

In their Own Words: Using First-Year Teacher Blogs to Prepare Preservice Educators

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DOI: 10.12735/ier.v3i2p01

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12735/ier.v3i2p01>

Abstract

Teacher-preparation programs strive to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and to prepare preservice teachers for the challenges and realities of the classroom. As budgets tighten and the alternative and online preparation of teachers becomes more common, field experiences in classrooms are increasingly limited. Creatively bridging the gap between theory and practice using teacher-created blogs provides preservice teachers the opportunity to gain insight into the challenges and life of teachers as well as the chance to reflect and make connections between coursework and their future profession. Although preservice teachers are often required to create blogs, little attention has been given the use of teacher blogs as a part of course readings and discussions, or as a supplement or replacement for field experiences. The purpose of the present study was to first explore the impact first-year teacher blogs had on pre-service teacher perceptions of the classroom, and then to determine if reading, analyzing and reflecting on the blogs impact how students perceive the applicability and utility of course content. Participants were 58 undergraduate preservice teachers seeking initial certification and enrolled in an educational psychology course at the regional campus of a public midwestern university in the United States. Results indicated that the teacher-created blogs impacted preservice teacher reflection and refinement of the realities of the classroom, and that reading teacher accounts via blogs facilitated realistic expectations of the challenges facing novice teachers. The finding may prove useful in that utilizing blogs may be helpful in situations when courses are on-line, or do not include the recommended opportunity for practical classroom interaction (Cheng & Tang, 2008).

Keywords: blogs, preservice teachers, theory to practice, teacher preparation, field experience

Abbreviation: Institutional Review Board (IRB)

1. Introduction

1.1. Field Experience is Crucial to Teacher Preparation

In an effort to prepare preservice teachers for the challenges they will face in the classroom, teacher education programs consistently seek better ways to bring the realities of the classroom into teacher preparation. Most teacher preparation programs require preservice teachers to participate in field experiences and community service in addition to student teaching. These experiences are intended

to assure future teachers have the experience, capabilities, and professional knowledge to be excellent educators, as well as to allow them to gain some appreciation of the challenges faced by teachers and the role theory plays in addressing those challenges. As budgets continue to shrink and alternative certification and on-line coursework become more common, teacher educators in courses, such as educational psychology, must necessarily consider alternative ways to help students gain insight into classrooms and the “life” of a teacher.

1.2. Teacher Induction

The induction and scaffolding of beginning teachers has become pivotal in the dialog relating to educational policy and reform. Increasingly the role of induction during the first years of teaching has come to be viewed as equally critical in the production of capable and highly effective classroom teachers. Schools provide the environments and colleagues assist or fail in helping new teachers adapt, teach and survive their first few years in the classroom. Lortie (1975) likened a new teacher to Robinson Crusoe and surviving alone by his or her own wits. Although increasingly schools and districts see the importance and effectiveness of putting in place induction and mentorship supports for new teachers, many first and second year teachers are left to discover the nature of being a teacher alone.

Although school-based induction programs effectively attempt to address elements, such as cultural transformation and awareness, early professional development and initial coping skills, including time and stress-management, these efforts are inherently temporary. In addition to considering school-based induction efforts, teacher preparation programs are positioned to continuously evaluate the tools and methods available and developed to bring the reality of teaching to the college classroom and engage those entering the profession in discussions, analyses and activities that foster an accurate perception of the nature of their activities as classroom teachers within the school community. Some of these tools include classroom observation, practica, case study assignments, and increasingly the use of technology to bridge the often wide gap between theory and practice.

