

Let's Blog About It: Capturing Preservice Teachers' Thoughts About Literacy Education

Kamshia Childs, Ed.D.
Texas A&M University – Commerce

Abstract

During the COVID pandemic, faculty and staff working within educator preparation programs faced the challenge of having to get future educators the tools they needed to be successful in a “normal” setting while working to set up and create their own virtual environments. This article looks at the practice of structuring course assignments in a way that preservice teachers create reflective blogs to demonstrate their knowledge of concepts taught in their courses (in this case, a literacy course). The blog format used in the 2020-21 academic year supported preservice teachers in developing their teaching philosophies and professional identities. What started out as a new way and a challenge for preservice teachers ended up giving them an additional set of educational technology skills and a digital footprint of their journey to becoming an educator.

Keywords: *Preservice Teachers, Reflection, Blogs, Literacy, Virtual*

In early 2020, a pandemic caused the world to shut down and become more innovative in the way in which everyone interacted. Whether personal or professional, decisions had to be made with physical distancing in mind. This included students of all ages and abilities using virtual classroom spaces. One key area that was impacted was the training of future educators. What was once a “hands on” process with several semesters of face-to-face learning in junior and senior level literacy courses, in which students learned about reading, writing, and assessment through project-based learning, became temporarily a virtual learning experience.

With a pandemic threatening the health and safety of students and educators, all educational systems had to revamp their curriculum, the delivery mode, and the ways students demonstrated their understanding. Colleges

already had online teaching and learning structures in place, such as Learning Management Systems, and offered some form of courses online, but many of the major universities were not prepared for every course to be delivered completely online. And even if faculty were prepared, many students were not prepared for the shift in course delivery.

The stresses and uncertainty of the pandemic made it a tough task to motivate students and required innovation. This article’s focus is on the use of blogs when preparing preservice teachers in a literacy course. Using blogs allowed teacher candidates to explore taking risks when planning instruction and exposed them to a new strategy that can also nurture and guide their future students’ literacy identities. The goal should be to prepare children to be fully literate in all aspects, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Blogs allow practice

with all four skills. Before the pandemic, teacher candidates used essays to reflect upon “hot” literacy topics, and writing blogs allowed them to be more engaged, more reflective, and to learn a new skillset by synthesizing knowledge gained. Using blog posts allowed students to write in a more personal and reflective tone and customize their blogs to their individual style. The blog format further aided in crafting their teaching philosophies.

Reflective Blogs for Preservice Teachers

Engagement

Students benefit from having opportunities to learn in a variety of formats. Educators often must find a balance with tools that interest students and effective practices that allow students to fully demonstrate their knowledge. Donovan et al. (1999) stated that “instruction can be viewed as helping the students unravel individual strands of belief, label them, and then weave them into a fabric of more complete understanding” (p. 11). It is a complex task to provide engaging instruction and get students to “buy in” to new learning content, especially when the pandemic changed the landscape of our classrooms and school systems.

When working with preservice teachers, a great deal of time is spent teaching pedagogical practices and specific subject area content. Often, the focus within educator preparation programs is the content, and then preservice teachers finally can apply their knowledge in their later semesters, right before graduating. This issue often creates a disconnect among theory, process, and application. With blog posts, teacher candidates are allowed to express their opinions, ideas, and knowledge and work toward closing their disconnection.

Articulation of Knowledge and Application

Blogging is a practice that bridges the gap between the traditional classroom essay and academic writing and offers more of a personal

approach. According to Tess (2013), “researchers found that blogs supported self-expression and self-reflection, as well as social interaction and reflective dialogue” (p. 64). Getting students to blog about course content throughout their semester and documenting their experiences in learning how to be a literacy educator not only allowed students to explore new topics, but it also allowed them to apply the literacy skills, standards, and strategies (writing, summarizing, forming opinions, etc.) that they would teach in their future classrooms.

When researching the effectiveness of using blogs with preservice teachers in China, Huang, et al. (2011) found that “The use of blogs encouraged students to strengthen their own skills with regards to easily sharing course key points and to fully express their thoughts in such an environment with less peer and time pressures” (p. 105). In addition to demonstrating learning of the current practices and philosophies, blog assignments allow preservice teachers to form their teaching “voice” through articulation of ideas and synthesizing the ideas of others. This low-stakes format can be used to provide insight as to whether students are grasping material, as well as it is opening the door for additional conversations (peer to peer and student to instructor) beyond content knowledge and standards.

A New Skillset

Educators in general might utilize or have some form of access to technology in the classroom, but through this quick shift to online learning, many discovered that they were not as prepared as they thought. The pandemic showed that teacher education programs need to work toward developing stronger curriculum that integrates technology so that their teacher candidates are ready when it comes time to put their skills to the test in the classroom (Alelaimat et al., 2020). By having students create blogs in their preservice junior level courses (specifically literacy courses), it allows room for developing more technology skills (formatting, use of

visuals, creating headers and themes, embedding videos, etc.). The more that education preparation programs can devote to developing new skillsets, the more prepared teacher candidates will be once they are in the field. Technology can be intimidating, but with opportunities for practice and more exposure and usage, the fears that develop with its instructional use lessen.

Getting Started with Blogging

Blogs may be new to some preservice teachers. When implementing something new, preservice teachers can benefit from “an example of how to locate and adapt digital resources effectively for use within a learning activity, as well as examine and evaluate critically” (Brush & Saye, 2009; Lee, 2008, p. 48). Prior to implementation, students should be presented with examples of quality education blogs (see figure 1) as well as scholarly work (peer reviewed academic articles and reports). For the blogs teacher candidates would create, it would be ideal for their work to fall somewhere in between these two formats: traditional blogging supported by scholarly resources.

