Infusing Technologies into the Study of Teaching: Using Popular Culture to Think Critically about Education

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates how, when faced with the challenge of integrating technology into an undergraduate, secondary education introductory course, we chose an inquiry based approach and blended active learning strategies, technology, and critical thinking activities via popular cultural images throughout the course. This approach provided students with new teaching and learning methods as future educators, and allowed us to model these methods and strategies for our students. We share examples of how we moved our students from awareness of various technological and pedagogical issues related to teaching, towards more critical analysis, synthesis, and application of these issues into their learning experiences in the university classroom, online, and in their field experiences at local schools.

The Problem and Solution

In 1997, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education published a report, *Technology and the New Professional Teacher: Preparing for the 21st Century Classroom,* which called for teacher-preparation programs to reflect the growing use of technology in K-12 schools. This report encourages teachers to acquire *new understandings* about the impact of technologies on society, *new approaches* to employ a range of technological tools as part of their instruction, *new roles* to use technologies to support students' inquiries in critical and reflective ways, *new forms of professional development* delivered in non-traditional ways (e.g. online communities), and *new attitudes* to become comfortable with and engage in lifelong learning with technology (NCATE 1997).

In response to this call, we adapted a pre-service, undergraduate, school of education course that has served as both a required course for those going into secondary teaching and as an elective for students interested in education. The course aimed at helping students develop questions they could ask themselves and other educators in order to make more informed decisions as future teachers and leaders. However, we were faced with multiple challenges. In this paper we focus on the following three challenges and the solutions we implemented:

– How to infuse technology into the course to help meet State Education technology requirements for future teachers?

– How to involve students in active learning spaces inside and outside of the classroom?

– How to bridge the gap between myth and reality about teachers and the work they do (Wexler & Tinto 2005)?

The following sections of this paper include how we built a framework for critical analysis, and examples of how the framework was put into practice through two vehicles – using popular cultural representations for students to explore their beliefs about teaching and using technology to expand learning spaces.

Building a Critical Analysis Framework

We decided to approach the course from an active learning perspective due to these three challenges, in addition to meeting a diversity of student needs and learning styles, a range of student background knowledges, the limited time available in the classroom, and the wide range of content that we could bring into the course. Meyers and Jones (1993) have argued that "changes in how we think about teaching, the growing diversity of our student body, and what researchers are discovering about the varieties of learning styles make a powerful case for active learning" (17). In particular,

> active learning provides opportunities for students to *talk and listen, read, write,* and *reflect* as they approach course content through problem-solving exercises, informal small groups, simulations, case studies, role playing, and other activities—all of which require students to *apply* what they are learning. (Meyers & Jones 1993; *xi*)

In order to create a diversity of spaces and opportunities for active learning to occur, we did three things: (1) approached the course from a series of inquiry-based questions, (2) blended online and in-class learning spaces using the Dialogue Project, an Internet-based communication vehicle, and (3) used popular culture images as a way to get students to think critically about their stereotypes of teaching and schooling.

Given that this was an introductory course with a large number of students, we could have approached it as a course that delivered information in lecture format. Instead, we chose to give students the opportunity to create their own understandings about being a teacher by engaging them in a variety of activities where they would work together in multiple ways. As a framework for the critical analysis basic to this course, we constructed a series of inquiry questions as a guide (See Fig. 1):

- What are the elements of being a teacher?

- What are the defining contexts for being a teacher?

- What does being a teacher look like through the eyes of an observer?

- What are the philosophical, sociological, and historical foundations of the school as an institution?

- What are the realities of being a teacher from the perspective of educators in the field?

Because we were limited by a set time frame, we used these inquiry questions and specific active learning activities to move the students from an awareness of the issues, towards application and analysis, and finally to synthesize their ideas about being a teacher. In keeping with our definition of active learning, students' culminating activities for the course included reflecting on the process of the course and developing a personal emerging theory about becoming teachers.

In promoting active learning spaces, we believed that students have a right and a responsibility to interact with different students and that they become resources for each other. As Billson (1994) explains, "A safe and friendly climate increases participation levels and class attendance" (26). To build this safe, active learning culture we created various spaces both online and within class, where dialogue and discussion could occur. We decided to take advantage of the Dialogue Project (Gates, Wexler, Gao, Tinto & Shedd 1998), developed by the Living SchoolBook and used to facilitate communication and learning among various K-12 and higher education communities (http://lsb.syr.edu). The Dialogue Project was developed to enhance pedagogy by engaging students in on-going

discussions extended beyond the classroom, and it is not meant as a replacement for physical class-meeting time. Inherent in the format of the Dialogue Project is the construction of alternative opportunities and spaces for learning. It bridged the gap between learning within the classroom and learning outside the classroom (Shelly & Tinto 2002).

