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Diane R. Collier

Brock University, dcollier@brocku.ca

Tiffany L. Gallagher

Brock University, tiffany.gallagher@brocku.ca

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Cover Page Footnote

We acknowledge the generosity of our school board partners and teacher candidates in the creation of the professional development project described here.

Blogging in Elementary Classrooms: Mentoring Teacher Candidates' to Use Formative Writing Assessment and Connect Theory to Practice

Diane R. Collier
Tiffany L. Gallagher
Brock University

Writing, whether we are children or adults, is always part of a dialogue, between ourselves and the audiences we imagine (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). When new teachers engage with students' writing they need to develop ways to respond, mentor, and inspire them (Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf, 2004). Learning to respond in ways that honour students' voices, and help to inspire students' writing, takes careful intention and time to think (Collier, 2016). However, educators in many contexts, and at all grade levels often express uncertainty around the teaching of writing (Cremin, 2006; Hodges, Wright & McTigue, 2019; West, 2014) especially in ways that reflect the multimodal ways in which contemporary learners actually write to communicate.

In this paper we explore pre-service teachers' perspectives about connecting theory and practice through the application of formative assessment to improve students' writing, here in the form of a class blog. In Canada, like in many English-speaking countries in the Global North, teacher education is in a state of flux (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015b; Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015; Scales et al., 2017). There are pressures to respond to mandated student assessments in literacy and numeracy, and these are often in contrast to the needs of 21st century learners. Teacher education is trying to ready pre-service teachers to respond to these pressures (Hodges et al., 2019; Peterson, McClay, & Main, 2011). We, the co-authors of this paper are teacher educators, who have been seeking ways to prepare elementary teachers for contemporary literacy teaching and how to design teacher

education courses that support confidence in beginning teachers and as well as a sense of preparedness. We have worked together for the past eight years, along with colleagues, to re-design elementary language and literacy teacher education in our university by creating a program that combines current research, theory and practice for the literacy education of 5-12-year-old children. Our pre-service teachers repeatedly express that they desire opportunities to perform like real teachers with real children, rather than what they view as simulations (e.g., case studies, analysis of decontextualized work samples). In response, we have developed course assignments that ask pre-service teachers to engage in literacy teaching and assessment with the students that they encounter in their practicum and observational days.

This paper focuses on an additional practice-based opportunity that is part of a longstanding collaboration between our university and a local school district. This collaboration connected pre-service teachers with in-service classroom teachers (referred to as “teachers”), under the guidance of school district curriculum leaders, and provided professional development and one-on-one mentoring. These activities occurred while teachers and pre-service teachers provided formative assessment to elementary students on their blogging/writing assignments. Reflecting on this professional learning, and our focus group sessions with the pre-service teachers, we were interested in thinking about how this intensive opportunity influenced pre-service teachers’ thoughts about writing instruction, their students’ writing skills, and their future teaching selves. In addition, because the students were writing using a blogging platform, we also wondered what this form offers or limits in terms of pre-service teachers’ experience providing formative feedback. Is there something innovative here that was not present in paper-based offline written forms of communication? As teacher educators we wondered about the power of this kind of experience to build teacher self-efficacy (Gallagher, 2020) and fluency in giving student feedback, with a goal of supporting young writers. Accordingly, our research question was distilled to: What are the professional learning experiences of pre-service teachers mentored by in-service teachers in the formative assessment of student writing?

Connecting Theory and Practice for Writing Teachers

Many educational researchers have investigated which models or approaches in pre-service teacher education might be most effective to develop reflective practitioners. Cochran-Smith and her team completed an extensive and international review of research on teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015a, 2015b). In two comprehensive articles they discuss their insights, the challenges of accountability of teacher education programs to governmental bodies, the lack of research about how to best train pre-service teachers, the need for

research on how the learning of children coincides with (or not) the learning of pre-service teachers, and, also, the ways in which pre-service teachers transfer ideas and theories from their own education into their teaching practice.

Often teacher educators incur challenges transferring ideas (often seen as lofty or impractical) to practice as they interact with their pre-service teachers. This dilemma is indeed common in our own university teaching experiences. School-university partnerships can help to bridge the divide between theory and practice, although the form of these partnerships and the degree of co-construction or exchange of ideas, varies widely (Burroughs et al., 2020; Guillen & Zeichner, 2018). In research with both pre-service teachers and classroom teachers, it is important for the researchers to listen closely to the contributions of the educators, and try to position themselves as learners, open to thinking about problems of practice in new ways (Paran, 2017). All educators are in the process of developing personal theories of practice, and these theories are constantly evolving as teachers plan, implement, change and reflect (Schutz & Hoffman, 2017).

Most teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and classroom teachers agree that hands-on or experiential learning is crucial to success (Waddell, Robinson, & Wehbi, 2018). Yet, the most effective experiential experiences are not clear; perhaps individualized practicum, aligned with personal philosophies and with room for some choice and control over what is done (Noonan, 2019) is the way forward in teacher education? As illustration, after following thirteen new teachers for two years, Ord and Nuttall (2016) proposed that it may be helpful to think of the doing as ‘embodied’ and the learning for educators happens in the body when they try something out. In the current context where we work with pre-service teachers, they often go from their university classrooms quickly into whole-class teaching, with some scaffolded tasks along the way. The professional learning opportunity offered and described herein, fills in the gap between initial teacher education and in-service practice and it offers a slowed-down focus on how to use and appreciate formative assessment in writing instruction.

