

# LEARNING FROM STUDENTS BEFORE MANAGING CLASSROOMS. USING EMAIL TO CONNECT SECONDARY STUDENTS AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

APPRENDERE DAGLI STUDENTI PRIMA DI ENTRARE  
IN CLASSE. LA COMUNICAZIONE TRA STUDENTI  
DELLE SUPERIORI E INSEGNANTI IN FORMAZIONE  
INIZIALE CON L'EMAIL

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**Abstract** This article presents a case study of a project through which secondary certification candidates who attend two selective, liberal arts colleges in the northeastern United States participate in a semester-long email exchange with high school students who attend local secondary schools. This exchange, which takes place before the certification candidates undertake student teaching, has a number of outcomes. According to the pre-service teachers and secondary students who participate in the project, the email exchange: (1) creates links outside of regular space, time, and relationships within which individualized communication can take place; (2) affects, in positive and negative ways, the kind of communication participants have; (3) facilitates careful analysis and reflection; (4) gives participants insight into others' perspectives; and (5) constitutes a record of the dialogues. Because the email exchange creates a kind of liminal space - an in-between space and time, in which neither the teachers-to-be nor the students are in their usual roles - the participants in this project can try on new ways of being, develop new ways of interacting, and experiment with whom they are trying to become.

**KEY-WORDS** Pre-service teacher preparation, Email, Student Voice, Liminal space, Reflection.

**Sommario** Questo articolo presenta uno studio svolto nell'ambito di un progetto di ricerca in cui, nell'arco di un intero semestre accademica, è prevista la comunicazione sistematica per email fra studenti universitari e studenti della scuola superiore. I primi frequentano dei corsi di laurea tenuti da due college nel nord-est degli Stati Uniti per poter ottenere l'abilitazione come docenti, mentre i secondi studiano presso delle scuole superiori di secondo livello situate nello stesso territorio. Dallo studio emerge che lo scambio di comunicazione fra i due gruppi, che avviene prima che gli studenti universitari comincino le prime esperienze pratiche in classe, genera una serie di risultati interessanti. Secondo entrambi i gruppi, le comunicazioni: (1) favoriscono la creazione di legami più personalizzati rispetto a quelli che generalmente si formano nei vincoli organizzativi e nei limiti dei ruoli tipici dei corsi universitari; (2) determinano, in modo più o meno positivo, le modalità di comunicazione proprie dei partecipanti; (3) favoriscono l'analisi critica e la riflessione; (4) offrono ai partecipanti la possibilità di capire meglio il punto di vista degli altri; e (5) costituiscono una traccia persistente delle interazioni. Gli scambi di email creano una specie di spazio liminale - una zona spazio-tempo intermedio in cui sia i futuri insegnanti che gli studenti svolgono ruoli diversi da quelli abituali - consentendo ai partecipanti al progetto di provare nuovi modi di essere, sviluppare nuovi modi di interagire e sperimentare dei ruoli diversi nell'ottica di capire meglio la loro idea personale di identità professionale.

**PAROLE CHIAVE** Formazione iniziale dei docenti, Email, Student Voice, Spazio liminale, Riflessione.

## INTRODUCTION

Most discussions of technology in teacher education focus on how to prepare teachers to use technology in their teaching (see, for example, Foulger et al., 2013). The case study presented in this article focuses instead on how a particular use of technology can put student voice at the center of teacher education and prepare prospective teachers to put student voice at the center of their teaching practice. Specifically, it focuses on email as a medium for exploring issues of teaching and learning in dialogue with students, practicing how to collaborate with students prior to taking on full teaching responsibilities, and preserving those explorations and exchanges for future analysis.

The context for the case study is the Teaching and Learning Together (TLT) project based at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, two selective, liberal arts colleges in the northeastern United States. TLT positions secondary students as dialogue partners to pre-service teachers who are completing state certification to teach at the secondary level. The project includes several components, but the focus of this case study is the one-on-one, weekly email exchange that takes place in the semester prior to the pre-service teachers' practice teaching. It thus unfolds after the majority of their college-based coursework is completed and before they assume responsibility for their own high school classrooms.

After a brief description of TLT, I situate this project within the student voice movement and provide an overview of the methodological approach I have used to document the work of the project. The majority of the discussion focuses on reflections and feedback from pre-service teachers and the secondary student participants, who highlight five recurrent findings from research on this project. I also briefly discuss the overall significance and implications of these findings, and I conclude with some thoughts on the liminal space the email exchange creates.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING TOGETHER: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

When I assumed leadership of the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program in 1994, I had several conversations with a secondary school teacher colleague in which we wondered why secondary students' voices and perspectives were missing from secondary teacher preparation (Cook-Sather, 2002b). Born of those conversations, the Teaching and Learning Together project has been based since 1995 in the secondary methods course taught at Bryn Mawr College.