To link students' past and current school experiences with opportunities to reflect and challenge their beliefs, we drew on popular cultural images of teaching found, for example, in movies, cartoons, and television shows. Each student had multiple spaces where they crafted a personal image on what it means to be a teacher (Adams & Hamm 1994; Daspit & Weaver 1999; Weber & Mitchell 1995). Popular culture played an important role in the ways people view teachers and teaching. As Weber and Mitchell (1995) state, "By studying images and probing their influence, teachers could play a more conscious and effective role in shaping their own and society's perceptions of teachers and their work" (32). By presenting to students popular cultural images as texts to be read, analyzed, and critiqued provided content for active learning activities that occurred inside and outside of the classroom (Wexler & Tinto 2005).

The Framework in Action: Examples of Moving from Awareness to Synthesis and Analysis

To meet the three main challenges of the course, we wanted to infuse technology and critical analysis whenever possible into the structure of the course. To accomplish this goal, we required students to engage in the content by teaching them to use a variety of technologies and popular cultural representations to improve upon their observation skills and encouraged them to think critically about teaching. Since students came to the class with a wide range of technology skills, we constructed the course to allow students to work from where they were with their skills and build on them. In this section, we share examples of course-related activities that we integrated into the syllabus to provide students with an awareness of educational, technological, and sociological issues and opportunities to apply, analyze, and synthesize their own ideas about these issues. These examples are described according to the use of (1) popular culture as a vehicle for students to explore their beliefs about education, and (2) technology as a vehicle to expand learning spaces.

Popular Culture as a Vehicle to Explore Beliefs

Popular cultural images of schools and teaching provided students a starting point from which to analyze and reflect on their less obvious views abut education. Students began to recognize their existing stereotypes and beliefs about teaching, allowing them to reflect on these previously unchallenged images. This helped students to think critically about their field and class experiences.

For example, we used videos to prompt students' initial reactions to a diversity of school cultures. We selected movie scenes to elicit discussion about students' misrepresented beliefs pertaining to the racial and economic make-up of the schools they visited. We wanted students to not only use these popular culture clips to reflect on their previously unchallenged beliefs about teaching, but also to develop their observational skills and apply these skills to their current and future field experiences.

Students also actively shaped their learning experiences by handing in popular cultural representations of teachers through music, pictures, cartoons and video clips that were posted on the Dialogue Project. They had to describe and critique these representations, and then other students had to respond to several original entries as well as others' comments. This created a discussion and provided on-line spaces for multiple voices to be heard. Juxtaposing the students' field experiences, their immediate beliefs about teaching, popular cultural images of education, and students' reflections on research readings helped to shape the content of the course. This juxtaposition grounded the content in real life experiences and promoted critical thinking. The strategy of using popular cultural representations in the classroom as common texts for students to critique was also important for us to model in the university classroom as a potential teaching strategy our students could apply in K-12 classrooms. Using "fictional" texts can provide safe spaces for any age students to reveal their hidden assumptions and commonly held stereotypes.

Technology as a Vehicle to Expand Learning Spaces

By introducing students to the Dialogue Project, we modeled the use of technology as a way to support on-going, in-depth learning conversations among teachers and students. To accomplish this, we developed spaces where

instructors could interact with students, and students could interact with each other in multiple ways – in small groups, as a whole class, or directly between the instructor and the student (one-to-one). These online spaces enabled students to reflect on current educational issues, course content, and field observations.

As instructors we established two long-term, small working groups for each student. These groups met face-to-face during class time and on-line outside of class. One group was formed by content area (mathematics, social studies, art, science, physical education, and English), giving students a foundation for a working group that they could return to later on in their academic program. This group also supported the field component of the course where they shared their school visit observations with each other. For instance, all mathematics students who were observing in math classrooms were to be part of a small group on-line to discuss issues arising from their school observations. The second group focused on the course readings and was cross-content so they could draw on the knowledge and resources of people outside their content area.

We tried to promote student-to-student discussion both in class and on-line by using technology. With the Dialogue Project we established spaces for all students and instructors to share information and generate conversation; this allowed students to contribute to building community resources. For example, as a class we created an Observation Question List that was posted under Course Resources on the Dialogue Project. This list emerged from classroom and on-line discussions where students' misperceptions about local schools were being voiced. To help all class members learn to be critical of assumptions and stereotypes and improve their observation skills, the class generated this list of questions to more accurately portray the school cultures they visited weekly. Once the completed list was posted, students could access it as a resource. Student discussions also guided our selection of guest speakers we invited to class. These speakers addressed issues raised by students that pertained to teaching and the diversity of school cultures (e.g. racism, educational law, and students with special needs).

