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## Leading the Dance of Learning: Using Reflective Questions to Promote Community and Understanding in Classrooms

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*Pre-lesson reflections prove a valuable tool in connecting teacher educators with their students while creating opportunities for their professional growth.*

## Leading the Dance of Learning: Using Reflective Questions to Promote Community and Understanding in Classrooms

Marilyn Nash and Judith Oates Lewandowski

### Abstract

A major challenge facing teacher educators today is creating a field-based opportunity for pre-service educators in which they are able to connect with K-12 students and differentiate instruction to fit the unique needs, attitudes, and diversity of the classroom. This action-research study addresses this challenge by measuring the effectiveness of incorporating pre-lesson reflection questions as a strategy to consider pre-service undergraduate students' needs prior to the planning of the lesson. Investigators were successful in utilizing this pre-reflective strategy within three distinct populations of pre-service undergraduate students. The investigators partnered with a group of undergraduate students early in their education program, a group of students just before their student teaching experience, and a group of seniors during their student teaching placements. The investigators and students participated in classroom discussions on information about pre-lesson reflection development, on-campus classroom exercises, and small group feedback conversations about lesson implementation, which enriched the connections between curriculum, classroom learning, and community.

### Introduction

This action-research study was designed to measure the effectiveness of incorporating pre-lesson reflection questions as a strategy for considering student needs prior to the planning of the lesson. The pre-lesson reflective strategy was shared with three different groups of education students. The three groups were selected based on the courses being taught by the instructor during the fall semester of that academic year. The first group was composed of 20 undergraduate students just entering the Teacher Education Program. The second set of 19 students included students enrolled one semester before undertaking their student teaching internships. The final group was composed of six students engaged in their student teaching experience.

A major challenge facing teacher educators today is creating a field-based opportunity for pre-service educators in which they are able to connect with the K-12 students and differentiate instruction to fit the unique needs, attitudes, and diversity of the classroom. Struggling students are not fearful of challenging topics and/or information; they simply need classes that strengthen what they know and build on what they value. Lesson planning thereby could be strengthened if teachers are able to connect with

students at a level that enables them to build on prior knowledge and personal values.

In order to create a learning narrative in the classroom, the teacher must be able to fuse the meanings found in texts and curriculum with the meanings enveloped deep within the lives of the students. In the context of a short-term field experience, it is extremely difficult for pre-service educators to do this effectively. Tisdale (1997) maintained that holistic learning gives a complete understanding of how to interpret and create a community of learners by looking at programs, processes, and persons. By incorporating holistic principles, pre-service educators may be able to build a stronger community for learning and thereby be able to design lessons with differentiated content activities.

Other disciplines encounter similar issues in terms of facing the need to connect quickly with participants in order to create a strong sense of community. Professionals in the realm of theology face a daily task similar to that of teachers. In order to connect with their parishioners, they must know the community in which they are working. Tisdale (1997) advised pastors to consider the use of reflective questions as a means to better understand the beliefs, attitudes, and diversity of the congregation. Additionally, she encouraged pastors-in-training to become active participant-observers in their own congregation as a means of connecting with and validating the voice of the members.

Tisdale (1997) further wrote about the importance of a pastor becoming an ethnographer for his or her congregation to better interface between their places of ministry and their surrounding constituents of faith. Her understanding of local theology was described as a theology crafted for a very particular people in a particular time and place. Tisdale defined congregational settings as churches where people can have a strong sense of belonging. She constructed a model for preaching that arises out of the midst of a pastor's congregation. There is a strong emphasis on knowing who one's church members are, what they do, and what is important to them.

Tisdale (1997) refers to this form of deep personal knowing as holistic preaching that leads to the construction of meaning and a dance of faith. Local theology is where a sacred text and congregations come together to encounter a meaningful impact on their lives. The preacher in such a place needs to be an ethnographer who

is both an insider and an outsider to the community of believers. The preacher who is subjective as well objective can move throughout the context of the congregation with a deep knowing of self and the lives involved in the faith context.