Formative Assessment in Writing Instruction

Most researchers and leaders in the teaching of writing agree that students need less general feedback and more focused and individualized feedback (Calkins, 1994; Goh, 2017; Paran, 2017; Stover, Yearta, & Harris, 2016). Again, learning to do this kind of assessment well can be a challenge for educators at all levels and with varying years of experience (Deneen & Brown, 2016; Mitton-Kukner & Orr, 2014). Formative assessment has been implemented in early years settings as pedagogical documentation, and these processes have been extended and specified for classroom teachers by Goodman and others (Goodman, 1978; Hedges, 2015; Kuby, Rucker & Kirchhofer, 2015; Owocki & Goodman, 2002). With a focus on

formative assessment, also comes an inherent and valuable focus on the writing processes (Collier, 2016; Koutsoftas, 2018).. A focus on process keeps learning, rather than evaluating in standardized ways, at the forefront of effective instruction (Collier, 2017).

Over the last decade, formative assessment has been espoused as an effective practice for educators in the province where this study took place (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2016; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Yum & Lian, 2020), however, educators still seek effective ways to do formative assessment in writing instruction (Yan & Cheng, 2015). In their research, Dix and Bam (2016) investigated young writers working with pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers emphasized the importance of specific feedback but also the dialogic element of writing and feedback, which should be viewed as a conversation between student and teacher, rather than a one-way directive from teacher to student. Previously, Dix (2006) also emphasized this need for an exchange between the teachers and students when students are engaged in revision. Making this idea more explicit, Riley, Riddell, Kidd, and Gavin (2018) have explained how feedback needs to be part of a broad application, where students give feedback to each other, teachers give feedback to students, and teachers give feedback to other teachers. This ecosystem of feedback makes the dialogic possibility more of a reality. In their study of elementary students and their teachers, success criteria (i.e., student-friendly descriptions of the attainment of learning goals) and modeling were integral to the instructional design (Riley et al., 2018). However, even with shorter and less intensive interventions or designs, writing and feedback processes have been enhanced. In another study of only two weeks duration, teachers and students were taught to use evaluative criteria for writing while engaging in collaborative review of their writing. Students' increased motivation, enhanced writing competencies and a sense of audience were reported by the teachers (Philippakos, 2017). Given that formative assessment in writing is valuable for students, it is worth supporting educators to develop their skills in this practice, as well as overall approaches to writing instruction.

The university-school district collaboration described in this paper was undertaken in the landscape of effective models of professional learning in formative assessment and writing, ways of connecting theory and practice for pre-service teachers, and the potential to use online tools, such as blogging, to enhance teacher feedback and increase student engagement, learning, and writing success.

Blogging as Writing and Assessment Tool

A number of studies (e.g., Catalano, 2015; Hew & Cheung, 2013; Nair et al., 2013) have looked at the potential of online tools such as blogging platforms to

engage students in writing, and to allow teachers and peers to engage in conversations with writers, as well offer feedback on writing as blog comments.

There are an abundance of studies of writing on blogs that have shown increased student engagement and growth in writing over time (Catalano, 2015; Chen, Liu, Shih, Wu, & Yuan, 2011; Ebrecht & Ku, 2015; Heath, 2013; Jordan, 2014; Young & Stover, 2015). Why? Students' writing voices are often enhanced as they feel confident in expressing their personal views and ideas (Chamberlain, 2017). Students enjoy the visual features and individualization of entries that most blogging platforms allow (Catalano, 2015). Also, the shortened time for revision (i.e., no need to rewrite by hand) is an incentive, as is the ability of students to research online and add to their content while writing. Teachers and students report increased collaboration in generating ideas and supporting the writing of others as well as a heightened sense of audience (Ebrecht & Ku, 2015).

In some cases, students also report understanding feedback better than they have previously, and this is particularly so when they are involved in giving feedback to others (Jordan, 2014). On occasion, students feel uncomfortable giving critical feedback to their peers (McGrail & Davis, 2014), and in some settings, both feedback and original postings are anonymous (Chen et al., 2011). For others, anonymity would defeat the accountability that is needed in online settings. Drexler and Fertig (2007) noted that as a function of providing feedback in blog platforms, differentiated instruction was facilitated and visual literacies were enhanced. The potential for differentiation and accessibility for students with exceptionalities was also mentioned by others (e.g., Albaugh, 2013). In some instances, more authentic audiences for blogging were developed. For instance, Zawilinski (2012) looked at two classes (first and fifth graders) who communicated via blogs and found that writing improved even more for the younger students, while collaboration was enhanced for the older students. The present study was premised on the work of Young and Stover (2015), who found that peer and teacher feedback significantly increased students' writing scores.

Studies of pre-service teachers working with student writers on blogs have found similar enhancements. Garza, Smith, and Boylan (2015), in a study of pre-service teachers who were blogging, noted similar benefits as above, but also recommended increased structure for reflective comments in order to encourage more critical examination of practices. Others have found the need to break down the task of blogging and commenting in an offline form using paper entries and comments to scaffold the online process (Lacina & Griffith, 2012) or to work in a combination of online and offline (Paroussi, 2014), which may be more amenable for teachers beginning this practice. In some studies of elementary children blogging, teachers had problems navigating the digital tool and missed the face-to-face interaction of conferencing with their students (Carver & Todd, 2016), and in

one Singapore study both teachers and students, writing essay assignments, preferred paper versions (Nair, Tay, & Koh, 2013).