As the course progressed, we offered opportunities for additional mixed groups both in the physical classroom and on-line. For example, one assignment asked students to create a group based around a common interest linked to an education-related topic. Students selected issues like violence in schools, tracking, bilingual education, and charter schools, but instead of compiling all of the information into file folders to have available in the library for the entire class to view, we had students construct virtual file folders. Each *File Folder* group's final product was a web page generated using interactive templates and needed to consist of an image, description, connections with students' content areas, interviews with practicing teachers, relevant Internet links and other resources, and a section of their choice. Educators in the field were then invited to offer critique of these pages. These web pages became virtual multi-media projects that class members could visit and use to gain information on relevant educational topics constructed by their classmates.

Also, we created individual learning spaces both in class and on-line. Opportunities for individual presentations within the classroom were limited because of the large class size and short meeting time, so individual accountability and interaction was accomplished primarily on-line. For example, subject categories within the Dialogue Project consisted of reflective and analytical short journal entries and longer written assignments that were submitted to instructors through the one-to-one category. Using this category, students privately submitted assignments to the instructors.

Results and Conclusions

We accomplished the technology goals by requiring students to engage in the content of the course by teaching them to use a variety of technology skills (e.g. using the Dialogue Project as an example of an online database and communication vehicle, creating web pages through the *File Folder* activity, and engaging with video in multiple ways – digitizing video, modeling the use of video as a teaching vehicle, building observational skills through the use of movie clips). While none of the students became a technology expert, they were able to build on the skills they came to the course with and most gained an awareness of various types of technologies available to them as future educators. All students had the opportunity to build upon their skills to gain a better idea of how to use technology for teaching and learning.

In creating this inquiry-driven framework, we were able to incorporate a variety of activities throughout the class and respond to the diversity of our students' needs, without losing the focus or purpose of the course and still accomplish our goals. Using active learning strategies allowed us not only to meet the challenges we faced when we

began teaching this course, but also to exceed our expectations. Infusing technology into the course met state requirements for future teachers, as well as enabled us to address the diverse needs of our students and include their voices in the course content. Our integration of popular cultural images both online and off helped to bridge the gap between myth and reality about teachers and their work by constructing safe spaces and common texts through which students learned to critique their own assumptions and stereotypes about being a teacher.
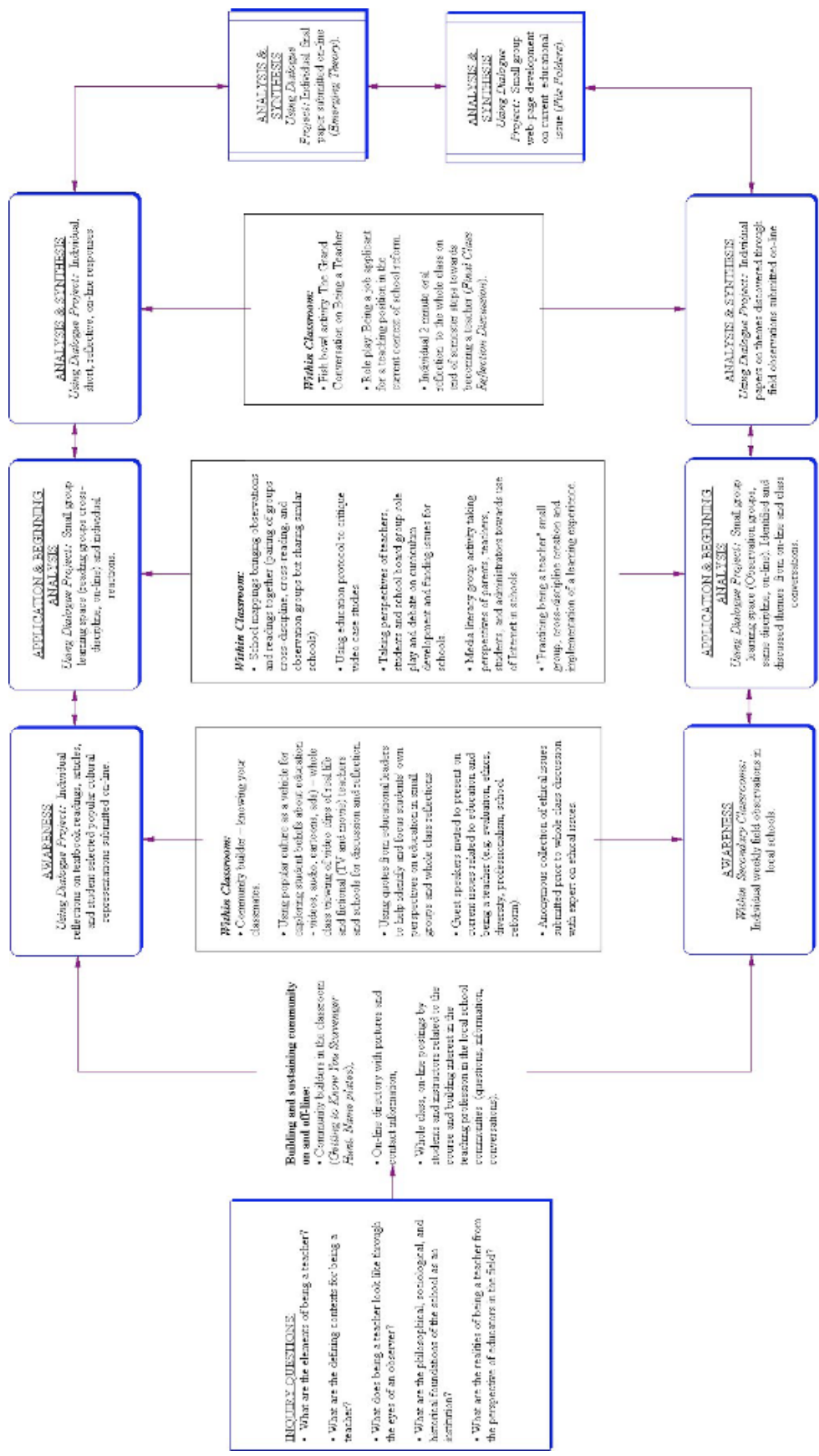
ANALYSIS & SYNTHESIS — *Using Dialogue Project:* Individual final paper submitted on-line *(Emerging Theory)*.