1.3. Bridging Theory and Practice in Teacher Preparation

The induction of teachers necessarily must bridge the gap between theory and practice and must contend with the reality that for most new and preservice teachers, knowledge about teaching is strongly influenced by their own experiences as learners in educational settings. The twelve year ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975) and Comeaux’s (1991) identification that the past educational experiences of preservice teacher are stable and heavy influences indicate that teacher preparation must necessarily overcome or balance the experiential learning of all preservice teachers (p. 162). Additionally, Hoban (2002) highlights the complexity of teaching, and points out that it be viewed (and ideally then taught) through the lens of a systems approach. Myers and Simpson (1998) underscore all these elements in pointing out that educators learn and hone professional skills “by teaching and from teaching” (p. 58). When classroom practice is not available during induction, the personal theory that results from ‘apprenticeship’ may not provide future teachers with adequate insight into the complexity of the system, nor will it highlight the utility of the material being delivered in teacher preparation programs. If this is indeed a large part of the framework of preservice teachers, then highlighting the contexts and processes by which teachers use knowledge in reflective and adaptive ways can be accomplished through field-based experiences, but also might be assisted through “virtual” observation and contextualization via the analysis of teacher blogs in teacher education coursework.

1.4. The Role of Technology and Blogs in Teacher Preparation

Using asynchronous learning environments creatively could assist teacher education programs in helping preservice teachers avoid relying on apprenticeship. Teacher preparation courses, such as

educational psychology, have begun using social networking sites and blogs to facilitate teaching and learning, commonly asking students to author blogs and to become participants in social networking environments related to topics, such as child development, classroom management, and lesson planning (Domine, 2012; Paulus & Roberts, 2006; Reupert & Dalgarno, 2011). Since their appearance in the early 1990s (Matheson, 2004), blogs, or dynamic on-line journaling allows the creator to continuously update content and focus, while allowing the audience to offer feedback. Pascu (2008) estimated that 100,000 blogs are created daily, and with that growth has come increased specialization (Brescia Jr. & Miller, 2006). As noted by Arnold and Paulus (2010) as well as Fulk (1993), technology, such as simulations, social networking and blogs, can (and should) be “interpreted in multiple and perhaps conflicting ways” (p. 922). Courses, such as educational psychology, which incorporate field experiences, case studies, and simulations can provide an environment in which the creative use of technology could facilitate active and reflective professional learning in the tradition of a constructivist perspective (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Dykes & Schwier, 2003; Schön, 1987) as well as bridging theory and practice.

Blogs or online diaries of teachers and educators are one of the many genres available via open-access sources. As a part of course objectives, educational psychology and other teacher preparation courses often include an introduction to the profession of teaching, the “life” of a teacher, and “theory to practice” opportunities. Blogs provide an available and accessible way in which to bring the experiences and lives of teachers to the college classroom (Glass & Spiegelman, 2008). In addition, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (1999) point out, the use of virtual spaces, such as blogs, essentially extend the learning space and time, increasing the opportunities for interaction with content, and reflection. Educational psychology instructors are keenly aware that it is important to prepare preservice teachers for the realities of teaching and to help students make the connection between theory and the reality of the classroom (Deemer, 2009; Faircloth, He, & Higgins, 2011; Jin, 2005). By incorporating reading and analysis of teacher-created blogs, particularly the blogs of first-year or “beginning” teachers, teacher-educators might facilitate an even greater appreciation of the profession of teaching and the challenges and rewards that come with the “life” of a teacher. By reading and discussing blogged accounts of the experiences of new teachers and scaffolding student reflection on those blogs, courses, such as educational psychology, could have another tool to help preservice teachers understand the profession, make connections across content, and interact with actual classroom situations through this virtual medium.

Preservice education courses use tools, such as field experiences, case studies, and most recently simulations, to expose preservice educators to the “real world” of teaching and to link “theory to practice.” Although these avenues serve students in preparing them for working in schools, they also have elements that are inherently limiting in the preparation of educators. As Bower, Klecka, and Silva (2010) point out, field experiences, commonly associated with courses such as educational psychology, have rightly become viewed as critical in the preparation of high-quality educators (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005). With the increase in post-degree certification, K-12 budgetary constraints, as well as on-line and alternative certification options, however, traditional field experiences opportunities may be difficult to provide as a part of courses where they could be beneficial (Cheng & Tang, 2008).