For the most part, blogging seems to be both an incentivizing practice and one that can improve both teachers' potential for giving formative feedback and students' writing skills. Regardless, even with a range of Web 2.0 tools, Hew and Cheung (2013) point out that teaching with online tools requires more dialogic teaching and perhaps new pedagogies. Thus, writing pedagogies continue to matter, and, in some cases, hybrid approaches are effective. Dialogic approaches between teachers and students also seem key to developing new collaborative contexts for writing instruction.

With this in mind, we viewed the collaborative professional learning opportunity among school district teachers and pre-service teachers as an ideal research project to garner further understandings on how to connect theory and practice for both teachers and pre-service teachers while using blogging as writing and assessment tool with elementary students.

Method

Design of the professional learning research. Inspired by an article by Stover, Yearta, and Harris (2016), the teacher educators (Diane & Tiffany) were contacted by a school district in Southern Ontario to work together on digital applications, student writing and formative assessment. The two-year collaboration began from a mutual desire to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers, build school district capacity, share expertise amongst interested teachers, and advance local and provincial goals to enhance students' writing.

Stover et al. (2016) proposed a professional learning model, using digital tools (i.e., KidBlog) and ways of working with pre-service teacher-classroom teacher pairings. Their model was implemented in the form of a book club where teachers, pre-service teachers, and students read the same book and responded in writing to discussions that related to the book. Each pre-service teacher wrote formative assessment comments weekly and synchronously for four to six students and the teacher responded to the rest of the students' blog posts. The project featured here with pre-service teachers from our program and teachers and students from the local Southern Ontario school district emulated Stover et al.'s model.

Pre-service teachers attended professional learning sessions with classroom teachers facilitated by two school district consultants, about formative assessment and the use of blogging to improve student writing. Central to the purpose of the professional learning was that descriptive feedback can be a formative assessment tool to help students to improve their written expression. There were three of these sessions in each of the fall and winter semesters in both Years 1 and 2 of the project. In the first session, the classroom teachers and their pre-service teachers co-planned

for a 6-week writing instructional unit. In Year 1, this planning focused on engaging elementary and middle school students to blog their reading responses to a novel. In Year 2, the focus was cross-curricular and open-ended such that blogging was used to communicate about any topic within a unit of study. Then the teachers implemented these plans in their classrooms over the course of 6 weeks. Central to this was the use of KidBlog for their students to write responses to prompts; students were encouraged to respond to their peers' posts as well. The pre-service teachers provided formative feedback on the blog posts (of 4-6 students) with comments to elicit more elaboration or clarification of the message in the post; the teacher performed the same role with the remainder of the students in the class. The second professional learning session occurred mid-way through the semester and it was used as an opportunity for the classroom teachers and pre-service teachers to debrief about the unit and share student feedback. An additional six weeks of blogging took place based on refinements to the unit plans and both pre-service teachers and teachers continued to provide formative feedback. Then the third professional learning session was a consolidation and group sharing of experiences.

While there were many exciting elements and achievements as a function of the collaboration (see: Eaton, Zupancic, Collier & Gallagher, 2018), the portion of the project discussed here includes the reflections and insights of the pre-service teachers over the course of two years of the project. Accordingly, the research design utilized a general qualitative approach suited to naturalistic methods of inquiry (Yin, 2009). Using a collective case design (Creswell, 2014), this descriptive research involved documenting the shared experience of the participants as they engaged in the project together – this is justification for the relatively large number of participants that were involved over a prolonged period of time.

Participants. For each of the Years 1 and 2 of the study, a new group of pre-service teachers were recruited, however half of the teachers remained participants into Year 2. The experiences of teachers and the concurrent activities of the pre-service teachers are represented below.

Year 1	20 pre-service teachers	Fall: Students enrolled in introductory language arts methods course and internships once a week; Winter: Students enrolled in teaching practicum and taking other courses.
	12 teachers	More than 3 years teaching experience, taught Grades 1-8

Year 2	8 pre-service teachers	Fall: Students enrolled in other courses; Winter: Students enrolled in advanced language arts methods course and engaged in final practicum.
	6 teachers	More than 3 years teaching experience, taught Grades 1-8

Table 1. Experiences of teachers and pre-service teachers during research period

Data collection and analysis. The researchers recorded fieldnotes during all the professional learning sessions making observations and taking photos of the activities and interactions. Artifacts such as handouts and presentation slides were also gathered as the school district consultants facilitated the sessions. Data were collected according to the schedule below.

Year 1	Focus groups: 2 university researchers, school district facilitators, pre-service teachers	Mid-semester Fall Mid-semester Winter
	Field notes, photos, copies of artifacts	During 2 PD sessions
Year 2	Focus groups: 2 university researchers, school district facilitators, pre-service teachers	Mid-semester Fall Mid-semester Winter
	Field notes, photos, copies of artifacts	During 2 PD sessions

Table 2. Phases of data collection

During focus groups, pre-service teachers discussed their developing professional understanding of writing and formative assessment through the blogging platform. Each focus group (either in person or via video) involved eight to 15 pre-service teachers and occasionally the school district facilitator attended the sessions. Semi-structured questions were used during the focus groups as discussion prompts. Sample questions from the mid-session focus groups included questions such as: Can you tell a little about what you have done so far in this project? Can you make any connections with literacy teaching more broadly? Ending focus group sessions were framed by questions such as the following: How do you think children become better writers? What did you learn about yourself? About teaching? As the focus group process unfolded, questions may have been modified or posed in a different order, but the key issues represented by the questions were all included. Data were collected as audio recordings and fieldnotes during focus groups.