ANALYSIS & SYNTHESIS — *Using Dialogue Project:* Small group web page development on current educational issue *(Psix Folder)*.

ANALYSIS & SYNTHESIS — *Using Dialogue Project:* Individual, short, reflective, on-line responses

Within Classroom:
- Fish bowl activity The Grand Conversation on Being a Teacher.
- Role play: Being a job applicant for a teaching position in the current context of school reform.
- Individual 2 minute oral reflection to the whole class on end of semester steps towards becoming a teacher *(Read Class Reflection Discussion)*.

ANALYSIS & SYNTHESIS — *Using Dialogue Project:* Individual papers on themes discovered through field observations submitted on-line.

APPLICATION & BEGINNING ANALYSE — *Using Dialogue Project:* Small group learning space (reading groups cross-disorders, on-line) and individual reactions.

Within Classroom:
- School mapping/ bringing observations and readings together (pairing of groups cross discipline, cross reading, and observation groups b/t sharing similar schools)
- Using education protocol to critique video case studies
- Taking perspectives of teachers, students and school board group role play and debate on curriculum development and funding issues for schools
- Media literacy group activity taking perspectives of parents, teachers, students, and administrators towards use of Internet in schools
- 'Practicing being a teacher' small group, cross-discipline creation and implementation of a learning experience.

APPLICATION & BEGINNING ANALYSE — *Using Dialogue Project:* Small group learning space (Observation groups, same disorders, on-line). Identified and discussed themes from on-line and class conversations.

AWARENESS — *Using Dialogue Project:* Individual reflection on textbook readings, articles, and student selected popular cultural representations submitted on-line.

Within Classrooms:
- Community builder – knowing your classmates.
- Using popular culture as a vehicle for exploring student beliefs about education - videos, audio, cartoons, solo – whole class viewing of video clips of real life and fictional (TV and movie) teachers and schools for discussion and reflection.
- Using quotes from educational leaders to help identify and focus students' own perspectives on education in small groups and whole class reflections
- Guest speakers invited to present on current issues related to education and being a teacher (e.g. evaluation, ethics, diversity, postmodernism, school reform)
- Anonymous collection of ethical issues submitted prior to whole class discussion with expert on school issues

AWARENESS — *Within Secondary Classrooms:* Individual weekly field observations in local schools.

INQUIRY QUESTIONS
- What are the elements of being a teacher?
- What are the defining contexts for being a teacher?
- What does being a teacher look like through the eyes of an observer?
- What are the philosophical, sociological, and historical foundations of the school as an institution?
- What are the realities of being a teacher from the perspective of educators in the field?

Building and sustaining community on and off-line:
- Community builders in the classroom (*Getting to Know You Scavenger Hunt, Name plates*).
- On-line directory with pictures and contact information.
- Whole class, on-line postings by students and instructors related to the course and building interest in the teaching profession in the local school communities (questions, information, conversations).

Figure 1
Framework of Embedded Active Learning Opportunities and Spaces

Related URLs:

The Living SchoolBook (http://lsb.syr.edu)

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