When it is not possible for preservice teachers to participate in a classroom field experience, interacting with teacher blogs in combination with other tools, such as case studies or simulations, may assist in constructing a learning environment that assists in bridging theory to practice for novice teachers. By working with the accounts of experiences of practicing teachers provided in blogs, teacher preparation programs might help students gain perspective and a measure of experience with situations encountered by new teachers. When field experiences remain part of a course experience, preservice teachers are most often observing different teachers, content areas and grade levels. Although the differences in the classrooms being observed provide variety in terms of

in class discussion, teachers being observed may be guarded in their actions and all that is observed is filtered through the lens of the student observing. By using blogs in addition to field work, teacher educators are able to have students read an identical teacher account and then reflect on the teacher's actions, reactions, and the relationship of the events to what is being studied in the class. Although the objectivity of the blog is not assured, the personal nature of blogged accounts offer what may be a less artificial view of the classroom, especially as it allows preservice teachers to read the thoughts and reflections of practicing teachers as a part of induction into the field.

Blogs differ substantially from the use of the traditional case study, in which the entire class reads the account of a classroom-based problem or in some cases views a video clip of a classroom and teacher, and then discusses the events and relevance to course material. Although case studies to provide a uniform observational or analytical opportunity, they do not inherently illustrate reflection into the process. Training teachers to be reflective professionals has been increasingly seen as critical especially in relation to novice teacher experiences in the classroom (Deng & Yuen, 2011; Stiler & Philleo 2003). Case studies, whether viewed or read, also tend to be antiseptic in nature. They provide targeted examples corresponding with the construct being discussed in the class, and often have specific "answers" provided in relation to the situation being portrayed. The reality of the classroom and teaching, however, is that multiple and complex problems arise simultaneously, and the perception that there is a "right" answer is erroneous. Blogs provide a supplement in that they provide raw and unstructured accounts and insights into teaching and the classroom environment. In a case study, preservice teachers can reflect together with an instructor, speculating on the impact a specific event or condition had on a first-year teacher, but blogs allow the true impact and affect to be known and discussed.

As Dotger (2011) points out, simulated interaction methodology may also provide a way in which to assist preservice teachers in transitioning from "preparation to practice" during induction. In considering the "core practices of teaching" as discussed by Grossman and McDonald (2008), the importance of assessing student work and cooperating with colleagues is often missed by preservice teachers who do not appreciate the importance of these elements until they are in their own classrooms. Simulations, such as what is described by Dotger, are indeed one response to what he describes as a "call to embed pedagogies of enactment" (p. 133). Simulations indeed involve the enactment and interaction that create the "pedagogical bridge" between theory and practice (p. 144); however, as Dotger (2011) points out, complex and well-planned learning simulations (Preece, 2000; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) may be difficult to implement in larger courses or in shortened semesters and do not create a community of learners. By using blogs created by teachers, especially those new to the profession, students can be guided through the unscripted posted teacher reflections relating to complex situations, such as interactions with families or the inclusion of children with disabilities. Guided use of teacher blogs creates an opportunity for teacher preparation courses to present the reality of the classroom while guiding the application of theory to practice.

1.5. Teacher Blogs in Education Coursework

Much of the literature relating to preservice teacher learning and reflection using blogs has been focused on the students creating blogs as a part of the course requirements. It may be possible, though, to also use existing publically available blogs as a resource to enhance student learning in courses, such as educational psychology courses. Assigning blogs allows students to read the uncensored writings of new or first-year teachers who are themselves reflecting, providing an opportunity for the reader to gain insight not only into the events within the classroom, but also into the effect these events had on the teacher. Through blogs, preservice teachers are able to read, sometimes in rather raw language, about the effect events in the classroom have on the teacher, and the thought processes of a teacher in dealing with a given situation. This study sought to explore the use of teacher-created blogs as a source of reflection and discussion in an educational psychology class. The study was guided by two general questions:

1. Are blogs created by novice teachers effective tools in teaching preservice teachers about the challenges and experiences of teaching?
2. Does reading, analyzing and reflecting on the blogs impact how preservice teachers reflect on course content and future challenges as a professional?