Applying these same principles to the K-12 classroom seemed like a natural parallel. If pre-service teachers are taught to consider the holistic needs of their students prior to planning lessons, a stronger classroom community and respect for diversity could positively impact the overall effectiveness of the curricular goals. In essence, as stated by Cushman (2006), pre-service educators needed a mechanism to guide their exploration of the classrooms in which they were teaching; they were in need of a structure to guide their view of the students and environment in a holistic manner.

By addressing the culture of the classroom before the implementation of the lesson, teachers can be proactive in advance of preparing their lessons for use with students in their classrooms. Classroom teachers will be able to increase their sensitivity to the diversity of their students and differentiated learning and intellectual capacities if time is spent prior to designing a lesson getting to know the students in the classroom. Kathleen Cushman (2006) maintained that teachers who know their students well can make powerful connections between academic subjects and the things children worry and care about in their lives. When a teacher truly knows his or her students, both the teacher and the students will feel more like partners creating meaningful knowledge that will impact their lives together. Significant learning begins when there are significant relationships.

The use of pre-reflective lesson questions creates a kind of local learning theory crafted for a particular set of people in a particular time and place. Students yearn for those classrooms where they have a sense of belonging and connection. Everyone is born with the ability to connect with others, so creating opportunities for students is critical in their learning experience (Kidron & Fleischman (2006). Teaching that has a meaningful impact on the lives of both the instructor and the students meets everyone at the level of their communally shared lives and gives all the stakeholders access to purposeful learning. When teachers give instruction from out of the midst of the community of learners, then holistically engaged and transformative learning

occurs for all involved.

In support of holistic engagement and transformative learning, instructors must be reflective practitioners. According to Moore and Ash (2002), critical reflection needs to be a central part of the beginning teacher's early classroom experience, in order to ensure that practice produces new learning rather than merely confirming existing understandings and position(ing)s. Reflective practice not only aids the growth of meaningful learning, but it also can lead to positive teaching and instructional outcomes. To create a stronger sense of classroom community and respect for diversity, greater use of reflective practice is needed to better understand students' lives and contextual factors. Reflexive activity for educators is productive thought about and understanding of the impact on students' classroom behaviors of social, cultural, and emotional lives outside the school walls. Reflective practice is an inquiry approach to teaching where knowing one another is of critical importance.

Parker Palmer's (1993) enthusiasm for compassionate knowing and Rachel Kessler's (2002) notion of the teaching presence come together at the crossroads of reflective practice. To become fully aware of and present in the lives of the students in the classroom, educators must think about, evaluate, and make changes to improve their teaching and learning. For Ron Miller (2006), reflective educators embody receptive awareness of themselves as instructors and the child's personality and aspirations as well as the impact the world has on their classroom learning environment.

Reflective practice promotes the development of deeply meaningful knowledge for all involved. However, there usually appears to be a gap in these reflective definitions and processes as a practice that occurs after a teaching event or a learning moment, rather than prior to the implementation of a lesson and/or classroom activity. This study is designed to fill in the gap of missing reflective practice by encouraging pre-service students to systematically reflect on their teaching lesson prior to using their classroom ideas and exercises with children using a set of pre-lesson reflective questions.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to measure the effectiveness of incorporating pre-lesson reflection questions as a strategy to consider student needs before the planning of the lesson. The pre-lesson reflective model was shared with three different groups of students. The first group consisted of 20 undergraduate students entering the Teacher Education Program. The second set of 19 students was in the final semester before their student teaching internship. The final group was composed of six students engaged in their student teaching experience. This study began with introductory in-class activities about reflective practice, followed by pre-service student implementation and student discussions about the impact of using pre-reflective lesson questions on the learning environment.

The next step in the alignment process was to gather planning tools currently being used by the pre-service educators to determine the theoretical framework for developing education-based pre-reflective questions. The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards are currently the foundation for many educational preparation programs. The INTASC standards were designed by a consortium of state education agencies and national educational organizations to enhance the reform of the preparation, licensing, and on-going professional development of teachers. Therefore, since these INTASC standards serve as a governing influence in the field of education, these standards seemed to be a strong foundation for developing a set of reflective questions that were local-education based.

The investigators aligned INTASC standards with the pre-lesson questions seen in Table 1. The investigators created questions about the knowledge base of pre-service educators, asking about background information and content skills prior to creating a lesson plan. The pre-lesson reflection encourages and assists educators in knowing the distinctive characteristics of the teacher and their students. Another question asks pre-service teachers for an applicable pre-lesson inquiry about what was learned in preparation for a lesson about the teacher, his or her students, and other colleagues.