This is the penultimate course required for certification to teach at the secondary level, and it is offered in the semester prior to practice teaching. Originally supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, the project has been fully supported by Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges since 2000. To date, over 250 high school students and secondary certification candidates have participated. There are four components to the project. Component 1 is a weekly, one-on-one email exchange between each pre-service teacher and a student who attends a public secondary school in the nearby city of Philadelphia. Each pair explores topics addressed in weekly seminars at the college (such as what makes an effective teacher, a good lesson plan, a successful test, etc.) as well as topics the pairs feel are relevant to teaching and learning more generally (e.g., what the secondary students experience at home, with their peers, in their communities).

Component 2 is weekly meetings of the secondary students convened by a school-based teacher at the students' school. The discussions last for approximately 30 minutes and are held after school or during lunch. Like the email exchange, they are based on the topics explored in the college course, and they are audiotaped, uploaded as podcasts, and assigned as required "reading" to the pre-service teachers. These weekly conversations contextualize the individual perspectives the pre-service teachers get from the one-on-one email exchange with their respective student partners.

Component 3 is weekly discussions in the college-based seminar during which the pre-service teachers talk about how the email exchange is going and what they are struggling with, learning, and integrating into their plans for practice. These discussions give the pre-service teachers a chance to share their excitement, frustrations, questions, and efforts with other pre-service teachers and the instructor of the college course. It is an important forum for unearthing assumptions and developing strategies for interacting with the secondary students.

Component 4 is an end-of-semester analysis paper for which each pre-service teacher selects a focus and draws on and quotes excerpts from the email exchanges, podcasts of discussions among the high school students, and college-based class discussions. This assignment gives the pre-service teachers a chance to step back, look over the whole exchange, contextualize it, and analyze it from a distance, when they are no longer in it. It also requires that they situate the students' per-

spectives and words within larger educational conversations, among theorists and peers.

In each of these components, students' voices and perspectives are central. Indeed, the project is built around student voice, and it provides an institutional structure within which secondary students are positioned not only as dialogue partners with pre-service teachers but also as teacher educators.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over the last two decades, arguments for listening to student voices have issued consistently from Australia (Holdsworth, 2012; Smyth, 2007), Canada (Levin, 2000)<sup>1</sup>, the United Kingdom (Fielding, 1999; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004), and the United States (Cook-Sather, 2002a; Mitra, 2011). The term "student voice" signals students' presence, participation, and power in conversations about and revisions of educational practice, encompassing the notion of each student speaking from his or her individual position and perspective and the collective insights offered and active contributions made by students as a diverse group (Cook-Sather, 2014).

In recent years, the student voice movement has gained momentum internationally. For instance, there is a growing emphasis in New Zealand on student voice and active participation in their education<sup>2</sup>. Researchers have begun to study the perspectives of young people on health and moral education in schools in the contexts of largely impoverished communities in Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and South Africa (Kiragu, Swartz, Chikovore, Lukalo, & Oduro, 2012). In Greece, one researcher analyzed the importance of students' active involvement and greater responsibility for learning (Mitsoni, 2006). In the context of a Lebanese school, a researcher explored what happens when students' active participation is expanded, casting teachers as co-learners and facilitating student-teacher "border crossings", and redistributing power among teachers and students (Bahou, 2012). And finally, collections of studies and stories of student voice in action have been published in the United Kingdom (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007), the United States (Cook-Sather, 2009; Serriere & Mitra, 2012), and Italy (Grión & Cook-Sather, 2013).

Programs that integrate students' voices and perspectives into pre-service teacher education in particular remain few and far between. Writing in the United Kingdom, Hull (1985) made one of the

earliest arguments for student expertise in pedagogical innovation and classroom research, for collaborative, research-based teacher education, and specifically for teacher development, that places teachers and students in a relationship of shared responsibility for education in classrooms. More recently, Donohue, Bower and Rosenberg (2003) described a program that partnered teacher certification candidates and secondary students within the context of service learning, and Youens (2009) developed and facilitated the Student Mentoring Program at University of Nottingham, which sought to include students' perspectives during the school-based or student teaching phase of the program (see also Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007).