Students also need clear expectations from the instructor. The following descriptors could be used to describe the expectation for blogs of good quality:

- Free of misinformation (material contradictory of the educator prep program and/or professional literacy standards)
- Inclusive of diverse perspectives and various teaching strategies/materials
- Well-organized
- Visually appealing
- Contains useful information for other educators

It is suggested that the instructor also take part in modeling prior to students beginning their own blogs. Sharing videos related to blogging and

creation of themes, titles, and other features would provide even more structure for students.

In the final step, before blogs were officially created, the students shared a discussion post detailing which blogging website they would be using for their own live blog and why they chose that platform (Google sites, Edublogs, WordPress, etc.). The choices varied each semester, and from student to student, but many candidates were comfortable with using Edublogs (Insub, 2021) to create their blog site, as they felt that it had simple functionality, offered basic but meaningful features, and was easiest to navigate.

Literacy Blog Topics

The literacy course that utilized blogs also had built in outcomes related to reading, writing, lesson planning, and differentiation. Blog topics were chosen with intention and purpose. With what normally would have been a weekly reflection/discussion in a face-to-face class, the decision had to be made on how to continue to encourage and engage students in course learning objectives beyond utilizing a discussion board to write traditional reflection papers. The decision was made to personalize the learning experience; hence, four blog assignments were created and became a part of the course.

Through instructor-created prompts, the students wrote their blog posts based on the materials and resources shared by the professor of the course, as well as discussions that were conducted, and using resources they found through research. Below are examples of the topics that were used:

- **The Beginning/Getting Started:** This is the initial post in which the students introduce themselves, and they share why they are using the blog, and how they feel about creating a blog (see Figure 1).
- **The Physical Literacy Environment:** Students share key components of a

literacy rich classroom and share ideas for their own future classrooms.

- Literacy Lesson Planning: Students share their knowledge about literacy lesson planning and are also encouraged to share a memorable literacy lesson that they were a part of as a student in their K-12 years (see Figure 2).
- Diversity in Literacy: Students address diversity of resources in books and

lesson materials— from a racial, social, and cultural perspective, as well as using a variety of materials to differentiate due to learning needs.

Other possible topics that could be explored include literacy assessment, differentiation, digital literacies, word study, motivation, writing, the science of teaching reading, or any topic that allows students to question and think through various philosophies and ideas.

Figure 1

Beginning Blog Post Example

Blog Post #1- The Beginning



Introduction (1 paragraph): Share how you are feeling about creating a blog related to literacy education.

Body (1-2 paragraphs): Share what you hope to learn before you begin teaching in your own classroom (whatever subject you will be teaching—math, science, social students, etc.)

Close it out (1 paragraph): WITHOUT surfing the internet to find the perfect answer... What do you think are three key elements that are needed to have an ideal and effective literacy classroom setting? (We will see how your thinking shifts throughout the semester)

Figure 2

Literacy Lesson Planning Blog Example

Blog Post #3- Literacy Lesson Planning



This blog post should be in two separate parts. The parts are described below.

Section I: Describe the most memorable ELAR/English/Literacy lesson that you have ever experienced (can be at any academic level). Discuss things such as the grade level, the experience in that class, the activity itself, and what made the activity special. (1-2 paragraphs)

Section II: Discuss 2-3 important tips that you feel people like yourself would benefit from in literacy lesson planning (Ex. Preservice teachers--those who are just beginning with writing lesson plans). You can use online resources to assist you, or any resources you have been provided with in the course. However, if you use words other than your own, PLEASE give credit and cite your sources at the end of your post. (1-2 paragraphs)

Preservice Teachers' Reactions

This process took place over two semesters, and each time there were students who were comfortable with the process and using technology, and others who had little knowledge of blogging. Some preservice teachers were very hesitant about taking on the assignments and sharing their knowledge and opinions with the world, but through discussions about the blogs, they shared that they were excited to be able to do something new, something they had not done in other courses before.

Some students' blogs were more elaborate (they contained photos, visuals/charts, and videos), while some only met the minimum requirements (answering the questions and length requirements on the prompts). There were even a couple of candidates who planned to use their blog long term. They pulled content from other courses and created a full site that featured

reflections and resources from all their courses in the university's education program.

Future Application of Classroom Blogs for Preservice Teachers

Blogging in this course was curated with more intention than reflection and regurgitation of course content. The creation of a blog website for preservice teachers was something to which they can later refer when they are in service teachers, as well as continuing to add content to the blog website and using it as a digital portfolio. The format not only could be used in literacy courses but could span to other courses and subjects in the department or campus as well.

Reflecting on Blogs in a Literacy Course

Using blogs with teacher candidates proved to be rewarding, and it opened the door for more conversations about literacy and technology as

well as the process of teaching in general. Getting into the minds of preservice educators was exactly what was needed during such a turbulent time. It improved the rigor of the course, and it gave authentic insight to who the students were, where they want to be, and it allowed them to begin to close the gaps that preservice teachers often experience between theory and practice.

With the incorporation of blog posts as assignments, teacher candidates were engaged and actively formulating ideas about the process of literacy education. They used their own perspectives and materials presented to them from their professor to articulate topics that were

challenging yet meaningful. They were also able to view their peers' blogs and have conversations peer to peer about concepts new to them. These are skills that will be valuable for an educator. Inservice teachers should be using research-based resources and strategies, as well as their own prior experiences with teaching and learning to improve and shape their classrooms. What started as a challenge due to the pandemic for students and their professor ended up giving them an additional set of educational technology skills and reflective documentation of their journey to become an educator.

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