Pre-service educators often struggle with lesson plan development and tend to focus upon the compartmentalized sections of the lesson plan (e.g., the opening set, materials, and

**Table 1.** Pre-Lesson Reflections

<b>Basic questions to aid in self-assessment before each lesson</b>	<b>Questions requiring written responses before each lesson</b>
How well do I know the content material? (#1 Content Knowledge)	What do you bring to the knowledge base of this lesson’s content? Where have you drawn from to enhance the lesson’s content?
How well do I know the level of the students? (#2 Child growth and development)	What are the distinctive characteristics of these students? What are some of the unique abilities and challenges in this class? What development levels are present with these students? How are you going to address different learning styles?
How do I plan to meet every students needs? (#3 Diversity)	What is the context of the students’ lives? What are their stories? Who are their heroes and heroines? Who are their “villains”? What challenges do they face? What are the demographics of your class?
Are the teaching strategies I plan to use going to be effective? And why? (#4 Instruction)	Which lesson activities, events, and/or questions do you believe will be effective in your lesson? And why? What if any portions of your lesson do you anticipate may be challenging to implement? Why?
How do I plan to manage the learning environment? (#5 Learning Environment)	What is communicated by the special configuration of the classroom space? Are any spaces “owned” by various groups of students and off-limits to others? What priorities are communicated by the way the space is set up?
How well do I communicate with my students? (#6 Communication)	Can all students move easily around the room? What sections of your lesson will receive the most attention, energy, and investment of resources? Is your lesson paced well?
How well have I planned? (#7 Instructional Planning)	What have you learned in preparation for this lesson about yourself, the students, and other colleagues?
How will I know students are leaning the intended objectives? (#8 Assessment)	What artifacts will be produced? What is the value of these materials for your intended objectives? Will the students value the artifacts produced in your lesson? Why or why not?
What are my professional strengths and weaknesses? Am I practicing reflection on my own? (#9 Professionalism)	What professional strengths and weaknesses do you bring to this lesson? What remediation do you anticipate for students struggling with the lesson, the learning environment, your teaching approach and/or other learning partners?
Who have I collaborated with for this lesson? What did I learn? (#10 Collaboration)	What have you learned from collaborating with your classroom teacher before your lesson? Who are those persons and resources used to create an effective lesson?

procedure) rather than viewing the lesson plan as one harmonious tool for encouraging holistic learning. As a means to synthesize the lesson planning process, the pre-reflective questions were embedded within the steps of designing a lesson plan. The pre-lesson reflection questions were designed to fuse the meanings found in texts and curriculum with the meanings enveloped deep within the lives of the students. The goal of the questions was to help education students becoming more aware of whom they are and are not in partnership with. A pre-lesson inquiry paradigm encourages students to be

active participant-observers.

Ethnography is an anthropological method of examining a community closely and discovering what it values, enabling an instructor to become a participant observer or a reflective practitioner. This action-based research method provides the instructor an inside view of those in a classroom. Pre-reflective lesson questions create a space for taking into consideration the classroom culture of the students. These pre-lesson reflections engage the instructor in using new questions and tools to interpret the community of learners. Once the questions were



completed, it became critical to introduce the students to the concept of pre-reflective questioning and the skills required to become a participant observer in the classroom setting.

### Sample Selection

The pre-lesson reflective model was shared with three different groups of students based on the courses being taught by the instructor during the fall semester of that academic year. Due to time and schedule constraints, the instructor decided to utilize fall semester students, rather than delaying the process until spring semester. The first group was composed of 20 undergraduate students who had recently entered the Teacher Education Program during the first semester of their junior year of college. The second set of 19 students included individuals enrolled in their final round of coursework prior to beginning their student teaching internship. The students in the second group were typically seniors. The final group was composed of six students engaged in their student teaching experience. All students in the third group were seniors ready to complete their educational degree.

