelfuso, 2016; Johnson & Dabney, 2018). Virtual modeling provided our

PSTs with the opportunity to construct their professional knowledge, then reflect on and apply their prior learning within the context of their own practice.

An unexpected benefit of the virtual enactments was how they provided a space for rich discussions as all PSTs were witnessing the same representation of practice. This contrasts with mentor modeling during real-time field experiences, in which no two PSTs share the same representation of teaching. PSTs may not pick up on their mentor teacher's application of pedagogical moves taught in their TEP (Gelfuso, 2016), or they may be placed in classrooms with mentor teachers who are unaware of the pedagogical goals of the TEP or who may not exhibit best practices (Darling-Hammond, 2014), thus preventing them from engaging in rich collaborative discussions. Given that our PSTs had access to the same recorded materials, this facilitated a shared experience and centered their discussions on specific pedagogical content.

Virtual modeling as shared experiences are incredibly powerful, and now that face-to-face instruction has resumed, we have both continued to use them in our courses. For instance, Stephanie had her PSTs deconstruct and reflect on a video of a kindergarten teacher whose group discussion privileged white students. Teacher educators across content areas can engage PSTs in similar virtual modeling to highlight essential teaching moves and provide targeted goals that cultivate deep reflection.

Conclusions

Through this collaborative autoethnography, we sought to deconstruct the social phenomena of online PST education by sharing the experiences of two teacher educators situated in different contexts. For both, the move to online instruction garnered similar reactions, with the ultimate realization that virtual modeling and enactments are powerful tools to foster content and pedagogical knowledge, decomposition, collaboration, feedback, and reflection. We recognized

that carefully crafted practice-based learning opportunities are the most important element, regardless of delivery mode.

As we now return to in-person learning, we have continued to implement a blended approach to PBTE. PSTs spend a portion of the semester using virtual enactments and virtual modeling as a means to build their pedagogical knowledge before enacting practice in a high-stakes environment such as the classroom. We stress that the opportunities that recordings afford should not be negated simply because PSTs are returning to in-person learning. In considering future research, examining the impact and effectiveness of a blended model of PBTE may be worthwhile, particularly as it relates to issues of justice and equity.

There are several limitations present in this autoethnography. First, our experiences are unique to our individual milieus. While we believe that our findings are applicable to the larger field of teacher education, our methods are unlikely to be replicated exactly. Additionally, our experiences reflect those of teacher educators in the United States and may not be generalizable to TEPs in other countries. Finally, while we have attempted to triangulate our experiences, the nature of autoethnography means that the work is rooted in personal experiences.

To conclude, we encourage our colleagues to engage in the autoethnographic process, particularly when attempting new teaching methods or contexts. Autoethnography provides us with a lens to reflect on our instructional experiences, leading to a rich base for future research, pedagogical improvements, and perhaps even policy-change. As researchers, our scholarly identities provide us with a unique perspective to frame the social realities of teacher education, and thus transform the entire process (Chang, 2016).

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