

**“Experience is the Best Tool for Teachers”:  
Blogging to Provide Preservice Educators with Authentic  
Teaching Opportunities**

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**ABSTRACT:** Considering the digital landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, it is paramount that teacher education programs prepare preservice teachers to incorporate technology into their classrooms to engage in communicative and collaborative acts as readers and writers. This collective case study was conducted to explore what happened when nine preservice teachers, in a literacy methods course at a small liberal arts university, blogged with the fifth graders about a commonly read text. Over a period of 11 weeks, various types of qualitative data including pre- and post-interviews, blog exchanges, and reflective papers completed by the preservice teachers were collected and analyzed. Data analysis procedures included a holistic in-depth exploration of the recurring themes and patterns in the data. The findings revealed that the preservice teachers designed and implemented differentiated instruction as they gained practice engaging the students in real world 21st century reading and writing activities. Additionally, the preservice teachers developed as active readers and writers, which allowed them to foster deeper thinking and metacognition with their elementary pen pals. These findings have important implications for the ways teacher preparation programs consider enriching and meaningful experiences for preservice teachers.

**Key words:** Preservice Teachers, Blogging, Differentiated Instruction, Reading, Writing



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Authenticity, engagement, and purpose are universal principles of effective instructional approaches. In the same way that elementary-aged learners need real-world experiences, preservice teachers also benefit from direct interaction with students and their work. With the diversity of today's 21st century classrooms, teacher education programs have an ever-increasing responsibility to provide pedagogically sound, authentic, digitally based learning opportunities for preservice teachers. In order to meet the needs of a diverse range of students, it is necessary for preservice teachers to develop knowledge and pedagogy of effective reading and writing instruction to meet the wide range of learners' needs through authentic teaching opportunities. It is essential that preservice teachers learn how to create meaningful classroom practice where authentic literacy interactions can flourish (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Moore, 2007; Moore & Seeger, 2009). With the changing nature of literacy, it is equally important that preservice teachers explore ways to integrate new literacies (Gee, 1991; Street, 1997) in their future classrooms.

With increased technology, the nature of reading, writing, and communication is constantly evolving (International Reading Association, 2009). Considering the digital landscape of the 21st century classroom, it is paramount that teacher education programs provide preservice teachers with ways to incorporate technology into their classrooms to provide students with opportunities to engage in communicative and collaborative acts as readers and writers. In fact, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) requires students to "use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others" (p. 18).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study used blogs as a forum for written discussion of commonly read text between preservice teachers and elementary learners to address a need for additional research on effective practices for preparing future educators to provide authentic, engaging, and purposeful literacy instruction. This study aimed to determine how the use of digital pen

pals to discuss literature influenced the preservice teachers' understandings about teaching reading and writing with a diverse group of students. Additionally, the study explored how the preservice teachers developed their understanding of the use of technology to foster socially mediated literacy practices in the classroom. The results of this study have the potential to inform teacher education programs about engaging and purposeful instructional experiences for preservice teachers in 21st century classrooms.

### **Literature Review**

Grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978), sociocultural perspectives suggest literacy as a social practice (Gee, 1991; Street, 1997). In this way, writing is a tool used to communicate for a variety of purposes and with an authentic audience. Various research studies have informed the design of this study. Studies exploring social interaction through the use of pen pals in the classroom and beyond, 21st century technologies, and teacher education were examined. In the literature review that follows, the authors discuss the use of pen pals to foster social interaction and enhance writing. This type of reader response provides writers with an authentic audience to engage in purposeful and meaningful communication. Secondly, the use of new digitally mediated forms of pen pal communications is explored. Specifically, the authors examine the use of blogs to foster online communication. Finally, the benefits of incorporating pen pal projects with preservice teachers are examined.

Rather than an emphasis on an autonomous model that supports literacy as discrete skills, researchers suggest the use of an ideological model that views literacy as a social practice (Perry, 2012; Street, 1997). An ideological model focuses on authentic real-world literacy practices. Graham and Harris (2013) have posited that "writing is a social activity involving an implicit or explicit dialogue between writer(s) and reader(s)" (p. 8). Pen pal partnerships provide writers the opportunity to engage in dialogic correspondence with an authentic audience. A number of studies have shown benefits of establishing pen pal relationships for both elementary students and preservice teachers (Burk,