As well as research leaders, we were language arts instructors for some of the pre-service teachers during the research. It was possible that these dual pre-service teachers may have inhibited discussions to some degree. Each pre-service teacher completed an IRB-approved consent form that specified that course status would not be influenced by research participation.

All audio recordings of the focus group sessions were transcribed by a confidential, researcher-trained transcriptionist and then reviewed by both authors. For all triangulated data (fieldnotes, artifacts, focus group transcriptions), each of the authors followed the same data analysis process, separately. Firstly, data were read holistically, then codes related to the central research question were noted through an open coding process through colour highlighting, and these codes were then grouped into themes. We then met to discuss our respective themes and each of the researchers extracted representative examples from the data to exemplify their themes. The first four themes of five were generated separately by each of us and then the fifth theme was added after discussion. As an example of this thematic resolution, the fifth theme, “Connecting pre-service teachers’ academic and personal experiences with practice” was created out of our discussion about the reconciliation of pre-service teachers’ experience, course work and practicum as evidenced in their focus group conversations. As part of the analysis process, tables of key words and excerpts from transcripts were compiled, compared and contrasted (Schreier, 2014). In the section that follows we use quotations from participants that represent and illustrate our shared and common findings (Hatch, 2002) and also we rely on our experience in the field, as educators and researchers. We recognize our roles as interpreters here, and that the findings are influenced by our positioning as researchers and instructors and are also guided by the questions and insights that were interesting and relevant to us (Agee et al., 2011).

Findings

In response to the research question regarding how pre-service teachers experience professional development mentored by in-service teachings in the formative assessment of student writing, we found five general insights or themes generated from the data based on the pre-service teachers’ experiences and the connections they were able to make between theory and practice. These insights address the learnings of the pre-service teachers that are both explicit and implicit. These findings are clustered in themes related to: lines of communication and levels of collaboration; pedagogical approaches to blogging and writing; effective ways of enacting formative assessment in the blogging platform; student learning and

writing success through blogging, connecting pre-service teachers' academic and personal experiences with practice.

Lines of communication and levels of collaboration. On a practical level, the project was designed so that pre-service teachers worked with classroom teachers asynchronously. The pre-service teachers were often on a formalized practicum placement or taking courses at the same time as this extra opportunity. Pre-service teachers expressed the importance of communication with the classroom teacher throughout the project implementation and expressed some frustration their limited knowledge of daily classroom activities. Initially, some of the classroom teachers were apprehensive about their own abilities to guide assessment virtually. In most cases, the pre-service teachers were able to collaborate on the implementation plan during the initial meeting and planning, and this was a valuable opportunity that carried them throughout the practice of providing feedback.

...what made the difference for the students was how the teacher set up the success criteria, and they [students] thought, every time that they were writing, and I used the success criteria to give them feedback. So, I chose one that they did very strongly and one that they could improve on and that was the feedback... I think because that was so specific and so clear to them what they needed to do...made it clear for them on how they can improve their next one (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 2 Winter).

Pre-service teachers sometimes communicated via text messaging with their classroom teacher partners and, in these cases, felt connected with what was happening in the classroom. Some of the pre-service teachers visited the classroom to introduce themselves and meet the children at the beginning of the project. Those who were able to do this reported livelier connections and familiarity with the children who were posting in the blogging platform.

At times, when the classroom teacher made in-the-moment decisions to change the purpose of the blogging, this was confusing to the pre-service teachers, especially when they were not informed. The pre-service teachers could not always see how the progress of students unfolded after they gave feedback to the students (because they were not in the classrooms) or when the instructional foci changed. Communication was not always consistent between the classroom teachers and pre-service teachers; however, this could be seen as an opportunity for pre-service teachers to reach out to teachers, as a peer and colleague, and to request guidance and information.

Pre-service teachers emphasized the importance of clear expectations for writing (for the students) and assessment (for them) as a successful part of the collaborative experience.

Expectations were clear from the teacher that we were working with. The teacher that I worked with was also clear on what she wanted from me and, she gave me the success criteria and sample of a response that I would be making (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 2, Winter).

During the project we suggested that collaboration needs to be reciprocal with the classroom teachers leading, and we reminded pre-service teachers that they had a role to play as well. The transition from pre-service teacher to assuming the role of a classroom teacher is one that is challenging and sometimes ambiguous for pre-service teachers (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015b; Scales et al., 2017).

Pedagogical approaches to blogging and writing. As in any school or school district, and as in any teacher education classroom or program, the instructional pedagogies and teaching philosophies are diverse. Similarly, approaches to implementing the blogging feedback from the professional learning sessions were varied. In the initial planning session, as the classroom teachers were creating the lessons that would include blogging, the pre-service teachers noted how the classroom teachers were making decisions that were responsive to students' needs and prior knowledge/experience.