The research design for this preliminary study allowed these two questions to be addressed through the consideration of the impact of the use of blogs within the context of a course that does not have a field experience component but stresses the “research to practice” of theoretical constructs. Exploring the impact of teacher blogs on preservice teachers in a 300-level educational psychology course also allowed feedback from students who had not yet taken many field-based practicum courses and, therefore, were less likely to have discussed the challenges of teaching with practicing teachers. Students self-selected enrollment in the course and sections, and the use of this convenience sample limits generalizability but assures that the make-up of the course represents the enrollment of the teacher preparation program as a whole.

2. Methods

2.1. Context and Participants

This study was conducted on the regional metropolitan campus of a state university in the midwestern United States, and involved two sections of a 15-week 3 credit required educational psychology course with 58 enrolled students (46 females and 12 males). Taught in sequential fall semesters, the course material included learning theory, instructional design, cognition, memory, and classroom management. Students enrolled in both sections ranged in age from 20 to 42 years, were of at least junior standing, and self-identified as African-American, Latina, Middle Eastern, White and Southeast Asian. Participant written responses to the reflective writing prompts provided the data for this study, and all procedures were approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB). Guided by Kong and Fitch (2002/2003) students completed preplanned writing prompts with an open-ended structure to encourage “personal, creative and critical responses” as well as to guide small group and in-class discussions (p. 353).

2.2. Procedures

Brownstein and Klein (2006) pointed out that sharing data, reflecting, and constructing knowledge is a part of the experience of being a student. To that end, students read and analyzed blogs over a four-week period, immediately preceding the start of the section of the course on classroom management. Before the initial phase of the work with blogs, students were asked to write a response to the prompt “What do expect to be your greatest challenges during your first year of teaching?” After responding to the prompt, students used what they had written to scaffold their participation in an in-class discussion about expectations and challenges. Students shared their responses to the prompts with their fellow students before submitting their individual responses (Prompt one). Individual responses provided the first data regarding student expectations and perceptions of likely challenges. The class then explored blogs as a medium together, and discussed the blogs and the insights they offered into the challenges of a classroom from the perspective of a new teacher.

The second phase of the use of blogs took place during class meetings and required students to select and completely read one blog from a list provided that was focused on their content or certification area before attending class, and to draft a response to the prompt “What similarities and/or differences do you see between your expected challenges and the challenges discussed by the first-year teacher in the blog? (Prompt two).” To make the activity more targeted, students brought their draft response to class and worked in small groups by certification level to discuss their

individual responses, create a synthesized group response, and reported out as a part of whole-class discussion. This approach allowed students to discuss blog content with their peers, including teacher experiences and challenges, the demands and duties placed on new teachers, and their personal expectations. Small group and whole group discussion did not focus on content delivery, but targeted the structure, schedule, and challenges faced by teachers at different grade-levels and content areas.

At the conclusion of the course, students responded to the reflective writing prompt (Prompt three): “After your work this semester, please identify and discuss a significant challenge you feel you might face in the first year of teaching of your grade and content level, and comment on how you might address that challenge using material covered in this course.” Students had five days to create a response to this prompt, and were instructed that they were free to use any material or activity from the course in their response to the prompt. Responses to this prompt provided data for analysis of students’ use or reflection on the blog activities as a part of the course, use of the blogs or language referring to the blogs and how the blogs may have impacted student perceptions regarding the applicability of course material in the first year of teaching.

2.3. Analysis

First, to assess the impact and utility of the blog activities on the preservice teachers’ perceptions about the challenges of teachers and on their reflection on course content, I used multiple techniques for analysis so as to maintain rigor in the qualitative research process. During analysis, I employed multiple data sources and levels of analysis (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout the blog activities and the analysis of student writing, I maintained a research journal with notes and memos to record my analysis processes and notes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72) as well as to capture classroom and group discussion, individual informal conversations and E-Mail correspondences with students regarding the blog activities (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Merriam, 1998).