1989; Ceprano & Sivret, 2007; Crowhurst, 1990; Moore, 1991; Moore & Seeger, 2009; Rankin, 1992; Teale & Gambrell, 2007; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1999). Research reveals that pen pal relationships support increased engagement (Bromley, Winters, & Schlimmer, 1994; Rankin, 1992; Teale & Gambrell, 2007), enhanced comprehension (Moore, 1991; Teale & Gambrell, 2007), and improved writing skills (Ceprano & Sivret, 2007; Crowhurst, 1990; Moore, 1991). Both sets of participants engage in an immersive literary process by activating multiple cognitive processes, including reading comprehension, formulating a response, anticipating audience perception, and written composition (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011). Participation in the aforementioned processes heightens the writers' level of intellectual engagement. Similar "authentic and challenging literacy experiences" have been successful in furthering development of literacy skills even in historically underachieving students (Teale & Gambrell, 2007, p. 7) and students with exceptional needs (Rankin, 1992).

A powerful component of pen pal exchanges is the opportunity to interact with an authentic audience to create a more meaningful and purposeful practice for young writers that increases enthusiasm and motivation to produce quality work (Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007; Bromley, Winters, & Schlimmer, 1994; Crowhurst, 1990; Day, 2009; Marshall & Davis, 1999; Moore, 1991; Moore & Seeger, 2009). New meaning is created when students discuss texts with others as additional connections and experiences are added to their existing understanding (Day, 2009). Using a theoretical lens of sociocultural learning (Vygotsky, 1978), pen pals create and recreate their thinking as it relates to their written responses within a community of readers and writers. The social interaction and scaffolding helps students construct their own understanding when reading and writing (Berrill &

Gall, 1999). Teachers can support, guide, and challenge students as readers and writers within their *zone of proximal development* (Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1999) which is the area that students find themselves successful with the added support of a teacher or more proficient peers (Vygotsky, 1978). A more capable pen pal who can read and respond to students' posts could work within the parameters of each student's zone of proximal development with the intention of fostering growth in the areas of reading and writing.

In an age where the definitions of literacy are constantly evolving, it is increasingly necessary that new teachers learn ways to prepare students for the demands of new literacies (International Reading Association, 2002; International Reading Association, 2009). "As literacy instruction continues to change, teachers should respond by offering students new opportunities and expand their learning community beyond their classroom walls into virtual learning spaces" (Larson, 2009, p. 646). In addition to offering students the chance of capitalizing on diverse learning opportunities that reach far beyond the classroom walls, they might also

consider the work of Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack (2004) in an attempt to incorporate opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the new literacies. Leu et al. (2004) have posited that encouraging students to think critically, read, construct and deconstruct multiple texts, and engage in collaborative learning opportunities are all components of new literacies that can be augmented by digital tools. A discussion platform that might allow teachers to better meet the increasing digital needs of their students is a blog.

A blog, or web log, can be used in a variety of ways in the classroom. As blogs enable users to generate content on the Internet for an authentic audience who can offer responses and engage in online

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conversations, they can serve as a digital reading response journal that students can access from home or school. Blogs can also provide students with a platform in which to discuss important events or even their most recent writing pieces. The use of technology such as blogs promotes social interaction, collaboration, and an infrastructure for digitalized peer support (Andes & Clagget, 2011). Multiple studies have revealed enhanced motivation and improvement in reading and writing abilities when engaged in digital literacies (Andes & Clagget, 2011; Mills & Levido, 2011).

Pen pal projects are equally beneficial in preparing preservice teachers. A study from Michigan State University has reported that the majority of preservice teachers are underprepared to teach critical reading skills (Michigan State University, 2012). Preservice teachers placed little emphasis on addressing and teaching *meaning* in literacy skills when describing their teacher education program. Preservice teachers need meaning-making experiences to develop comprehensive understanding of how to create meaningful experiences for their students (Parrott, Da Ros-Voseles, & Eaton, 2013). Teacher education programs that offer authentic teaching opportunities can enhance preservice teachers' capacity to provide future students with meaningful literacy experiences.

Preservice teachers gain practical knowledge from authentic interactions with developing readers and writers (Marshall & Davis, 1999). Letter correspondence presents an opportunity to begin refining their abilities to assess and monitor student growth. They learn to "think like teachers" (Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, & Dalhouse, 2009, p. 340) when analyzing student writing, offering constructive feedback, and providing both direct and indirect modeling (Moore, 1991; Moore & Seeger, 2009). The pen pal exchange is mutually beneficial as preservice teachers individualize responses to provide students with feedback specifically tailored to their needs (Ceprano & Sivret, 2007; Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, & Dalhouse, 2009). A pen pal exchange can be a scaffolded experience in that preservice teachers are not responsible for the literacy needs of an entire class. Each preservice teacher is able to gain

experience teaching literacy skills to an individual or a small group of students.