These studies and the practices they feature highlight the commitments, challenges, and possibilities of student voice in education and in teacher preparation in particular.

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

All students who participate in TLT are invited to participate in the study of its outcomes, a study I have maintained since the advent of the program. Each year I have secured approval from Bryn Mawr College's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and all students sign IRB-approved consent forms, as do parents of the secondary students. Confidentiality is protected for all participants: no names of pre-service teachers or secondary students are used, and no names of secondary schools are referenced.

The pre-service teachers who have participated in this project represent the diversity of undergraduates enrolled at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. Certification candidates, between five and 15 per year, major in a range of disciplines (e.g., Math, Science, Languages, Social Studies) and plan to teach in a wide variety of school settings at both the middle and high school levels. Individuals come from a range of racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds and are often from various locations across the United States. Likewise, the school-based facilitators of the project invite secondary students who claim a wide range of backgrounds and identities to participate in the project.

Participant perspectives in this discussion are drawn from final analysis papers and audiotaped sessions of conversations among pre-service teachers and secondary students. The data have been coded using constant comparison/grounded theory (Creswell, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to determine themes and trends in the experiences and perspectives of the pre-service teachers and the secondary students. For this particular discussion, I looked for references to the email exchange within the larger body of data. The categories I use to organize the pre-service teachers' and secondary students' reflections

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/students/speakup/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://instep.net.nz/Conducting-inquiry/Using-inquiry-approaches/Gathering-appropriate-data/Student-voice>

earliest arguments for student expertise in pedagogical innovation and classroom research, for collaborative, re-

were generated through open coding: «*the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data*» (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61).

### OUTCOMES OF PARTICIPATION IN TLT

The pre-service teachers and secondary students who participate in this project regularly state that the email exchange:

- 1) creates links outside of regular space, time, and relationships within which individualized communication can take place;
- 2) affects, in positive and negative ways, the kind of communication participants have;
- 3) facilitates careful analysis and reflection;
- 4) gives participants insight into others' perspectives;
- 5) and constitutes a record of the dialogues.

#### **Through email, communication is immediate and individualized**

Because email is asynchronous and its use does not depend upon interlocutors meeting in any actual place, communication can happen any time and anywhere-as needed for individuals/pairs-rather than be limited to unfolding within set, finite frames (such as weekly class meetings in particular classrooms). It is thus more spontaneous, and both parties are more engaged because they define the terms and substance of the exchange. The pre-service teachers articulate clearly how rare and beneficial it is to have such a communication channel prior to assuming the responsibilities of a teacher:

«*Communicating with my student this semester has provided me with an opportunity to put what I see as the importance of student input into action. I can ask my student all sorts of things-theory or practice related-and then use her responses in my own theory and practice*».

Likewise, almost every secondary student participant asserts that the best aspect of the email exchange is that it lets students get their opinions "out there"-something they are rarely if ever invited to do:

«*The topics we spoke on are not commonly discussed with students. We don't often get the chance to give the constructive criticism that so many of us have thoughts on*».

These comments reinforce the importance of providing virtual spaces within which those preparing to teach can communicate directly with secondary students. The various qualities of those spaces- they are immediate, flexible, individually focused, practical, and less strictly governed by standard power dynamics-make them particularly conducive to educative exchanges.

#### **Email affects the kind of communication participants have**

One pre-service teacher wrote:

«*The discussion with my high school dialogue partner really would not have happened in the same way face to face. Because email has the effect of socially leveling student and teacher (we both are just email addresses), the student was more comfortable 'talking' via email than in person where my gender, age, and general 'presence' would shut her down*».

In contrast, another wrote:

«*The email exchanges with my [high school] dialogue partner are great when an actual exchange occurs, [but] it took about a month for my dialogue partner to respond to my first email*».

A secondary student highlights both the benefits and drawbacks:

«*The email system of correspondence worked well convenience-wise. There were some times, however, occasions where I felt there weren't enough questions asked or there were questions that had a very simple answer or an answer that wasn't too broad. As a result, I felt that my [pre-service teacher] partner was maybe not getting the amount of information that she wanted from me*».

Both consistent with and in contrast to the assertions made in the previous section, these comments point to the fact that email has the potential to ease or hinder communication. Questions of comfort, extent, depth, and complexity of communication are thrown into relief by this technological medium.

#### **Email facilitates critical reflection on/by oneself**

The email exchange prompts pre-service teachers and their secondary-student partners to, as one pre-service teacher put it, «*really think through what we had to say before we said it, unlike a conversation where often the things said are the first things that come to mind*».