I know my teacher was saying that a few of her students were, showed real gains just from the simple fact that they were using a keyboard instead of pencil. They were able to get their thoughts out quicker and more in a flowing manner than they would have in other ways. So, I think that it differentiates instruction in that sense, that they can succeed with the tools given as opposed to only having one traditional way of working. (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 1 Winter Final).

The pre-service teachers noted that the classroom teachers viewed blogging as a platform to support the integration of curriculum and opportunities for their students to think critically about text and issues within the text and beyond teaching the mechanics of writing.

If they were great at answering the question and giving support from the text, then maybe they should be expanding and writing why that support from the text is important. I have been just trying to take them that extra

step further without overwhelming them – that has kind of been my strategy (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 1 Fall Mid-Semester).

During the focus group, pre-service teachers were not being evaluated by the university and they had more liberty to be evaluative of their mentor teachers' pedagogical decisions and practices than they might have in their program practicum setting. They reflected on the teachers' pedagogical decisions about assessing the students' journal writing and the students' writing about reading. By listening to each other's experiences, the pre-service teachers were also able to see the variety of approaches that teachers took, an important element of pre-service education. At the end of the project, the pre-service teachers recognized how the classroom teachers used descriptive feedback of the blog posts to drive pedagogy and to model for their students the peer review process. They recognized that blogging was a tool and not an end in itself.

One thing that she did what I thought was great was that the students were supposed to respond to their peers, and provide constructive feedback and constructive criticism, kind of the same nature that the teacher and I were providing (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 2 Winter).

When the focus of the blogging activity was narrowly defined (in Year 1 where students responded to a particular question about a novel that they were all reading), the pre-service teachers were focused on providing regimented, narrow, structured feedback. However, when the blogging was open-ended and fluid (in Year 2), their feedback was more open. During the focus group sessions, we often talked about student choice and how much choice was optimal. The question of choice reflected the overall dilemma of open vs. closed activities. The pre-service teachers often preferred minimal choice, as this made their feedback easier and more predictable. Opinions shifted throughout the discussion but, in the end, there was a continuum of approaches from closed to open that were preferred by individual pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers, in general, appreciated the enhancements that the blogging environment provided, regardless of the open-ended or fluid format as it has the potential for the teacher to enhance learning for this technology.

I kind of can get a sense of the kids' values through what they write...a lot of them wrote about poverty, changing that, changing world hunger. I can kind of see their own reflection in their writing which is really nice, too. And I think that's because the questions are so open ended (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 1 Winter Mid-Semester).

Effective ways of enacting formative assessment in the blogging platform. In this project, pre-service teachers learned about the assessment of writing in the form of a blog. Blogging is often viewed as a form of purposeful, expressive writing; blogs are written for authentic purposes (i.e., for self-expression, to make an argument, to tell a story) and often directed at particular audiences. In the classroom blogs used here, the audience was limited to the classroom teacher, the pre-service teacher, and the students' peers. On rare occasions, the blogs were shared with another class in the same school. In some instances, children logged into the blog at home, and parents/families may have had the opportunity to view them.

Pre-service teachers came to see how to use descriptive feedback to inform writing instruction. The visibility of the student writing and their responses in the platform appeared to enhance this understanding. The pre-service teachers learned to focus on learning goals—outlined by the province and also highlighted by the school district leaders in their sessions—while responding to short pieces of writing with a small number of students. This approach was manageable (i.e., fewer students at a time than if they were the classroom teacher) and anchored the feedback in a blogging platform that was viewed positively by the students and that was immediate and action oriented. They reported that their feedback was most effective when focused with one or two areas for student action, rather than complex and lengthy.

The biggest thing I've learned is about not giving too much feedback at once cause I think that last year in my placement, I gave too much feedback at once. I started to realize that giving them one or two things to work on and improve on, it's overall better for them in the long run because overwhelming them will kind of discourage them (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 1 Winter Mid-Semester).

Giving effective student feedback is a difficult skill to learn and pre-service teachers discussed the challenges of knowing when to guide and when to hold back and how to connect learning goals to success criteria.

During the professional learning sessions, the implementation of writing goals was supported by the school district consultants providing success criteria exemplars that were written in an accessible and clear fashion. In the planning sessions, and in the classroom teachers' practices, these success criteria were referred to anchor the descriptive feedback, and this was helpful for the pre-service teachers to rely on. These expectations were clearly communicated to the students and, in some instances, students explicitly discussed these expectations and writing elements in discussions of their own writing.

I really like that [teacher] is very focused on the success criteria. So that has really helped me in developing my descriptive feedback and really going back to that every time...so all the students were getting similar feedback that way. (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 1 Fall Mid-Semester).

Pre-service teachers also learned how to differentiate writing assessment for students with exceptionalities by customizing descriptive feedback to the students' levels and needs. They also adapted the use of the rubric criteria and modified feedback to students on individualized learning/education programs.

There are a few students in my grade 6 class right now that kind of shut down when they're asked to put pen to paper. So, I try to just find different apps, or computers for them to just get their thoughts to hand in (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 1 Fall Mid-Semester).

Because of the platform, and the permanent and easily visible record of student writing, the pre-service teachers were able to review a student's history of blogging and track changes in their writing over time.

The act of providing descriptive feedback communicated implicitly and explicitly to students that writing can always be enhanced. The approach of the school district leaders was that this should be done in a motivating way, while both praising student successes and making suggestions or posing questions to prompt students to continue to revise their work. Pre-service teachers reported that, for the most part, this approach was mirrored by the classroom teachers and they were also able to take on that stance.