Acquiring and applying instructional skills through pen pal exchanges increases preservice teachers' confidence in teaching children (Bromley, Winters, & Schlimmer, 1994). Placing responsibilities in the hands of preservice teachers elicits autonomy, empowerment, and self-efficacy signifying "progress towards development of professionalism" (Parrott et al., 2013, p. 6). This empowerment enables teachers to navigate the "complexity of the teaching process" (Liakopoulou, 2012, p. 2) with confidence. A high degree of self-efficacy is linked to strong commitment to teaching (Parrott et al., 2013). Preservice teachers who feel confident and are adequately prepared are more likely to be dedicated and effective classroom teachers.

## Method

A collective case study design (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2002) was used to explore the following research questions: (1) How does the use of electronic pen pals to discuss a commonly read text enhance preservice teachers' understandings about reading and writing instruction and meeting the needs of diverse students? (2) How does this experience better prepare college students as future teachers? (3) In what ways does technology enhance the participants' experiences as they take part in a pen pal project to discuss commonly read text?

Using a collective case study, the researchers aimed to explore the development of nine preservice teachers through a partnership with 21 fifth graders to discuss commonly read literature in the online space of a blog. Specifically, they hoped to develop a deeper understanding of how the participants considered the role of differentiation in teaching, effective literacy instruction, and the use of technology in the classroom.

## Setting and Participants

The study occurred within two settings both in the same southeastern state in the United States. The preservice teachers were enrolled as undergraduate students studying to become teachers at a small

private liberal arts university. The fifth graders attended a diverse public elementary school with 45% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. The study took place during the spring of 2013. Participants included nine White female undergraduate junior elementary education majors and 21 fifth graders (nine White, 11 Black, and one Hispanic). Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality. The preservice teachers were enrolled in one of two mandatory literacy methods courses. Prior to taking this course focused on reading and writing instruction in intermediate grades, the preservice teachers completed another required literacy methods course focused on teaching reading and writing in the primary grades. In the current course, the preservice teachers studied effective reading and writing instructional practices, learned how to use ongoing assessment to be responsive to the needs of individual learners, and developed as reflective practitioners.

Katie, the first author, taught the undergraduate literacy methods course. The second author, Lindsay, taught the fifth grade students that were partnered with the preservice teachers to blog about the book, *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2010). Both Katie and Lindsay were participant observers and acknowledged their positions as insiders in the role of researchers and classroom instructors. As participant observers, Katie and Lindsay had an advantage of being insiders within their own classrooms respectively. The third author, Rachel, participated as a student researcher at the university where the study was conducted to assist with the data collection and analysis process.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over a period of 11 weeks. Various types of qualitative data were collected and analyzed as part of this study including pre and post semi-structured interviews, pen pal blog exchanges, and reflective papers completed by the preservice teachers after participating in the project. The data sources and implementation of the study in three phases are described below. A timeline highlighting week-by-week procedures is included in Appendix A.

**Phase 1.** Before communicating with their pen pals, the preservice teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol (Spradley, 1980) (see Appendix B). These interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes.

**Phase 2.** The preservice teachers were assigned 2-3 fifth grade students to communicate with individually through the use of a blog. A minimum of eight letters and responses posted on the blog including an introductory pen pal letter and subsequent letters to discuss *A Long Walk to Water* were exchanged over the course of the study implementation (see Appendix A). Initiated by the fifth graders, a “get to know you” post began the pen pal exchange. Each week, the fifth graders read three chapters of the book, *A Long Walk to Water*, and then individually posted a written response to the book. The students were encouraged to summarize and share their personal reactions to characters and story events. They were required to post by Friday of each week. In the meantime, the preservice teachers read the same chapters and responded to their pen pals using the comment feature of the blog. Their responses included sharing their own reactions to the story events, modeling of their own reading processes through written think-alouds, and asking questions to probe for deeper thinking.

The pen pal exchanges became an online discussion in which the preservice teachers practiced stimulating deep thinking and engagement, experienced informally assessing the students’ work, and explored strategies for providing individualized reading and writing instruction. The preservice teachers were encouraged to respond to the students’ needs and interests in a way that promoted comprehension and writing development through informal differentiated instruction through careful analysis of the individual students’ blog posts. Course readings and class discussions provided the preservice teachers with support and direction to foster explicit and implicit instruction to each of their pen pals. Additionally, the preservice teachers were encouraged to read their peers’ responses to the fifth graders to examine other examples.

