

# Transforming Pedagogies during the Pandemic: Lessons from a Teacher Education Program

Tanya Manning-Lewis

University of Victoria, Canada

## Abstract

Teaching literacy-based courses to teacher candidates (TCs) outside of the discipline can be quite challenging. In response to some TCs course survey comments in previous years that the *Multiliteracies Across the Curriculum* course content is not relevant to their teachable, the researcher decided to revamp the course. The shift to online teaching in the fall of 2020 provided a unique opportunity for the instructor to develop new pedagogical strategies to increase course engagement and relevance. These strategies included creating content through videos, graphic novels, students' ongoing vlog/ blog post reflections, bi-weekly course reviews, and support grouping within the cohort. The researcher engaged an auto-ethnographic approach embedded in social constructivism to examine the impact of her pedagogical response to the challenges teacher candidates from different subject disciplines were experiencing in her course. The researcher utilized personal reflections (dairy), students' anonymous bi-weekly review of the course, and the exit course survey to determine effective or ineffective strategies. The reflections, reviews and 2020 survey comments revealed that the newly developed strategies positively impacted students' response to the course. Most students across disciplines indicated that the diverse methodologies, online learning tools, multiliterate pedagogies, practical applications and classroom community increased course relevancy, access and engagement.

**Keywords:** Pedagogy; multiliterate strategies; teacher-candidates; pandemic; online learning

## 1. Introduction

The increasing demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the pandemic require transformative teaching practices for educators. The pandemic has brought to the fore the need for schools and teachers to adapt to changing learning contexts quickly. This shift means teachers have to create alternative means to continue students' educational growth and engagement in learning amidst a growing crisis. However, the proliferation of new technological tools and applications available due to online learning can be quite overwhelming and has generated immense concern for many educators. Reimer (2021) reported that an assessment of educational strategies used to support students during the pandemic revealed shortcomings in the efficacy of the strategies and educators' capacity for rapid innovation. He further noted that the daily interruptions to online learning and the emotional strain of the pandemic left many students and teachers at odds with curriculum outcomes.

As the instructor for several educational courses in 2020, I experienced much trepidation about how online teaching will impact students' learning, attitudes, and experiences in an online environment. However, the shift to online learning provided a unique opportunity for me to explore my pedagogical practices for one of my courses, *Multiliteracies Across the Curriculum*. This course aims to prepare prospective secondary school teachers across all disciplines to develop understandings and approaches to integrating literacy processes and products into their subject disciplines. It examines multiple literacies and contemporary understandings of texts across the curriculum, focusing on teacher-candidates' (TCs) engagement in different modalities. This is one of the more challenging courses to teach as there is usually resistance from TCs coming from the sciences and math who sometimes do not find a multiliteracy course viable. Given this challenge, I am constantly reflecting on my practice and considering ways to improve my pedagogy to increase course relevance, access and engagement. For me, the shift to online learning was an opportunity to revamp the course, consider new approaches and assess the extent to which these are successful.

In this process, two critical questions guided my inquiry: (1) How do I interrogate my pedagogy to create more diverse and inclusive methodologies that appeal to students across disciplines. (2) How do I shift my pedagogical practices to increase course relevancy, access and success.

### **Theoretical Framing**

Teaching is an ever-evolving process, and the expectation is that educators are continually adapting, adjusting and altering their practice in response to students' needs (Loughlan, 2002). To be pedagogically responsive, instructors are compelled to interrogate their pedagogies to determine the changes needed to make courses more accessible to all learners. In many ways, teacher educators are being challenged to provide TCs with richer learning experiences that can translate into their future classrooms. To achieve this, Roswell, Kosnic & Beck (2008) propose that teacher educators develop a new pedagogical vision of teacher preparation that allows students to participate across all disciplines. Curriculum integration is at the core of this new pedagogical vision. Thus, a transdisciplinary approach is necessary to dismantle the discipline-specific focus that might impede some students' growth and access to literacy strategies (Klein, 2020; Davis & Phelps, 2005). This approach seeks to disband the boundaries between disciplines as learners immerse themselves in the more seamless integration of contextual knowledge. It is critical in allowing TCs to make connections across disciplines which will add much depth and complexity to their learning. The world is constantly changing, so TCs need the tools to bridge the gap between traditional literacies, multiliteracies, and multimodalities as they interact with students from various backgrounds and abilities (Ajayi, 2010; Roswell, Kosnic & Beck, 2008). In sum, through transdisciplinary lenses, the learner begins to understand the interplay between knowing, doing and understanding across perspectives and disciplines (Klein, 2020; Davis & Phelps, 2005). Spitler (2011) contends that:

In order for pre-service teachers' beliefs to shift regarding the content area or disciplinary literacy instruction in secondary social and cultural contexts, teacher educators should focus on the literacy identities of the pre-service teachers in their classrooms. In other words, educators should make a concentrated effort to understand how prospective teachers see

themselves as members of a literacy discourse community (Gee, 2008), and how they envision and enact literacy instruction in support of adolescent literacy development (p.306).