I find that that's really making me construct the sentences to be more engaged with critical thinking. So I'll say, 'I really like this, but can you say more about...'. So it's just like the wording is so important and you don't want to discourage that student but you have to be really on point with your wording cause you want to stay as positive and you want to guide them to the next level (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 1 Fall Mid-Semester).

For the classroom teachers, there were issues related to the manageability and time associated with providing feedback for the number of students, multiplied by the number of comments, multiplied by the number of suggestions to follow through on. The pre-service teachers only worked with four to six students in a typical class of 20-25 students and this lightened the teachers' workloads. This

made the pre-service teachers aware of the challenges that might be present if they were to implement this practice in their future classrooms.

Throughout this process, pre-service teachers gained an appreciation for the fact that writing development takes time and not all feedback can be assimilated immediately by students; feedback must be manageable and developmentally appropriate. Pre-service teachers came to recognize the need for students to continue to practice their writing and they expressed a desire to be consistently repetitive in their feedback. At the same time, during the focus group discussions, they discussed how overly consistent or predictable feedback can be less effective over time as students tend to ignore repetitive comments. There was a divide amongst the pre-service teachers; some wanted students' writing to have a more streamlined focus on an assigned topic and others came to value an open approach and talked about the enhanced creativity of students' writing. One insight was that writing more quantitatively was not always better and some pre-service teachers came to appreciate that writing was a kind of thinking.

One of the advantages of the blogging platform was the enhancement of many students' and pre-service teachers' feelings of validation. Pre-service teachers were eager to know that students were reading their comments (and were disappointed when they did not) and they were eager to get affirmations of their feedback from the classroom teacher and the students. They did notice that, overall, student writing improved regardless of whether they revised based on teacher feedback or used those insights for future writing. The students expressed enjoyment from validation of what they were writing as writers; they received this validation from the educators, and from their peers. Overall, for the pre-service teachers, the ability to focus on a small number of real students, from the convenience of their device, with the guidance of clear expectations and engaged mentors, led to an overall positive and manageable experience of assessment as an early stage educator.

Student learning and writing success through blogging. Overall, pre-service teachers experienced authentic learning in that they perceived that they were really teaching, and they were making theory-to-practice connections. Specifically, pre-service teachers were able to see how a philosophy of teaching that encourages formative feedback, that treats students as authors, and that moves away from a corrective stance, can be beneficial. In the previous section, we reported on how the pre-service teachers began to see the affordances of blogging and the improvements in students' writing. The pre-service teachers also noted unanticipated student learning around peer-to-peer collaboration and feedback, digital citizenship learning, enhancement of student voice, and the appeal of the visual and social media features of the blogging platform.

One of the potential benefits of using a blogging platform for writing is the expanded audience, in this case, the students' peers. When viewing others' work and making comments, students can build relationships, increase awareness of what makes a strong piece of writing and build in a sense of agency and accountability to others. At the beginning of the project, the pre-service teachers noted that students tended to respond more their peers' comments but as the project continued, the students needed reminders to do so. The pre-service teachers wondered if students were accustomed to getting feedback from the teacher and shifted to only be responsive to that. This tendency highlighted some of the engrained assessment practices that pre-service teachers were hoping to redirect but that were not always easy to accomplish—especially when connected remotely to students.

I am not seeing any of the responses from their peers. I have to talk to the teacher to see whether or not she is still going forward with the comments on other people's posts. I think definitely accountability and just getting students to actually read their peers' posts and then to write about their peers' posts (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 2 Winter).

The pre-service teachers reported that their students were learning about digital citizenship, on-line etiquette and how to be accountable for posted comments – all real-world skills that were by-products of the blogging project.

I think they learned online etiquette, learning how to properly respond to their peers online without just saying one word responses...seeing it was a bit of accountability what was happening so they would write something and know that their friends are gonna be reading it and providing them feedback (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 2 Winter).

They were pleased to see how blogging gave students a voice and the ability to take a stand or try on new perspectives. Students were in a mode of digital social engagement and, in some classes, began to think critically about social justice issues. Importantly, they recognized that their students learned that writing is an important life skill; representing yourself in public writing is important.

Well, I was just going to say definitely it is a life skill. It is a lifelong skill that I'm still working towards to, you know? We're all at different levels... but at the same time it builds confidence (Pre-service teacher Focus Group, Year 1 Fall Mid-Semester).

The pre-service teachers perceived that, for the most part, their students found blogging more appealing and accessible than traditional writing. Because it was asynchronous, the feedback responses of classroom teachers and pre-service teachers were more flexible. Students found the visual and textual options engaging and often discovered new possibilities for personalization and features that they were able to share with their educators. Pre-service teachers reported that because blogging was engaging, students were apt to write more. They reported that their students learned how to focus their postings to get a message across and saw improvements to the clarity of the students' writing.

My descriptive feedback for a level four [80%+], would just be the things that I would be asking them to work on for next time. [However]...my feedback would just be directly answering the question was something that I saw a lot of the lower level writers struggling with (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 1 Fall Mid-Semester).