**Phase 3.** At the conclusion of the blogging exchange, the follow-up semi-structured interviews were

conducted with the preservice teachers (Appendix B). Additionally, the preservice teachers completed a reflection paper as a course assignment where they described their experiences communicating with the fifth graders about literature through writing in a digital space. The preservice teachers were asked to address the following questions in their reflective papers:

1. Describe each of your students as readers and writers and how they have grown throughout this project. Cite specific examples from the letter exchange.
2. Describe how you have grown as a teacher of reading and writing as a result of this experience.
3. In your opinion, what are possible benefits of engaging in this type of project for both elementary and preservice teachers? Cite specific examples from the letter exchange where applicable.

Trustworthiness was maintained through the triangulation of multiple data sources, member checks, and peer debriefing. Member checks were conducted to ensure that information obtained through data collection was accurate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, the participants were given copies of their transcribed interviews to determine accuracy. Ongoing peer debriefing to regularly discuss the data and emerging themes helped the researchers gain an in-depth understanding of the cases being explored.

Data analysis procedures included a holistic in-depth exploration of the recurring themes and patterns in the data. Ongoing thematic analysis was conducted to code, categorize, synthesize, and interpret the data (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Using an interpretivist approach (Erikson, 1986), the strongest themes that emerged from the data became the basis of the findings. This approach allowed the researchers to delve into the nuances of the pen pal exchange and the professional development of the preservice teachers.

The large amount of data were systematically examined and reduced through several stages. First, each researcher independently read and coded the data. Next, the researchers came together to discuss

possible codes and categories to use in analyzing the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once agreement was reached, the researchers began the second phase of data analysis. After determining codes, the corpus of data was reread to categorize and determine emerging themes. Results were compared and consolidated into broader categories. Data analysis continued until the researchers arrived at a consensus regarding the findings.

## Findings

In this study, the researchers explored how a pen pal project, in which the preservice teachers discussed a common text with the fifth graders in a digital space, prepared the undergraduate education majors for their future work as classroom teachers. Specifically, they were interested in how this experience enhanced the preservice teachers' understanding about reading and writing instruction and meeting the needs of diverse students. They also examined the role of technology as a medium for this type of interaction. Findings revealed the following themes: development as active readers and writers, individualized instruction, and the use of technology.

### Theme 1: Development at Active Readers and Writers

Findings revealed that the preservice teachers developed as more active readers and writers, which allowed them to provide more effective instruction for their fifth grade pen pals. The preservice teachers enhanced their metacognitive awareness as readers and gave more consideration to their audience as writers. Before participating in the pen pal project, the preservice teachers articulated components of effective literacy instruction, such as the use of read-aloud, integrating reading and writing, and a process approach to writing. However, their previous experiences with writing instruction focused solely on correcting student errors. The digital pen pal exchange increased the preservice teachers' awareness of their own reading processes and deepened their engagement with proficient reader strategies.

In Mollie's reflective paper she wrote, "I quickly realized that in order to teach [my pen pals] how to

read and write thoughtfully and critically, I myself had to read and write thoughtfully and critically.” During her interview, Faith reflected on her improved metacognitive awareness: “I normally make pictures in my head but at the same time I don’t particularly notice like ‘oh I was questioning about this’ or ‘oh I made this specific connection to this.’ Having to talk to someone about it helped me notice it more.” In her interview, Tara described how her perspective changed from a passive to active reader. She shared, “I caught myself reading as a teacher and a reader... thinking ooh what strategies can I share.” Ashley also noted in her interview that she became more aware of when she used proficient reader strategies, such as prediction, in order to talk to her pen pals about the book.

The preservice teachers provided explicit and implicit instruction via blogging to increase the fifth graders’ metacognitive abilities. Modeling and assistance allowed the fifth graders to extend their thinking and deepen comprehension. Ashley described the importance of gradually releasing responsibility to teach students to monitor their reading processes in her reflective paper. “By writing back and forth with my pen pals, I have had the opportunity to show my students how to properly use the rules of capitalization and punctuation as well as how important it is to reflect on the text and think aloud about what you are reading.”

Realizing that this learning does not occur instantly, Caroline reflected that teaching is an ongoing process and requires scaffolding. In her interview, she explained, “I felt like I was doing a lot of the things slightly each time I felt like I was kind of getting a little more out of them. So, I’d keep doing it but try to use different techniques each time.” Caroline modeled reading strategies, such as making predictions, the use of correct grammar and sentence structure, as well as proper letter format. Through direct instruction and probing questions, she encouraged students to implement the skills in future posts. Before introducing new techniques,

Caroline provided the students with several opportunities to practice through the blog posts.