All three groups of undergraduate student participants were individuals attending education classes on a full-time basis. They ranged in age from their early 20s to approximately their mid 40s. Each group of undergraduate students was predominantly female with a small number of male participants. All of the students were primarily white with two African American students and one Hispanic student. The research sample was a small with 45 undergraduate students in total. The first group of undergraduate students contained 20 people, the second 19, and the third 6. All were from within a 50-mile radius.

### Procedure and In-Process Adjustments

As the process of integrating the INTASC reflective questions was set forth with each group of students, careful daily notations and observations were conducted in a variety of ways: (1) following each on-campus class discussion; (2) after every small group in-class exercise; and (3) subsequent to the reading of each student-formulated lesson plan reflection. These notations and observations were methodically recorded in the instructor's action-research journal to inform the professor of the need to modify the questions and acknowledge an impact (if any) upon the planning success of the pre-

service educators in each of the three participant student groups mentioned above. The notations and observations gathered from these student educator groups could also possibly be used in future implementation of the reflective questions with courses in upcoming semesters.

If feedback from the student groups was positive and modifications to the pre-lesson questions were needed, then the investigators, based on student feedback, would modify the reflective inquiries as needed and make the pre-lesson questions a regular component of their education courses. On the other hand, if the investigators discovered that the reflective questions were not helpful, then additional considerations and modifications would be made to the reflections and further analysis would be conducted, working closely with the students. However, reactions gathered from each set of pre-service educators in the original three student groups were quite positive and unique and represented clear differences in the levels of professional development. These differences among the three student groups linked directly to their current classroom and course preparation, ranging from the beginning level to the more experienced.

The first students introduced to the pre-lesson reflective questions had, for the most part, just entered into their methodological courses. They had had minimal exposure to and were only beginners in developing an understanding of the important components in lesson preparation. When the pre-lesson reflective questions were shared with these students, the background information of Tisdale's reflective questions for preachers and their congregations for using such a tool were presented, followed by small group discussions on why this was or was not a valuable model to use with their future classrooms. When the small groups reported summaries of their conversations with the entire class, the students discussed how they felt it would be much easier constructing lesson plans if they took time to assess who the lesson was actually being created for prior to its implementation. However, the students also raised some interesting questions about their ability to construct an in-depth analysis of a classroom, when at this point in their educational programs, they were "only" at a field experience level.

Further clarification with the first group of undergraduate students about why they were

hesitant to conduct an in-depth observation of the classrooms where they were doing field experiences was needed. There was a misunderstanding and incorrect perception of what could and could not be done in a field experience among the students. The next step in sharing the pre-lesson reflective questions with these beginning education students was to clarify the dynamics and meaning of field experiences. In other words, these students saw themselves as detached from or only as observers in the process rather than as the participant-observers described in Tisdale's (1997) book on pastoral ethnography and community connections. With this additional dialogue about the meaning of being an active observer in their classrooms, the first group of students was eager to utilize the pre-lesson reflective questions in preparing lessons for use in their field experience contexts. The students were informed that detailed follow-up discussions would be held on campus for feedback about using the reflective questions.

Students taking methodology courses in their senior year before their student teaching experience composed the second group introduced to the pre-reflective lesson questions. These students are several semesters beyond the first group discussed above and typically bring a deeper understanding of the role lesson planning carries in a learning environment to their undergraduate classes. Immediately upon introducing these students to the questions, the students visibly stiffened as if they had been handed some enormous weight or edict concerning their own personal philosophies of teaching.

Additional inquiring into why they had had such strong adverse reactions to the pre-lesson reflective questions clarified for the instructor that the students were currently feeling overwhelmed with the amount of course work they were already being required to generate for their university instructors. An immediate discussion of how the pre-lesson reflective questions could be blended into their everyday observation and interaction with classroom children seemed to help the pre-service educators to feel much more comfortable moving forward with using this new tool within their field experiences. These students were definitely focused more on the products required with their education courses than on the actual process of knowing your students better in order to create the best practice lesson plans.

The final introduction of the reflective process occurred with students enrolled in the third group of student teaching internships. The introduction again began with a sharing of the theoretical basis for implementing such a tool into their classrooms, followed by conversations around the actual reflection questions. The student teachers initially responded with raised eyebrows and higher stress levels due to their alarm at assuming they were being given an additional component to include in their professional portfolios for student teaching. Not only were these student teachers concerned about doing additional tasks, but they also questioned how they would be able to find time in their already busy schedules to justify spending more of their day jotting down information about the children with whom they were working.