Second, I analyzed student written responses using grounded theory to guide multi-staged analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, I collected the primary data sources (student responses to the three prompts) and used a case record format (Patton, 2002) to conduct word-by-word and line-by-line open-coding that resulted in codes and categories for each prompt. This process was also used to highlight themes that captured the ways in which blogs impacted preservice teacher concepts of first-year teaching challenges and the utility of course material. For example, several themes regarding preservice teacher expectations of first-year challenges became clear, including two levels of external concern (content-related challenges and pedagogical challenges) and one internally-oriented concern (personal challenges or perceived weakness in personality or ability). In order to consider how student perceptions were impacted, I used the display method (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) to create tables illustrating themes and categories, as well as to highlight patterns. I also conducted open-coding on notes from in-class discussion and all entries in my research journal, and then triangulated student written reflection with in-class discussion to assure that all themes and student perspectives had been represented.

Third, the themes and categories from the display method tables were used to verify and explicate student responses to the student use of blogs when possible, as well as to illustrate any impact the use of blogs might have had on student perceptions regarding the relevance of the course to their likely challenges as a teacher. Use of the themes generated in response to prompts one and two were not all apparent in prompt three; however, those themes that appeared in prompt three were themes that were underscored by teachers in the blogs read and analyzed, and did not include themes generated only by the preservice teachers. Of note, the theme of personal challenge or perceived weakness may not appear in prompt three in part because the prompt asked students to employ theory and material from class in considering first-year challenges.

3. Results

Analysis of the preservice teacher responses to writing prompts and resulting themes suggested that reading and analyzing blogs assisted in developing an understanding of real-world teaching challenges. Additionally, through reading and analysis of first-year teacher blogs, students regarded course content as “valuable” or “useful” in relation to the experiences documented in the blog.

3.1. Effectiveness of the Blogs

Using guided analysis and display method, preservice teachers enrolled in the course identified three primary thematic areas as “challenges” during their first year of teaching. The coded thematic groupings of comments in Table 1 document the challenges preservice teachers included in responses to Prompt 1 that asked “What do expect to be your greatest challenges during your first year of teaching.” Many students included more than one of the themes in their response.

Table 1. Prompt 1 themes

Thematic grouping codes	Examples	Frequency of theme in student work (n=58)
Content Challenges (External - Experience)	Don't know material (No opportunity to learn)	26 (45%)
	Cannot learn material quickly enough	
	Cannot understand material I need to teach	
	Don't have enough background knowledge of different subjects	
Pedagogical Challenges (External - Readiness / Effectiveness)	Will be asked to teach something unfamiliar	57 (97%)
	Not able to plan quickly enough	
	Too much material and not enough time	
	Asked to teach in a way that is unfamiliar	
	Students lack motivation	
	Unable to maintain order in classroom	
Personal Challenges (Internal - Personal characteristic weaknesses)	Meeting needs of learners with special needs	38 (66%)
	Class too large to be effective	
	Amount of time necessary to prepare	
	Maintaining family life	
	Making new friends	
	Managing stress	
	Not ready to be a teacher	
	Not comfortable speaking in front of students	

These initial reflections created by preservice teachers completed before working with blogs illustrate that most of these preservice teachers (97%) imagine that at least one of their greatest challenges will be pedagogical, as well as content-driven (45%). The prevalence of these references reflects student worry regarding competencies relating to instruction and instructional strategy and planning. Almost all students (99%) included at least one mention of a concern or challenge relating to either the teaching of material (Content challenge) or the management of the learning process (Pedagogical).

In phase-two, preservice teachers read a first-year teacher's blog corresponding to their

certification or content area and drafted a response to the prompt (prompt two) “What similarities and/or differences do you see between your expected challenges and the challenges discussed by the first-year teacher in the blog?” Individual responses to this prompt were submitted and guided analysis and display was used to highlight the most prevalent similarities and differences between the challenges expected by preservice teachers and those experienced by first-year teachers. Preservice teachers noted the differences between their expectations and the realities reflected in the blogs of first-year teachers, and their analysis highlighted thematic areas of both similarities and of differences. Similarities in the expected challenges of preservice and first-year teachers clustered in three thematic groups evident in Table 2: processes and materials; differentiation and student differences, and work-life balance.