Hillary noted in her reflective paper that she observed her pen pals making changes in their responses as a result of her modeling. Hillary’s implicit modeling showed when her pen pal began using the letter format in her blog posts similar to Hillary’s. Erika explained in her reflective paper that “young students will see how the teachers model how to effectively read, write, and engage with the texts and may begin to mimic these strategies themselves.”

The preservice teachers carefully crafted their responses to ensure clarity and comprehension. They modeled good spelling and grammar and intentionally selected appropriate language and sentence structure for their fifth grade audience. Consideration of audience fostered a balance between asking meaningful questions without overwhelming their pen pals. Caroline shared in her reflective paper that “the whole idea of using [her] writing as a model for these students made [her]

much more aware of what [she] was writing and the reason why [she] was writing those particular ideas.”

The pen pal blogging project provided the preservice teachers with real opportunities to implement what they had learned in their literacy methods courses. As

Tara explained in her interview that she felt more confident to teach reading strategies after this experience, commenting, “Experience in general is the best tool for teachers. I realized I need that too.” She added, “You have to teach them these reading strategies... [if not, it’s] like withholding a good gift from someone.”

## Theme 2: Individualized Instruction

In the initial interviews, the preservice teachers discussed the importance of individualized instruction to meet the wide variety of student needs but offered no specific approaches for doing so. They

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observed a range of ability levels in previous field experiences, but had limited opportunities and understanding about how to differentiate for these learners. Interestingly, with prior experience only in a primary setting, Steph noted in her interview that she believed that students in intermediate grades were all on the same ability level. Hillary was surprised at the low ability levels of students in her field experience classroom. She recalled in her initial interview, "I started to wonder, how do you get that one-on-one time? You always say that's what you should do, but then you get in there and you're like, wow, there's kids everywhere!" Hillary's comments revealed the challenge for beginning teachers to balance a classroom full of students with unique instructional goals and learning styles.

As a result of being assigned multiple fifth grade pen pals to communicate with via blog increased the preservice teachers' awareness of the wide range of ability levels of the students within a class setting and ways to tailor instruction to support them individually. This is evident in the following comments from the preservice teachers' reflective papers:

*My students were about as opposite as they could have possibly been... the things I would say and suggest to one student were totally different from the other. (Hillary)*

*In any classroom, I had to be able to focus on the individual student I was working with instead of just lumping together a generic response and hoping it worked for both of them. (Mollie)*

*This experience gives preservice teachers a better idea of what it's like to conference with readers and writers and individualize instruction based on the diverse setting of the classroom. (Faith)*

The preservice teachers also learned to avoid a deficit view when evaluating the students' work. Although several stated that it was their natural reaction to find errors, they continuously reminded themselves to emphasize the students' strengths. For instance, during her interview, Ashley stated, "it's not all about

'oh, just you're doing all these things wrong.' Let me list them." In her interview, Kate suggested complimenting and encouraging the student. Tara explained in her interview that she complimented her pen pal when he "came up with this beautiful compelling theme at the end [even though] it was only a sentence and was a run-on with lots of mistakes." As Tara noted in her reflective paper, "by expanding on what my students do best, I build their self-confidence, making them more willing to take risks as readers and writers."

Tara noted in her reflective paper that this experience helped her "examine different students' strengths and weaknesses as a means of determining individualized instructional suggestions tailored specifically for them." Mollie shared in her interview that the pen pal correspondence "helped [her] develop good critical teaching skills because [she] looked for strengths and what could be worked on and how to say it in an appropriate way for the age level of the kids." After participating in this project, Erika explained in her reflective paper that "now [she] knows how to provide constructive criticism and challenge students with their work in a way that does not discourage them from continuing to write and engage in a conversation about the book we are reading." The preservice teachers learned that by valuing the students' ideas and voices as opposed to solely focusing on their deficits, the elementary learners were more motivated and invested in the reading, writing, and blogging experience.

The pen pal blogging project provided the preservice teachers with a bridge between working with students one-on-one, common in the field experience placements, and working with an entire classroom of students. Oftentimes in field experience settings, preservice teachers have opportunities to observe whole group and/or work one-on-one with students who need additional support. Within this dichotomy, preservice teachers have limited opportunities to engage with a range of students to assess their abilities as readers and writers and design/tailor instruction accordingly. Faith explained in her interview that "when I'm a teacher, I will have a classroom with twenty or more kids who are diverse and have different needs. It's such a difference working with one kid or twenty kids. I

think this is cool because I had three people. So, working with a group of three and still having to individualize between all of them and work with them to come up with what they needed help on and what they're doing well... was more than what I've done with one [student]." This experience fostered their development as future teachers by introducing them to a wide range of ability levels where they were responsible for offering differentiated and meaningful support.