Connecting pre-service teachers' academic and personal experiences with practice. One of our primary goals for the project was that pre-service teachers would make connections among their teacher education course readings, course assignments, educational technology and assessment courses, this project, and their practicum experiences. Pre-service teachers noted that, their practicum experiences were primarily technology-free and sometimes technology-averse and that they often were not able to try to implement some of the approaches they had learned and tools they had experienced. In the context of this project, the authentic experience of providing descriptive feedback to students' blogging was more aligned with what they had been led to expect in their courses.

I got to see that the feedback that we were giving them really does impact with students. So, for me it added meaning to what I was learning in my language class so, I think it would do that for, all of the other students [pre-service teachers] too (Pre-service teacher Focus Group, Year 2 Winter).

All pre-service teachers reported they benefited from the additional experience in writing formative assessment feedback and this encouraged them to shed their preoccupation with error-free writing as a goal for all students all the time. For pre-service teachers who stayed with the project for more than one semester, they reported a high degree of change, moving from a fixation on grammar and spelling accuracy to a greater emphasis on content and exchange of ideas. There were several pre-service teachers whose experiences in the project took place in the middle school grades (with 11-13-year-old students). They noted

that the professional learning sessions aligned more with the experiences of the elementary pre-service teachers than those in middle school. In particular, the pre-service teachers in the middle school grades expressed that they had to shed their notions of what error-free writing looks like to get to the message of the students' blogs, "And I tried to look beyond the spelling and grammar to just focusing on their ideas because I wanted to have them develop their ideas more" (Pre-service teacher Focus Group, Year 1 Fall Mid-Semester).

Collectively, the pre-service teachers stated that the project provided an opportunity for them as they could focus on writing assessment and not on the classroom demands of teaching and management. In this way, under the mentorship of the classroom teacher, they were able to put into practice some of the formative assessment concepts and technology-enhanced methods that they were learning about in theory during their teacher education.

Actually having that real world a experience where you're not concerned about classroom management and content and curriculum and lesson plans and all that stuff that you have to do – just focus the assessment part which is so vital (Pre-service teacher Focus Group, Year 2 Winter).

The pre-service teachers were surprised by how varied students' written posts were, and they wrangled with the complexity of the task they were assigned as educators. Theory came alive for them as they were able to experience the challenges of cross curricular integration and assessment of students on IEPs with rubrics. Pre-service teachers believed that these authentic teaching skills were best learned in situ, during the experience of working with real students in real classroom scenarios.

...this was the first real assessing that I had done and that was a big challenge for me. I am able to practise it. I improved and I was able to see their strengths. They were harder to find when I first read their writing (Pre-service teacher, Focus Group, Year 2 Winter).

Discussion

Our intentions in this paper were to highlight the experiences of pre-service teachers in a professional learning model that paired them with classroom teachers to implement formative assessment to enhance student writing. Secondary to this query, we also wondered how pre-service teachers might make connections between the approaches to teaching writing that are supported in their teacher education courses, their academic readings and in the practical experiences of engaging in assessment and conversation with students in a blogging platform. As

part of these two foci, we inevitably considered the potential that a blogging platform might offer for enhanced learning, assessment and engagement for both learners and educators.

Connecting theory and practice for writing teachers. By design, this project coalesced with the experiences that the pre-service teachers were having in their teacher education course assignments, their practica, and their own experiences with blogging and writing. Authentically, the classroom teachers were contributing to this coalescence by providing modeling and guidance to integrate technology into literacy teaching and assessment. The experience of working with a classroom teacher to give formative feedback on students' blogs afforded the pre-service teachers with the opportunity to connect theory and practice as writing teachers. Some pre-service teachers came in with distinct beliefs about writing instruction such that it should focus on grammar and mechanics; they came to appreciate the value of a holistic message in writing. The pre-service teachers also came to appreciate more deeply the purpose of writing as a form of communication and in some classrooms, it was a response to reading. This purpose of blogging to express aesthetic responses as well as to assess reading comprehension has been documented by other teacher researchers such as Stover et al. (2016) and Stover and Yearta (2015). The experience in this project was a reconciliation of pre-service teachers' prior experience, beliefs and current practice.

Indeed, it is a conundrum within teacher education as documented by Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015a, 2015b) to support pre-service teachers to transfer theories from teacher education and ideas from their own experience into their current and future teaching practice. As a means to facilitate and illustrate this transfer, teacher education programs might seek school-university partnerships to contextualize the connection between theory and practice (Burroughs et al., 2020; Guillen & Zeichner, 2018). Such opportunities provide realistic experiences for pre-service teachers to refine their theories of practice (Schutz & Hoffman, 2017). We contend that the professional development opportunity described herein, filled in the gap between the initial teacher education program and in-service practice as it featured a collaborative effort between a classroom teacher mentor and pre-service teacher to provide students with formative assessment in writing instruction.

Formative assessment in teaching writing. To provide formative feedback, functional and effective working relationships between the pre-service teachers and classroom teachers had to have open and active lines of communication. The pre-service teachers desired communication with the classroom teachers to do planning, verify students' expectations and collaborate on the formative feedback. This was

particularly important for the educators working with early elementary students as they needed to plan for building students' basic technology skills as well as their early writing skills such as basic sentence structure. Similar to other researchers (e.g., Zawilinski, 2012), the reality was that blogging with first graders requires modelling, scaffolding, close monitoring and formative feedback. Frequent, communication between the classroom teachers and their pre-service teachers was essential to ensure that they were providing consistent and effective formative feedback. Pre-service teachers also craved validation from the classroom teachers, and this was accomplished when there was open, abundant communication.