## Methods

The intertwining of teaching and research is important to pedagogical shifts. Loughlan (2002) reasons research is a symbiotic response to teaching as a problem develops, shifts and changes; research allows for continual response to it. As such, it was only natural for me to conduct research into my own practice to assess, reflect and make adjustments where necessary. To reflect on TCs' 2020 online experiences in the *Multiliteracies Across the Curriculum* course, I engaged in an auto-ethnographic study of my course practices with 29 TCs (2)math and (5)science. Each week through ongoing class reflections (verbal), I document (in my teaching diary) students' concerns, successes and challenges with the course and adjust my teaching the following week. Students were also given opportunities to share anonymously concepts and activities that were inaccessible, unappealing or useful to them in their learning. My personal reflections and students' feedback were critical in understanding how the current educational climate (the pandemic) and my pedagogical choices impacted students' learning. The shift in pedagogical choices included using several technological tools such as Aha Slides, Jamboard, Blackboard, creating videos, Twine, and short graphic novels for content.

## Results and Discussion

Research shows that teacher-candidates outside of disciplines connected to literacy have to first conceptualize their roles as literacy educators to design curricula pedagogies to meet students' literacy needs across the curriculum (Allison & Golston, 2018; Ajayi, 2010; Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2020; Patterson Williams & Monte-Sano, 2020). Thus, it can be reasoned that it would be challenging for teacher candidates coming out of the sciences and math to perceive themselves as multiliterate educators. Over the years of teaching the literacy course, I observed similar challenges. My observations of the class, reflections and ongoing conversations with TCs revealed that some chemistry, physics, and math TCs were more likely to have teacher identities that did not embrace literacy practices in their classroom spaces. This was likely due to the lack of emphasis on literacy practices and approaches in their undergraduate programs where a different conception of 'knowledge' and 'learning' drives the programs or in their other teacher education courses. The course survey over the years supports this view as several TCs indicated that the course is irrelevant to their discipline or needed to be much shorter than a semester. Given these circumstances and the change to an online platform, I reasoned that giving TCs opportunities to work with peers from other disciplinary orientations and using multimodal approaches and strategies in authentic learning contexts will increase the probability of them acquiring an identity as literacy educators. These multiliterate and multimodal learning opportunities included creating 'Who am I' videos, vlog/blog reflection pages, developing cross-curricular/interdisciplinary unit and lesson plans, teaching using different online tools, sharing weekly literacy strategies they were discovering, and K-12 student case studies. Of note, students in previous years have created 'Who am I' videos, blog posts, interdisciplinary unit plans and case studies. What was notably different about these in 2020 was the focus on digital literacies and identities. For example, for the 'Who Am I' videos, students were asked

to share how they came to be in the field of education, what place literacy might have in their classroom and how they could facilitate its integration in their classroom. TCs also had to intentionally demonstrate a multiliterate approach through their unit and lesson planning. The blog/vlog and weekly sharing of strategies were not formally assessed tasks; rather, they were introduced as a means for students to share their new understanding or discovery of literacy strategies that are useful to their subject area. Students were asked to share at least one post or strategy throughout the term. The sharing of the literacy strategies turned out to be rather engaging as students developed a friendly competition with each other to see who discovered something unique throughout the week.

These ongoing interactions, reflections, and students' anonymous responses on course progress via the software AHA Slides helped steer the course. For example, from this feedback, I discovered that some students wanted more explicit instruction on implementing literacy strategies in their classroom while others wanted more time to learn some of the tools I introduced, such as creating graphic novels with Comic Life 3 or using Twine or Canva.

I did experience some success with the newly implemented teaching pedagogies as one TC noted in the exit course survey that "The lessons were clear and practical. I could imagine myself using the multiliteracy strategies in my classroom, something I didn't think was possible for my subject area." The weekly check-ins, classroom support groups (students placed in groups of six at the beginning of the course and asked to check-in and support each other given the adverse effects the pandemic was having on everyone) and setting aside time to share 'did you know' moments about self in multimodal ways also helped to build classroom community and multiliterate identities. Another student stated in the course survey that "The instructor was exemplary in her ability to create connections with students and to create a positive atmosphere (even over zoom!!). Spending time in her lessons was certainly the bright spot that we needed during these times. I learned so much about multimodal teaching just from observing her practices." As the 2020 cohort classroom rapport increased, so too did their engagement in the course and affinity for multimodal discourse. Similarly, Ajayi (2009) observes that when TCs are exposed to multiple literacies across social, cultural and national boundaries, it provides many opportunities for them to reconceptualize their identities as literacy educators. It was evident from these comments that some TCs were experiencing higher course relevancy and access.

Some of our many conversations about what TCs need to do to keep students engaged and avoid Zoom fatigue suggested that more TCs were keen to embrace multiliterate approaches. These conversations and the observed enthusiasm from science and math TCs to try out new literacy tools (digital and non-digital) and strategies led me to believe that the shift in the demand on teachers during the pandemic and increased exposure to multiliterate tools might have been impacting their positive attitude to the course. Students from diverse disciplines were likely more aware that they needed the literacy skills and digital tool kits to be better able to support diverse students in an online environment.

## Conclusion

The auto-ethnographic work reveals that ongoing reflection of my pedagogy has implications for how my courses are taught. It is clear that pedagogical approaches and conversations with TCs are shifting, and so too should my practice. These recent experiences and the findings from the 2020 group have reassured me that greater connections with students at the start of a course, community building, authentic course experience, ongoing feedback and diverse teaching strategies are significant for TCs to thrive, especially in a course outside of their discipline. Shifts in instructional engagement are also key in TCs' response to the course, thus leading me to conclude that the online teaching platform was a unique opportunity to create more transformative practices that allow TCs across disciplines to see themselves as literacy advocates.

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