Tara shared in her reflective paper that she "feel[s] more confident in [her] ability to take on a classroom full of students, each with their own learning needs." While the diverse range of ability levels can be "scary" according to Hillary's comments from her interview, this experience prepared her to differentiate instruction for a classroom of individual learners.

The pen pal project provided the preservice teachers with a meaningful experience that proved to be an effective transition to designing and implementing differentiated instruction in the whole classroom setting. As Mollie noted in her interview, "it definitely helped me to realize how to balance between different levels." Kate's reflective paper revealed that she now thinks more about being a teacher of reading and writing to the individual students within the larger classroom context. This experience was good preparation for teaching a whole class of students with a range of ability levels.

### Theme 3: Use of Technology

At the onset of the study, the preservice teachers shared their awareness of the need to integrate technology in the classroom but had little familiarity with it. During a study away program to New Zealand the previous year, four of the preservice teachers observed an expansive use of technology with one-to-one access in the schools. While they recognized the importance and endless possibilities of technology in today's classrooms, they demonstrated little familiarity and comfort with it. As Tara stated in her interview, "I think technology is great, however I barely know anything about it... I'm kind of nervous, like, I'm a junior and this is the first time I've ever blogged." Others have blogged but did

not consider classroom application prior to this experience.

After engaging in the pen pal project, the preservice teachers found value in technology as an effective tool to facilitate and enhance learning. As Kate noted in her reflective paper, "instructing and getting to know students through an online blog is a great example of embracing technology and using it as a tool for success." In her interview, Erika commented, "It was fun to see that you can use technology and you can use that form of communication to teach and to help [students]." Several preservice teachers discussed the importance of student interaction with technology through real-world applications so they develop alongside of the ever-changing growth and advancement of the 21st century society. As Steph suggested in her interview, proficiency of technology use is essential for overall success. She explained that technology is part of today's students' daily lives as digital natives and this project therefore matches their real world digital reading and writing activities. Tara declared in her interview that "People actually blog!" The use of blogs to communicate and connect with a wide audience is an example of real-world out-of-school literacies. Therefore, this experience allowed the preservice teachers to practice engaging students in real world 21st century reading and writing activities.

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The preservice teachers recognized cyber collaboration as an engaging way to encourage the students to interact with text in more meaningful ways. In her interview, Caroline explained, "it's not just a textbook or here's a book, now read it." The use of a blog to communicate with pen pals about the book increased the students' engagement and motivation to read and respond to the text through

written exchanges. The fifth graders looked forward to reading and writing within the blog space and were therefore more actively engaged in their learning. Kate shared in her interview that “the sheer fact that they were excited to read and write was number one!”

The use of an online space for communication provided the participants with an authentic audience. The fifth graders were able to share their ideas and respond to their college pen pals and their peers. According to Mollie’s interview, “they’re not just writing it in a daybook for the teacher... someone is going to read it and respond.” Faith shared in her interview that “it’s not just writing for the sake of getting a grade. It’s actually something other kids might read.” The blog provided a wider audience and therefore students had a greater sense of responsibility as readers and writers. Kate believed that “the students are pushed to take themselves more seriously as readers or writers. You could call it publishing.” Faith continued in her reflective paper, “Since all their classmates can read what they post, this also gives them a sense of authorship. People are reading what they are writing, which makes them feel like their voice is being heard.” In her interview, Mollie discusses how the students felt like their writing mattered because they were blogging with college students. Additionally, the blog presented the preservice teachers with access to and involvement in the original work of the students with whom they had established relationships. The role of writing for an authentic audience made the experience more meaningful and purposeful for both sets of participants.

While the context of the pen pal exchange was more authentic for both participants, it was also noted that the collaborative nature of the online space allowed the preservice teachers to access their peers’ blogs as examples. Access to the peers’ responses extended the possibilities for teaching ideas and professional learning. Typically isolated within one classroom during their field experience, the pen pal blogging project gave them access to a wider network of fellow preservice teachers through social interaction in a digital space.