As reported by the participants, students that the pre-service teachers worked with demonstrated growth in skills such as peer assessment, digital citizenship, writing with voice and audience appeal. Heath (2013) specifically found that blogging as a form of writing enhances fifth graders' understanding of audience and relationships. This might be the optimal blend between writing to communicate and socially connecting. The pre-service teachers recognized growth in these skills but also that they needed to maintain responsiveness in their students' feedback to their peers. This might have been attributed to the variable amount of pre-teaching of how to provide effective peer feedback. Philippakos (2017) documented the need for students to have explicit instruction in how to review their peers' writing using success criteria as a guide. Indeed, other researchers (e.g., Chen et al., 2011) have found that fifth graders who used peer feedback through blogging to enhance their writing had difficulty coming up with comments and sometimes gave their peers incorrect suggestions; elementary students also need emotional support to deal with critical feedback (McGrail & Davis, 2014). A crucial realization by pre-service teachers was that more quantity in writing is not necessarily the same as quality in writing.

Blogging as writing and assessment tool. It is generally contended that the use of web-based technologies has a positive impact on student learning when used constructively and strategically as part of the learning process (Hew & Cheung, 2013). As an example, Lacing and Griffith (2012) documented how a classroom blog can engender communication, enhance writing process skills, and contribute to a classroom community of writers. In the current study, the pre-service teachers saw firsthand how classroom teachers used the process of blogging as a vehicle for student learning in writing instruction and worked with its affordances to respond to class and individual students' needs. Descriptive feedback was embedded in blog posts and this served to guide students as they revised their writing. Yet, it is important to note that teachers should not make assumptions that technology usage supports reflection in all students who are blogging (Nair, Tay, & Koh, 2013); both the writing process and product need to be mindfully supported. Pre-service

teachers also contemplated the differences between closed, teacher-directed tasks and open-ended, student-chosen tasks and how assessment needs to be aligned with these learning objectives.

It appears this blogging format was relevant and motivating for the students and also inherently conducive for teachers to provide visible feedback. An unanticipated outcome of the blogging format that the pre-service teachers realized was the explicit validation of students' ideas and the teachers' feedback. Others (Ebecht & Ku, 2015; McGrail & Davis, 2014; Payne Jordan, 2014) have documented that students as young as first grade, express how blogging helps build their literacy skills while they are practicing a number of essential technology skills; they understand the revision process and find blogging feedback helpful (Chen et al., 2011). Feedback that is conversational and action oriented, tends to engender assessment that is supportive and formative. In this study, the pre-service teachers made it obvious to their students how blogging responses may or may not have met success criteria. These practices set students up for self-regulation of their own learning and this has been documented as an effective use of technology: to empower students to access and acquire information and then communicate their learning (McQuirter-Scott & Meeussen, 2017). Similar to over a decade ago (Drexler, Dawson & Ferdig, 2007), pre-service teachers in this project commented on the affordances of using collaborative blogging to support differentiated instruction for students on individualized learning/education programs). The pre-service teachers saw the overt ability to track student progress, but that this was a time-consuming activity. It is well documented that blogs promote collaboration and have the potential to track the learning progression of individual students (Sharma & Monteiro, 2012).

Implications and insights. Models of teacher education and practicum experiences need to be augmented with more authentic classroom-based experiences that are both targeted and scaffolded but also open enough to enable pre-service teachers' ability to apply their learning in context. Focus was important to bracket pre-service teachers' learning as they were also relieved of the responsibilities of working with an entire class of students. They had the convenience to give feedback as they were in an asynchronous learning platform.

At the end of this phase of our university-school district collaboration, we reflect back and project forward on what a project like this has to offer our pre-service teachers, our planning in teaching language arts and literacy, and, ultimately, our pre-service teachers' future students. We see great potential in this kind of experience that allows for a slowed down, highly mentored, collaborative teaching/assessment experience. It is not a practice with which our university commonly engages. While we have had our pre-service teachers assess real

children's writing (and other forms of literacies) in our course activities, this in-between experience offered an opportunity that was seen by pre-service teachers as more of a bridge to authentic teaching. There were no doubt several features that stood out: two researcher-educators were there to support a small group of pre-service teachers; each pre-service teacher had a classroom teacher-mentor; the leadership of the school district consultants was informative and open; pre-service teachers were able to support each other; and the workload was small.

This work is a small-scale, action-oriented study that explores the experiences of teacher and pre-service teachers who are working to improve practice. The role of researchers who were also instructors, the lack of observation of classroom practices, and the constraints of the tools that were used are all limitations of this study. Nonetheless, we are left with the conviction that blogging, as a tool, can be supportive of curricular integration, is accessible to teachers, can be implemented in a variety of ways, and provides incentives for student participation and writing. Despite the benefits of an asynchronous connection, the pre-service teacher experience was most positive when they had a personal (face-to-face) connection with the students - this might also be able to be achieved through videoconferencing.

Pre-service teachers' experience is enhanced when they have input in and experience with the writing pedagogies and activities that students experience. When working together with a mentor teacher there is benefit from the development of relationships to foster a synchronized approach to teaching and assessment of students' writing. Language and literacy teacher educators might consider these kinds of authentic experiences in formative assessment of writing processes for their pre-service teachers.

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