After lengthy discussions and explanations about how to use the reflective questions, the student teachers became excited about having a tool that empowered them to design better lesson plans that focused on classroom children becoming fully engaged in the learning process. During the in-class discussion, the student teachers in the third group openly asked about the reflective questions and received instructor clarification about inquiry details, and then were able to understand the purpose and goal of using the pre-lesson reflections. Following the in-class discussion, the student teachers were gathered into small groups to begin creating a lesson plan for possible use in their student teaching classrooms.

During the small group exercises, the student teachers began making connections between pre-lesson reflections and knowing more about themselves, the students, and the learning environment. They shared their insights with the instructor and the rest of the class. Given their in-class responses to the small group activity, the student teachers of group three understood that, by using the pre-lesson reflective questions, they would be able to improve their ability to make appropriate assessment and remediation decisions.

All three groups of undergraduate students were given approximately one month to apply the pre-lesson reflective questions into their various learning environments. At the end of one month of using this form of lesson preparation, all three student groups provided the investigators with their feedback about the pre-lesson questions during an in-class discussion. The investigators

recorded all student comments and feedback from this first month of using the lesson inquiries

The students of group one and two were asked to work in small groups of two or three in order to respond to the pre-lesson reflection questions. Each set of students in both of these groups were able to encourage one another, assist in clarifying responses and look more closely at the educational placements for their field experiences. Their collected written responses to the pre-lesson questions were gathered at the end of the class session. This method was selected in order to provide guidance to the undergraduate students in each group, their peers, and the instructor.

The third group of students, engaged in their student teaching experience, was approached in a slightly different manner since there was less direct interaction with each of them. For this last set of students, an explanatory letter about the purpose and use of the pre-lesson questions was sent to each participant. In the correspondence, the student teachers were notified that the questions were to be embedded within their planning process and that written copies were to be turned in to their university supervisor.

The responses of all three groups were collected and analyzed over a period of three months.

### **Analysis and Findings**

The analysis of the student feedback took place through a series of weekly discussions between the investigators and the students which extended beyond the 16-week course semester. After initial readings of the student feedback and reflections, the student data were analyzed through coding where two independent researchers looked for common themes throughout the discussions and reflective meetings. The two researchers examined the data as a means for validating the student feedback. The analytical tool of coding themes examined student responses, investigator reflections, and discussions with students held on campus about comparing and examining their lessons prepared prior to and then following the use of the reflective questions. As the analysis of the lessons and pre-reflective questions occurred, one reoccurring theme was an observable increase of pre-service educators' instructional abilities as well as an increase in the expectations for performance and achievement of the children. The observable increase was measured through

the theme of improved course grades assigned to the students at the completion of their assigned courses as mentioned previously.

The verbal responses and feedback from all three student groups in the extended campus discussions also showed a heightened understanding of appropriate tools and methods to use in their field placements. The majority of the undergraduate students connected with their field experience students and the different instruction required to fit the unique needs, attitudes, and diversity of the classrooms. The students in the three undergraduate groups were able to successfully integrate reflection, tools, methodology and meeting student needs through the use of the pre-lesson reflective questions. The investigators observed the student improvements in their ability to reflect and prepare lessons which increased in detail and planning from the lesson plans submitted at the beginning of the semester compared to the lesson plans completed at the end of the course.

All three of the student groups introduced to the pre-lesson reflective questions had in praxis shed their initial response and concentration on being product oriented to now having a focus on the process of using best practices in the classroom. This shift from a product oriented pre-service teacher to a more process driven educator occurred because the reflective tool had raised each of these students' awareness and understanding of what it means to be a participant-observer in a classroom whether it is a university learning environment or a school room setting.

In each of the three student groups, students verbalized how the reflective tool assisted them in keeping the whole story or the goal of field and student teaching experiences in mind. The students stated they felt more competent in creating lessons and other materials because they had been given a tool which enabled them to move beyond their unending daily list of tasks and assisted them in focusing on being present and available to the children they were actually teaching.