Technology in the classroom offers endless possibilities for collaboration, publication and continued learning. According to Ashley’s interview, “There are lots of ways [technology] could be incorporated to make learning more meaningful and more fun and get [students] engaged.” The use of technology can provide students with opportunities to conduct research to increase their knowledge and understanding of a range of topics. For instance, many of the fifth grade students demonstrated interest in Salva’s cause and researched his story and his non-profit organization online. The students explored the inspiration for the book as well as the broader implications related to the content of the story and how to get involved to take action. As Erika shared in her interview, “[technology] makes education more at your fingertips.”

### **Limitations**

Some preservice teachers suggested that a balance between the blog and face-to-face interaction such as Skype as a way to virtually meet their pen pals would enhance the experience for both sets of participants. According to Faith in her interview, “the technology was in some ways harder to deal with just because we didn’t know our students. We didn’t know what they looked like, their background or anything like that.” Additionally, others believed that the lack of proficient and fluid typing skills may result in additional spelling and grammatical errors and could possibly interfere with the writer’s stream of consciousness and ability to record their thinking without losing their ideas.

However, with increased practice, several preservice teachers noted that the fifth graders could develop their typing skills over time. In her interview, Hillary suggested that the lack of access to technology could have been a limitation to this approach making it more difficult for students to regularly monitor and interact in the blog space. Furthermore, both the fifth graders and the preservice teachers suggested that the posts needed to be within one thread so conversations were more dialogic and continuous. In her interview, Caroline expressed her belief that this would create a more supportive collaborative learning space and enhance the students’ comprehension.

Finally, although the preservice teachers demonstrated growth in their own reading and writing practices, awareness of the need for individualized assessment and instruction, and an appreciation of technology, the study does not clearly indicate how much of this new understanding can be attributed to the pen pal experience itself. Other factors including course readings, class discussions and field experiences may have influenced the preservice teachers' development.

### Discussion

Interaction with the elementary age learners through electronic pen pal exchanges provided the preservice teachers with an authentic experience to develop their professional identities. The findings of this study revealed that the preservice teachers developed as active readers and writers, which allowed them to foster deeper thinking and metacognition with their elementary pen pals. By merging their thinking with the text, both sets of participants were able to construct deeper comprehension (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). This project further developed the preservice teachers' understanding of the need for individualized instruction. As Harvey and Goudvis (2007) have noted, "One size does not fit all... We design our instruction to support students with varying reading proficiencies, learning styles, and language backgrounds" (p. 36).

Throughout this project, the preservice teachers provided individualized guidance and feedback to support the child's reading and writing development through their blog responses. When discussing commonly read literature, the preservice teachers offered a model for discussion, posed and answered questions, and elicited student thinking about the text both explicitly and implicitly. The preservice teachers modeled literate behavior to scaffold

student learning and helped them feel valued as a member of a literate society outside of the four walls of the classroom (Bloem, 2004). Through explicit instruction, responsive teaching and differentiated instruction, the preservice teachers learned how to build a "literate community" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 35).

Through this firsthand experience, the preservice teachers learned a practical way to incorporate technology in the classroom to encourage reading, writing, communication, and collaboration. Initially they had little familiarity with specific use of

technology in an educational context but learned the value of matching out-of-school literacies with in-school literacies for today's digital natives. According to Larson (2009), "It is the responsibility of all teachers to orchestrate learning opportunities in which students can collaborate and communicate within a technology-rich environment" (p. 648).

The use of blogs increased the students' engagement and interest in reading and writing experiences. The online forum served as a window into their thinking, which enabled preservice teachers to better individualize instruction. As Harvey and Goudvis (2007) have stated, "It is impossible to know what readers are thinking when they read unless they tell us through conversation or written response" (p. 28). Additionally, using blogs allowed the preservice teachers to expand their instructional toolbox by viewing other posts and responses.

These findings have important implications for the ways in which teacher preparation programs consider enriching and meaningful experiences for preservice teachers. The results of this study can have the potential to inform teacher preparation programs and 21st century reading and writing instruction in K-12 settings and beyond. This study

As Harvey and Goudvis (2007) have noted, "One size does not fit all... We design our instruction to support students with varying reading proficiencies, learning styles, and language backgrounds" (p. 36).

provides support for preparing preservice teachers through exposure to authentic experiences with developing readers and writers and through individualized assessment and instruction. Just like elementary learners, preservice teachers benefit from opportunities to construct their own meaning through purposeful experiences and application of in-course content (Parrott et al., 2013). The preservice teachers were able to see technology integrated in a purposeful context, and as a result, felt more confident about using it in their future classrooms. Preservice teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy and autonomy are more likely to be committed, effective classroom teachers (Parrott et al., 2013). Incorporation of these findings in preservice teacher preparation programs can develop more empowered and dedicated teachers.