Table 2. Prompt 2 themes

Student-identified similarities in first-year teacher blogs and preservice teacher reflection	Challenge	Theme
	Classroom management Planning and grading Classroom materials	Processes and materials
	Students with disabilities Understanding cultures of students	Differentiation and student differences
	Personal stress	Work-life balance
Student-identified differences between first-year teacher blogs and preservice teacher reflection		
Identified by first-year teachers and not preservice teachers	School routine, activities and rules Understanding school district / politics Additional duties and responsibilities	School structures, context and activities
Identified by preservice teachers but not first-year teachers	Getting to know fellow teachers Not being accepted by other teachers Working as part of a teaching team or pod	Professional relationships

The expected challenges of preservice teachers not evident in the blogs of first-year teachers also showed a thematic cluster on school structures, context and activities. Challenges identified by first-year teachers but not by preservice teachers focused almost exclusively on school structures, context and activities. Both these disconnects focus on the settings, structures and relationship dynamics within schools and educational settings. Preservice educators focused concern on issues relating to relationships and partnerships necessary for near success within their career. Personal relationships, partnerships and acceptance by peers were the consistent concerns of preservice

teachers while structural issues, politics and the management of workload resonate as concerns for teachers during their first year in the classroom.

3.2. Impact on Preservice Teacher Learning

In order to explore the larger impact of blogs on preservice teacher learning within the course, students wrote a response to the prompt: “After your work this semester, please identify and discuss a significant challenge you feel you might face in the first year of teaching of your grade and content level, and comment on how you might address that challenge using material covered in this course.” Students were free to use any material or activity from the course in their response to the prompt. Responses to this prompt provided data for analysis as regards student utility and application of the first-year teacher blogs in their synthesis of the constructs and theories presented during the semester. Analysis highlighted not only the rate of reference to the blog activities in response to the prompt, but the nature and application of the blog content in creating a linkage between course material and the reality of the classroom.

These final written reflections created by students in the course contained substantial and substantive references to the blog activities and content detailed in Table 3. The blogs were mentioned in 48 of the 58 the written responses (83%). Of the 48 reflections that contained reference to the blog activities, 45 discussed specific elements of the blog content in relation to course content and their future classroom activities (94%), and 3 noted the blog activities in passing with no reference to specifics regarding the activities or blog content.

Table 3. Prompt 3 themes

Theme Identified	Specific focus	Identified by both preservice and first-year teachers as challenge	Not originally identified by preservice teachers as a challenge	Example	Preservice teacher use in writing*
Processes and materials	Classroom management				36
	Inadequate Resources	×			
	Planning and Grading				
Work-life balance	Personal stress	×			17
Differentiation and student differences	Student characteristics	×			11
School structures, context and activities	School routine				14
	Understanding school rules		×		

*Students referred to multiple blog themes within responses, counts are greater than n=48

When identifying and discussing teacher challenges in response to this writing prompt, the 48 students who used the blog content or themes as part of their response focused on challenges that had been identified by both the first-year teachers and the preservice teachers: processes and materials (36), work-life balance (17) and differentiation and student differences (11). Notably, however, 14 students discussed a challenge originally only identified in the first-year teacher blogs and not by the preservice teachers (school structures, context and activities), and no students discussed challenges that had been identified only by preservice teachers. Additionally, despite originally being discussed only as a challenge by first-year teachers in blogs, preservice teachers discussed it in the written response more frequently than differentiation and student differences.

4. Discussion

The findings and themes highlighted through the analysis of the three prompts illustrate that the use of blogs impacted preservice teacher reflection and refinement of their expectations of the challenges faced by a new teacher. The finding may prove useful in that utilizing blogs may be helpful in situations when courses are on-line, or do not include the recommended opportunity for practical classroom interaction (Cheng & Tang, 2008). Additionally, reading, analyzing and reflecting on the blogs created by first-year teachers provided an additional way to illustrate the utility of course content and theory. It is important to note that this exploratory study used a small convenience sample at a single university, and that the characteristics of this population may not generalize despite being demographically diverse.

