

Teaching through Discomfort: Critical Reflections on Co-Teaching Pre-Service Teachers

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How might we navigate through tension and resistance as pre-service teachers in our classroom praxis and methods? In this paper, we will describe our experiences co-teaching a group of almost one hundred pre-service teachers as two PhD students in education at a mid-sized university in New Brunswick, Canada. The Bachelor of Education (BEd) course we co-taught together was designed to challenge pre-service teachers to engage critically in dialogue with each other across a wide-range of educational policies, social issues, histories, philosophies, and anti-oppressive approaches to teaching. While the course is not advertised as critical studies, many of the conversations and topics are organized around various critical theories and methods. Over the semester, as course content was brought into conversation with provincial politics, we encountered a multitude of tensions, opportunities, and resistance as co-instructors that we navigated by engaging with many different teaching methods and practices: some of these methods were successful and others were not. In this paper, we want to engage with some of the dominant tensions and themes that we encountered. We will also discuss how these challenges influenced our teaching methods and praxis, and the adjustments we made in response. Ultimately, we propose that co-teaching ended up being our most useful strategy in navigating through the discomfort and tension that can sometimes exist in large undergraduate lecture halls.

We write this paper together as two second-year PhD students. Marshall is a cis-gender graduate student and former member of the Canadian military. During that time, Marshall spent close to ten years teaching adults and leading within the military's education system. For his research, he is exploring how institutional culture is taught, learned, and shapes individual identities. Melissa is a queer graduate student and former New Brunswick high school teacher. After teaching in rural schools for over 12 years, she took a leave of absence from her position to pursue a PhD in education. As part of her research, Melissa engages with the intersection of gender and sexuality, participatory visual research methods, and schooling, within the context of New Brunswick.

As part of our doctoral program, we have the option to teach undergraduate and graduate courses (both in person and online) within the Faculty of Education as contract instructors. This BEd course was the first lecture-hall style class we both taught. It was also the first time we co-taught a course. The course consisted of just under 100, mostly white, pre-service teachers. We met twice a week for two hours in a large teaching auditorium at the university. The course was scheduled across two semesters (from September - October 2023 and from January - February 2024) and was organized around large and small group discussions about a variety of topics related to the ethics and philosophies of teaching: educational policies, theories, curriculum, histories, and social issues. The students brought a mixture of thinking and perspectives into the learning environment based upon a variety of educational experiences. Between the two semesters, the pre-service teachers also had their teaching practicum experience, during which they taught in schools across New Brunswick, elsewhere within Canada, and overseas. Students came to class with a variety of questions, concerns, and curiosities about their teaching futures and from their teaching practicums. This meant that many of the conversations and discussions in the class were emergent and driven by the students themselves. Throughout this paper we use

the terms student, when considering our course specifically, and pre-service teachers, when discussing their role within the larger profession.

Co-teaching

Our practice of co-teaching together was guided by ongoing collaboration, dialogue, and mutual support (Roland & Jones, 2023). In this course we adopted Kelly's (2018) conceptualization of co-teaching, which they defined as "two instructors who team-teach by providing simultaneous planning, instruction, and assessment in a course throughout the semester" (p. 183). Working together in all aspects resonated with us because we saw this as an opportunity to learn both alongside one another but also from each other as we undertook this teaching assignment. Building upon Kelly's (2018) conceptualization, we wanted to find ways to leverage each other's strengths to support student success. For instance, Marshall was able to employ his knowledge of digital technologies and tools to enhance our classroom discussions and lectures and Melissa was able to use her background in gender and sexuality studies when conversations inevitably turned toward the recent amendments to the province's school-based 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion policy (Policy 713).

During large group discussions when students were notably divided in their perspectives and we often had to think on our feet, we were able to build off each other for support (e.g., one person would respond to the group dialogue while the other person would gather their thoughts) as we worked together to support the students. We also used the small break-out groups as opportunities to get to know the students better—something which we felt was difficult to do in the large group setting (where we taught on a stage and students were arranged in auditorium row seating). Co-teaching is not without challenges. The large class meant that students often would spread across the building to complete small group work. We would circulate the space ourselves, which meant that we often would not know where the other was located. Or, we would sometimes give contradictory feedback or instructions to students when they were in their smaller discussion groups.

Context: Political Politics and Tensions

The course unfolded during an interesting time in New Brunswick. The local education system continues to feel the impacts of the enduring COVID-19 pandemic and online learning, teacher burnout, and emboldened political meddling in the local education system (Saul, 2023). Our classroom conversations were driven by many ethical and social issues that the pre-service teachers brought into conversation, like controversies surrounding nationalism and white settler colonialism in schools, sexuality education, and standardized assessment. Notably, in our mostly white classroom with two white instructors, conversations about race and racism in New Brunswick schools did not emerge, despite their enduring racist and white supremacist tendencies (Noreiga, 2022; Noriega & Nasion, 2023). We noticed during our in-class conversations with students that they articulated a diverse range of opinions, political differences, and vocalized resistance to some of the course content, notably around gender identity and sexuality, within their small groups. However, in the larger setting, we struggled to achieve the same richness in conversation. Thus, we were curious about finding ways to bridge-build between these often conflicting discourses that were circulating the room by bringing a wider range of views and ideas to the forefront.