### **Conclusion**

As Keene and Zimmerman (2013) have posited, the goal for active readers is to “awaken the ‘voice in their minds’” and engage in “ongoing, inner conversation with themselves and the text” (p. 604). Through the pen pal experience, both sets of participants developed a deeper sense of the communicative and transactional nature of their reading and writing processes through hearing this inner voice. This scaffolded process fosters a greater likelihood that the fifth graders will develop the literacy skills needed for overall academic success.

The preservice teachers learned essential strategies for fostering this growth and development through effective literacy teaching in and beyond the classroom.

This study can serve as a catalyst for future research. In fact, future studies could be conducted with a larger sample size in order to examine the results on a more significant scale. Research questions to consider might include: How does the number of elementary students that preservice teachers work with influence preservice teachers’ learning? Specifically, what are the results of one preservice teacher working with an entire elementary class? Additionally, future studies could explore a similar type of online interaction between preservice teachers and students from more diverse populations and across different grade levels.

Finally, a possibility includes conducting a similar study at a school where each elementary student has personal, one-to-one access to a laptop, iPad, or tablet. In this case, research questions may include: How does increased access to technology enhance the dialogic nature of the online conversation? While this study was conducted on a small scale, it has potential to inform teacher education programs by demonstrating the importance of providing preservice teachers with authentic experiences to utilize technology and provide individualized instruction for a range of learners.

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## Appendix A

### Implementation Timeline

#### Phase One

Week 1 –Preservice Teacher Pre-Interviews

#### Phase Two

Week 2 – Pen Pal Introduction Blog Posts

Week 3 – *Long Walk to Water* Chapters 1-3 Pen Pal Blog Exchange #1

Week 4 - *Long Walk to Water* Chapters 4-6 Pen Pal Blog Exchange #2

Week 5 - *Long Walk to Water* Chapters 7-9 Pen Pal Blog Exchange #3

Week 6 - *Long Walk to Water* Chapters 10-12 Pen Pal Blog Exchange #4

Week 7 - *Long Walk to Water* Chapters 13-15 Pen Pal Blog Exchange #5

Week 8 - *Long Walk to Water* Chapters 16-18 Pen Pal Blog Exchange #6

Week 9 – Pen Pal Final Blog Posts

#### Phase Three

Week 10 –Preservice Teacher Post-Interviews

Week 11 –Preservice Teacher Final Papers Due

## Appendix B

### Preservice Teachers' Pre/Post Semi-Structured Interview Protocols

#### Establishing Rapport

1. Tell me a little about yourself in general, as a reader, as a writer, and as a future teacher.

#### Pre Interview Questions

1. Describe your own experiences with learning how to read and write.
2. Describe your experiences thus far with teaching children how to read and write.
3. What are some things teachers can do to help students with their reading and writing development?
4. How important is it for teachers to get to know students as individual learners? Explain.
5. What are some ways teachers can get to know students as individual learners?
6. How do you feel about teaching students about diversity and various cultures from around the world?
7. What are some ways we can teach students about diversity and various cultures from around the world?
8. How do you feel about the use of technology in the classroom?
9. What are some ways to utilize technology in the classroom?
10. Have you ever participated in a pen pal project before? Please explain.

#### Post Interview Questions

1. What are your overall thoughts about this project? Please explain.
2. How would you describe yourself as a reader and a writer after participating in this project?
3. How would you describe yourself as a *teacher* of reading and writing after participating in this project?
4. What have you learned about effective reading and writing instruction as a result of this project?
5. How has reading and discussing the book, *A Long Walk to Water* with your pen pal influenced your thinking and understanding of other cultures and diversity? What helped you develop this new understanding?
6. How do you think reading and discussing the book, *A Long Walk to Water* with your pen pal influenced your student's thinking and understanding of other cultures and diversity?
7. Why is it important for students to learn about diversity and other cultures from around the world?
8. How has this project prepared you as a future teacher?
9. What did you learn about your student as a reader?
10. What did you learn about your student as a writer?
11. How has this experience enhanced your student's reading and writing abilities? What factors do you attribute to this growth?
12. How has this experience enhanced your student's view of himself/herself as a reader and writer? What factors do you attribute to this change?

13. How did the use of blogging enhance the pen pal experience for yourself and your student?
14. If you had hand-written your letters to the student, what do you think would have been different about your overall experience?
15. How does the use of technology improve the learning experience for our students?

### **Conclusion**

16. What have you enjoyed most about this project?
17. Do you have any suggestions for how we might improve this project in the future?
18. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me before we finish?