Like the pre-service teachers, the secondary students emphasize that the email exchange prompts them to reflect critically on their own education and behaviors as students:

«*The email correspondence forced me to think about certain complaints I have had about teachers, and think about how that could be improved upon. The questions I received in the emails were specific to me, but allowed for my experiences to be generalized about*».

Such opportunities for critical reflection are rare, and yet the deeper understanding and greater sense of responsibility that result are powerful. The self-awareness that results has the potential

to make both pre-service teachers and secondary students more thoughtful participants in the shared project of teaching and learning.

### **Email exchanges offer insights into others' perspectives**

Secondary students explain that the project offers them insights into teachers' experiences and perspectives:

*«It made me realize how much the teachers have to think about what they're doing and that they don't just get up there every day and do their thing. That they actually think about ways that they can improve themselves and they work really hard to do what they do.»*

Pre-service teachers gain equally powerful insights:

*«[There] was a really big turning point in the dialogue project where I realized that I was dominating discussion [in the exchange of emails] and that's not what I believed... I know on paper I can say, "Oh, I really want student voice to be a dominant part of my classroom." But, when it really comes down to it, can I somehow foster an environment where that's true?»*

As these excerpts illustrate, both secondary students and pre-service teachers gain insights through the email exchange that make them rethink their own and others' roles, gaining appreciation for others' work in particular.

### **Email constitutes a record of the dialogues**

Whatever the nature, frequency, or quality of the exchanges, email provides records to which participants can return. A pre-service teacher explained: *«Email is preservable unlike the spoken word so you have something to refer back to later»*. This is useful in a purely practical way - participants have records to which they can refer - but it is also important in that it makes possible a recursive and ongoing form of critical reflection that is also not bounded by time or literal space.

## **DISCUSSION**

Timing, position, and medium are important in this email exchange project. In terms of timing, this exchange affords pre-service teachers the opportunity to develop ways of listening to and interacting with secondary students before they assume the many, complex, often overwhelming responsibilities of running day-to-day classrooms. In terms of position, the pre-service teachers are not yet teachers but are on their way, so they have the commitment but not yet the title and formal role—they are in between: closer to students, still, but starting to try to think like teachers. In terms of medium, email is at once intimate and distanced. It is instant, informal, somewhat imper-

sonal, yet able to convey in a kind of disembodied but detailed way anything the partners want to share and constitutes in that sharing a record of the exchange.

Because of the timing, position, and medium TLT provides, pre-service teachers have the chance to develop their speaking and listening skills with a single student, with the support of other pre-service teachers and the college instructor, before using these skills in an actual classroom. Some of the skills they talk about developing include: how to frame and pose the most generative questions to invite students to share their experiences and understandings (this might include asking questions about something other than academics, such as about students' lives or experiences); how to ask follow-up questions that focus and invite students to think more deeply and expand on their points; how to find and interpret meaning that students might not articulate directly or clearly; and how to create a space of listening in which students find and make their own meaning.

The insights pre-service teachers gain are important for how they will conceptualize their practice in their own classrooms: As one reflected, in conversation with the secondary students:

*«Learning and teaching don't go in one direction. In this project we learned from you guys, and learning from students doesn't stop. As teachers we're still learners and as students you are teachers in the sense that you are teaching us about yourselves and what matters to you»*.

Another stated:

*«The experience made me realize that as much as I thought I knew my student partner, by listening to him, I found something surprising that demonstrated a richness and deepness to his personality and experiences I hadn't previously known and appreciated. This motivated me to assert that when I'm a teacher I have to realize that there is a lot about each of my students that I don't know, but if I take the time to listen to them talk, I will find something new and wonderful»*.

## **CONCLUSION**

The email exchange through TLT creates a kind of liminal space—an in-between space and time, in which neither the teachers-to-be nor the students are in their usual roles. As with all liminal spaces, the participants in this project can try on new ways of being, develop new ways of interacting, and experiment with whom they are trying to become. Because the medium is electronic, it is virtual liminal space, affording instant access and spanning literal distance. The result is a linking of places and people that would otherwise be dis-

connected and entirely abstract. The further result is a deeper sense of connection and understanding forged prior to these pre-service teachers taking on the formal role of teacher. That sense of connection and understanding, I argue, prepares them to be better teachers.

This article draws on Cook-Sather, A. (2007). Using Email to Connect Pre-Service Teachers, Classroom-Based Teachers, and High School Students within an Undergraduate Teacher Preparation Program. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 15(1), 11-37.

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