Importantly, in September 2023, the Progressive Conservative New Brunswick government amended the provincial school-based 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion policy (named Policy 713). Given course context, discussions based upon and surrounding Policy 713 were constant. Policy 713 was enacted in 2020 with the aim to make New Brunswick schools safer and more affirming to queer and trans students, workers, and teachers. With the changes, students under age 12 must receive permission from their families for schools to use their preferred names and pronouns (Mundie, 2023). The New Brunswick Premier, Blaine Higgs, and the Education Minister, Bill Hogan, defended the changes in media interviews and media scrums, citing their concerns over parental rights. The policy changes and “parental rights” rhetoric received scoping media attention across New Brunswick and Canada—leaving many New Brunswick teachers, including the pre-service teachers in our course, wondering how these amendments would impact their classrooms and public perception of their teaching practices. The Policy 713 changes became a dominant and divisive topic across both semesters.

Methodology

We situate this paper as a form of narrative inquiry and a way to make sense of our efforts to make space for competing discourses within this specific course. For us, we draw upon Kalaba (2023) and consider narrative inquiry as meaning-making in hindsight, and storytelling that shapes life narratives. The following discussion is a collaboration in story making. The two of us shared our stories and experiences within this course with each other. It then became a dialogue, as we engaged with each other as a community of educators (Wenger, 1998). In line with Lyle (2013), we used narrative inquiry to unpack our experience as educators and our interactions with our learners. In keeping with Connelly and Clandinin (1990), who remind us that individuals lead storied lives, the discussion in this paper reveals the ways in which we experienced teaching.

Giving Voice to All

This BEd course was designed to challenge students to engage critically in dialogue with each other across a wide-range of educational policies, social issues, histories, and philosophies. As co-instructors, we hoped to engage in critical conversations with our students to help them connect theory to their individual practice as pre-service teachers. At the same time, we recognized how polarizing issues related to education within New Brunswick were affecting students differently. We experienced tension between what we wanted to do and the reality of teaching one hundred students in a large lecture hall. In the large lecture hall, we did not achieve our goal of engaging students. The conversation was often dominated by a few students which stood in stark contrast to the levels of participation we observed during small group discussions. A few times, students approached us after the class to express that they did not feel that there was space in the larger group to express their own opinions around particular issues. So, if our goal was to engage in critical discussions where individual students felt comfortable participating and expressing themselves, we failed—at least in the beginning of the course.

Our initial attempts to increase participation within the larger group were unsuccessful. We tried to call upon other students. We attempted to shift the conversation and draw upon examples from the small group activities. However, this did not achieve the rich discussion we envisioned. So we shifted our approach, steadfast in our belief that all of the students had thoughts and opinions. Yet, we recognized they may simply not be comfortable bringing their

thoughts and opinions forward in the large group. Recognizing most students did not want to, or did not feel comfortable addressing the larger group, we turned our attention to finding anonymous ways for students to participate within the large-group discussions. We achieved this through the use of anonymous digital tools (i.e., Padlet), the development and presentation of case studies based on personal experience and social tensions, and finally via “gallery walk abouts” (MacEntee & Mitchell, 2011). In this section, we will focus on how we were inspired by “gallery walk about” methodologies, after Melissa observed her doctoral supervisor employ this strategy during a research project, to engage students creatively in their small groups, and more importantly, how it provided individuals voice within our larger lecture hall.

Drawing from MacEntee and Mitchell (2011), we relied upon the idea of a “gallery walk about” to help our students engage with the idea of critical pedagogy. A “gallery walk about” allows students to move through a space and engage with different stations or visuals. At each stop, there is often a large piece of butcher paper with a question or statement posted. As students circulate a given space, they are given an opportunity to respond to the ideas being posed. Relying upon Paulo Freire (2005), we provided students with one of several statements detailing what an actualized critical pedagogy might look like. These statements included macro-level ideas such as “a banking model to an inquiry model” and “from teachers as narrators to teachers as learners”. In small groups, students explored their statements, drew connections or identified disjunctures between educational theory, their experiences in the classroom, and government policy. Afterwards, we posted the student’s work exploring each of the statements in our large lecture hall. Students used colourful sticky notes and proceeded to engage with each statement. They offered practical examples that reinforced a given group's work while also presenting ideas that challenged it.

As we gathered back into our larger cohort, the original small groups presented their statement and brought attention to their peers' comments. In this way, each student was afforded an opportunity to express themselves both in small groups and to have their thoughts and ideas brought to the attention of the larger group as a whole. This activity was successful on two fronts. First, it allowed students to engage in rich discussions about critical theory within their small groups. Second, as a method of engagement within the larger lecture hall, it appeared to reduce some of the barriers in discussing controversial issues that we spoke about earlier.

Conclusion

As educators with significant classroom experience within our respective fields, we were used to developing relationships with individual students and creating space for difficult conversations. Yet the lecture hall format and large number of students attending this course, which aimed to challenge pre-service teachers to engage critically in dialogue with a variety of subjects and each other, presented unfamiliar challenges. As a result, we were challenged to explore different and oftentimes new pedagogical practices. Ultimately, our approach as co-teachers proved to be our greatest strength. By approaching this course in a collaborative manner, we were able to draw upon each other’s strengths and provide students the necessary opportunities to engage with each other.

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