The first group of students who initially saw the questions as one more task to be completed eventually indicated that they felt much more confident about moving beyond simply being passive observers in their classrooms. The pre-lesson reflective questions empowered these pre-service students to become participant-observers who were then significantly more aware of the



values, actions, and backgrounds of the children they were interacting with in their lessons. For example, in response to INTASC #2, which asks:

A student from the second group commented on their response sheets collected at the end of their small group work:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| How well do I know the level of the students? | What are the distinctive qualities of these students? What are the unique abilities and challenges in this class? |
| (#2 Child growth and development)             | What development levels are present with these students? How are you going to address different learning styles?  |

“The thought of taking inventory of a class before you teach makes a lot of sense because when you know your students, you know how to keep each of them involved, focused and interested in what is going on in the classroom.”

One of the student teachers in group three stated in their feedback about using the pre-lesson questions:

Feedback from the first group of undergraduate students consisted of comments such as:

“After I used these pre-reflective questions, I feel I also know my students like you know us. I can see a much deeper personal connection with the children. It is so much easier to prepare a lesson plan when you know what each of the student needs to be successful.”

“I can make students feel welcome to ask questions any time during the class lesson because they know I am much more relaxed since I’ve taken time to think about what I’m doing, what they’re doing and what being partners is all about in a classroom. I made sure everyone understood what was being discussed and presented so I didn’t have as many students as I typically do who are off task, restless and causing problems during a lesson”.

The second and third groups of undergraduate students commented that when using the reflective tool, they found they were able to design better materials management plans for their lessons because they felt they knew their classrooms more thoroughly. These groups of students commented that they were better equipped to anticipate problems with children and to field content/subject concerns during the lesson, which also led to fewer discipline situations. Student responses to INTASC #4 questions were numerous. It asks:

With an increase in student awareness of their field and student teaching classrooms, there also seemed to be an improvement in the class assignments and lesson plans required for the university courses. Specific improvements in the lesson plans were made follow the series of on-campus feedback discussions between the investigators and the pre-service students. From the student comments and shared educational experiences, lesson improvements included a number of items such as well thought out materials management plans, clarification in contextual factors, more attention to components of diversity and developmental levels, and greater connections between lesson objectives, standards, and assessment tools.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| Are the teaching strategies I plan to use going to be effective? | Which lesson activities, events, and/or questions do you believe will be effective in your lesson? |
| And why?   | And why?   |
| (#4 Instruction)   | What, if any, portions of your lesson do you anticipate may be challenging to implement? Why?      |

It also seemed that the students who used the reflective questions also became better at reflecting on their work in the schools because they understood the particulars for which they were observing and responding to in their portfolio materials. These undergraduate students had a higher level of understanding for using educational tools in the classroom. Again, this shift from a product oriented undergraduate student to a more process driven educator occurred because the reflective tool had raised each of these students’ awareness and

understanding of what it means to be a participant-observer in a classroom whether it is a university learning environment or a school room setting.

The use of the pre-lesson reflective questions both strengthened and challenged the investigators to know education students as well. As with all three of the student groups, the instructor had increased her observational skills and abilities to know the students in the classroom. For example, in each step of initially creating this reflective tool, the investigators took time to answer each of the questions for their own methodology classes. After thoroughly reflecting on each of the classes and coming to know the students better, the investigators also experienced a newly discovered confidence in their teaching strategies just as each of the three groups had in their field and student teaching experiences. These new insights provided a framework for how to better design educational courses and exercises that would have meaning and purpose for all involved.

### **Personal Reflection from the University Instructor**

Using the questions myself and participating in implementing this tool with three of my classes helped me as well to see what areas of improvement I had as an instructor. For example, I very quickly realized that I needed to focus on what language I used and/or how I articulated various concepts and instruments to my students so that the focus remained on utilizing and implementing the information into their field and student teaching contexts rather than creating an undue shift onto the course artifacts themselves. I am much more sensitive now to keeping my classroom focused on the learning process and creating high quality course materials.

And as I had suspected in the first place, when I took the time to know my students better, I saw relational improvements among and with my students as well. Responding to the pre-lesson questions encourages higher education students to know themselves, their teaching and their own students' learning experience. Osterman (1990) believes reflective practice is critical in meaning making and understanding of the learning experience. For example, the students' sensitivity to the importance of respecting each other and their field or student teaching contexts increased because once again everyone had much higher

levels of familiarity and background knowledge about themselves, the classrooms, and the schools.