No barriers to implementation of the use of blogs occurred; however, future work in relation to the use of teacher blogs should consider the different types of discourse and levels of detail as well as potentially the accuracy of the blogs used in this manner, as quality could become a concern and impact effectiveness and fidelity. Although this study indicates that using blogs to explore many of the field-based realities is effective, this initial study at one university in a single course limits generalizability. Current work expands the use of blogs to other teacher preparation course experiences, and monitoring impact in different class settings is critical. Additionally, this study used a small convenience sample, and larger studies on multiple campuses will create a more accurate view of the impact of blogs in preservice teacher preparation.

Responses to prompt one highlighted the existing beliefs of preservice teachers regarding their most likely challenges. The clear and dominant concern of these teacher education students was pedagogical (97%), including issues relating to classroom management, student motivation and teaching style/planning. The related concerns voiced regarding content further underscores the worries of preservice teachers: Will I know enough, and will I be able to teach what I know effectively? Preservice teacher responses to prompt one did not include many challenges that remain largely unseen until a preservice teacher enters a classroom setting, including school routine, policy, politics and professional relationships. The theme of the internal or personal challenge evident in this response continued in prompts two and three, but became less dominant perhaps because these concerns became subsumed by other challenges voiced in the blogs in relation to issues, such as stress and relationships. The first-year teacher blogs and the preservice teacher reflections did not focus on teaching “tips” as noted by Reupert and Dalgarno (2011), but were vehicles for analysis and reflection. The fact that the blogs and the students using them were not superficial presents a contradiction to the 2011 findings and highlights the utility of blogs as a vehicle for reflection.

In responding to prompt two, preservice teachers noted the differences between their expectations and the realities reflected in the blogs of first-year teachers. Similarities in the expected challenges of preservice and first-year teachers clustered in three thematic groups: processes and materials, differentiation and student differences, and work-life balance. The

differences between the challenges identified by the preservice and the first-year teachers centered on the organization, structure, the context of teacher duties and the relationships critical to successful teaching. Concerns regarding personal relationships, partnerships and acceptance by peers are a consistent focus of preservice teachers, highlighting hypothetical relationships between known “players” within school setting. First-year teacher-identified challenges in their blogs centered on structural issues, politics and the management teacher responsibilities - essentially the complex system described by Hoban (2002). The blogs, then, can provide a glimpse into the nuance of the complex system and allow preservice teachers to compare their ‘apprenticeship’ (Lortie, 1975) experience as learners with the challenges documented by first-year teachers as they work within this complex system.

Prompt three asked preservice teachers to identify and discuss a significant challenge they might face in the first year of teaching and how that challenge might be addressed using the course material. Although the use of the blogs and the associated activities was not specified, 83% of students used a reference to a blog at least once in their written response, and the majority used examples and challenges identified by both the first-year teachers and the preservice teachers, including processes and materials, work-life balance and student differences. Of the 48 students, 14 (30%) discussed issues only identified in the first-year teacher blogs and not by the preservice teachers, and no student discussed challenges identified only by preservice teachers. Preservice teacher use and adoption of the challenges discussed by the first-year teachers hints at the utility of the experiential accounts of practicing teachers on tempering the ‘apprenticeship’ of personal experience (Lortie, 1975), and also the influence of the presentation of the complex systems approach by Hoban (2002). Student responses required notation of theory; importantly here, students attached theoretical knowledge and concepts, such as operant conditioning, motivation theory, and student attributions to real-world challenges as voiced by the teachers creating the blogs. This improved theory to practice brings life to a “case study” format, and allows preservice teachers a longitudinal nuanced view of the challenges of beginning teachers.

Blogs are accessible, affordable and unedited, and give preservice teachers a view of the initial years of teaching in a way that books about initial teaching experiences cannot. Preservice teachers are told of the importance of classroom management, of preparation and time management, and of the utility of theory, but through assigning first-year teacher blogs, future teachers have the opportunity to examine their experiential beliefs about the profession and its challenges. Additionally, the ability of teacher education students to interact with practicing teachers through blogs in creating context for the applicability of the theory and content presented within the course. Simulations, case studies and field placements create the “pedagogical bridge” (Dotger, p. 144); however, the use of first-year teacher blogs may also provide a way to link theory to practice and support developing teacher discussions and community.

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