The communal dynamics increased both in and out of my classes. I observed that the undergraduate students' sense of validation and affirmation increased since they became a stronger community of inquirers. I knew the distinctives of my students which empowered me to tap into their knowledge base, their learning styles and their developmental skills. Partnering with the students' abilities created a collaborative learning environment for all the stake holders in the classroom. This research allowed me to have an insider's view of those in a classroom. Teachers who know their students well, make connections between academic content and student interests (Cushman, 2006). When a teacher truly knows his or her students, both the teacher and the students will feel more like partners creating meaningful knowledge that will impact their lives together.

I found this perspective on relational dynamics to be true for myself, my undergraduate students, and, hopefully, for my future education students as well when time was taken to know one another more deeply. The pre-lesson reflective questions gave all of us an avenue to be engaged in and to engage each other in the process of experiencing affirmative communal dynamics. Being an educational ethnographer confirmed my understanding of holistic learning that looks at programs, processes and persons for a complete understanding of how to interpret and create a community of learners through reflection.

By incorporating Tisdale's (1997) principles of sermon preparation where a minister knows his or her congregational members and prepares for preaching based on reflection prior to sermon delivery, these pre-service educators were able to build a stronger community for learning and thereby able to design lessons to meet the unique needs of each group of learners. Tisdale (1997) advises pastors to consider the use of reflective questions as a means to better understand the beliefs, attitudes, and diversity of the congregation. Additionally, she encourages the pastors-in-training to become active participant-observers in their own congregation as a means to connect with and validate the "voice" of the members.

From the small group discussions between the investigators and the three student groups,

lesson planning thereby can be strengthened if teachers are able to connect with students at a level that enables them to build on prior knowledge and personal values. The use of pre-lesson reflection questions with education students shows that these students simply need university courses and instructors will to support their learning that strengthen what they know and build on what they value. In order to create a learning community in the classroom, these students were able to fuse the meanings found in textbooks and the curriculum with the meanings enveloped deep within the lives of the children in their field experiences.

These students discovered in their teaching experiences that connections between subjects, students and themselves were a powerful platform for learning. When an undergraduate student truly knows their classroom students, both the instructor and the students create a partnership of meaningful knowledge. The use of pre-reflective lesson questions creates contextual learning crafted for a particular set of learners in a particular time and place. Students of all ages yearn for those learning environments where they have a sense of belonging and connection.

Everyone desires to connect with others in some way so creating positive educational opportunities for pre-service students and their field experiences is critical in their learning experience. From this action-research study designed to measure the effectiveness of incorporating pre-lesson reflection questions as a strategy to consider student needs prior to the planning of the lesson, the investigators and the students found that teaching can make a meaningful impact on the lives of all involved. Using pre-reflective questions with pre-service students based on Tisdale's understanding of sermon preparation is an approach that meets everyone at the level of their communally shared lives and gives all the stakeholders access to purposeful learning.

There are several limiting aspects to the student groups. First, all of the undergraduate students in this action-research study were succeeding in their current educational courses. In other words, these were students who were not in danger of failing any of their current course work. And secondly, every student was very familiar with the use of post-reflective practices due to the widespread expectations that all course work and/or lesson plans involved this course component.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the pre-lesson reflective question process may have been a success in implementation in part because the instructor utilized the questions in the best situation possible with students who were excelling in their education program and who had high familiarity with reflection. However, building on these strengths, both the instructor and the students realized reflection develops a paradigm for cycling through the experiences of the educator, the student and the learning process. Dewey (1933) first pointed out and promoted the use of reflection because he believed that educators who are speculative and contemplative will be more open-minded, wholehearted, and responsible toward all stake-holders in the learning process. The reflective praxis becomes the connective link for every educational experience which in turn creates multiple opportunities for professional growth. Lasley (1990) explains an effective knowledge base for educators as a model that includes reflection with a deep knowing of the learning community rather than repetitive focus on techniques alone. Effective teaching and best practices involve communal dynamics and communicative reflections.

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