Pedagogical Care

Considerations of COVID and Care in Middle Grades ELA Methods Instruction

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In this paper, an ELA teacher educator turns to self-study to explore how the pandemic has repositioned her teaching – both what she does and how she does it – and how that repositioning has reframed understandings and expectations of both students and self. Two research questions guide the study: 1) In what ways has my pedagogy changed in the ELA middle grades methods class through navigating the COVID-19 pandemic? 2) How have these changes reframed my pedagogical understandings and expectations? The self-study uses the lens of pedagogical care to engage with these questions, revealing that altered approaches to attendance, course feedback, and instructional questioning reflect both relational care (e.g., Noddings, 2012) and relational teacher education (e.g., Kitchen, 2005).

Introduction

Recently, a colleague stopped by my office with a question: How was I dealing with student absences this semester? An ill student had emailed her, asking whether it was possible to Zoom into her methods course; as it happened, I had received a similar request earlier that morning. The conversation revealed our common approach: We preferred students who were sick to be absent – physically and virtually – when they were ill, and we would work with them when they returned if they were behind. As she left my office, however, my colleague mused, "Am I being more flexible now or do I just not care enough?"

In theory, life has returned to some semblance of normalcy now but it's clear that the COVID-19 pandemic will ripple through all aspects of our lives and our classrooms for years to come. As my colleague's question captures, we do things differently now and we're not quite sure why: because we've rethought our pedagogy or reconsidered student needs or redefined what's important? I frequently wonder how the pandemic has repositioned my teaching – both what I do and how I do it – and how that repositioning has reframed understandings and expectations of my students and myself. I have turned before to self-study to examine my teaching and professorial growth (e.g., Shoffner, 2016, 2018, 2020) so it makes sense to do so again as I unpack those questions.

The Pedagogical Context

As an English Language Arts teacher educator, I regularly teach a middle grades (6th-8th) ELA methods course (note: adolescents are typically between 12-15 years old in United States' middle schools). While I teach other courses, the

middle grades (MG) methods course is the most frequent: In the last five years, I have taught it seven times and I am teaching it in both semesters of the 2022-2023 academic year. While the course typically meets twice a week for 90 minutes, it is sometimes offered once a week in a three-hour block.

Through the years, I have revised specific elements of the course and my instruction in response to different factors: student feedback (e.g., Shoffner, 2020), current events (e.g., Shoffner, 2019a), pressing issues (e.g., Shoffner, 2019b). For example, after considering how to offer students more latitude in directing their own learning, I created reading banks for the Spring 2022 iteration of the course. Each bank offers 18-20 different articles/chapters addressing a component of MG ELA (e.g., reading, writing, language, technology). Students choose readings of interest from the appropriate bank for the classes in which we focus on the given component.

My reframing of the larger context of the course offers a second example. While MG methods still focuses on developing students' understanding of and skill with MG ELA adolescents, curriculum, and instruction, I now orient students' learning using three overarching questions: What does it mean to be a good middle school ELA teacher? How can ELA curriculum and instruction challenge adolescents' learning? Why are pedagogical choices always issues of equity and justice?

Both of these examples illustrate the results of reflective consideration over time. Like faculty around the world, however, I was required to revisit every aspect of my teaching immediately when COVID-19 descended mid-semester in Spring 2020. Where previously I rethought elements of MG methods throughout the semester or during the summer, I was now forced to reconsider every aspect of the course immediately: my pedagogical reliance on class discussion and in-class group work, my required readings and assignments, and even my interactions with students.

With the return to what is now regular university life, I am again teaching MG methods in a classroom down the hall from my office. Some students still wear masks; some do not; all engage in class discussion and in-class group work again. Some readings have been changed; some assignments have been revised; some topics have been reframed – typical alterations that occur every semester. However, MG methods is somehow not the same as it was prior to the pandemic. It feels different, from my classroom instruction to my interactions with students to my approaches to the material.

I firmly believe Cochran-Smith's (2003) assertion that good teaching requires both professional competence and personal connection – and previous self-studies have helped me to explore this combination of pedagogical expertise and relational interaction (e.g., Shoffner, 2014). The pandemic's disruption reinforced the importance of care in the classroom, which Rogers and Webb (1991) identify as a component of good teaching. While I do not question the quality of my teaching (any more than I typically do), I do question how it has changed in response to our virological upheaval and what that means for my teaching in the methods course. As such, this self-study uses the lens of pedagogical care to engage with these questions.

The Framework of Pedagogical Care

Learning, motivation, and engagement are interconnected foundational elements of the classroom (Bundick et al, 2014); in order for students to learn, they must see meaningful connections between the material and their own interests or goals. Likewise, care is an integral part of teaching and learning. Though care in teaching can take many different forms (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006), it is grounded in teachers' relationships with, acceptance of, and responsiveness to students (e.g., Gay, 2010; Noddings, 2005) – for example, responding to expressed versus assumed needs (Noddings, 2012) or grounding interactions in love, well-being, and joy (Love, 2019).

Care is also located in the pedagogical. Pedagogical care is situated within personal, professional, and institutional relationships, found in the actions and behaviors that support students' emotional and intellectual development (Hawk & Lyons, 2008). While pedagogical in action, such care occurs in ways that allow students to "feel valued, listened to, and recognized" (Nicol et al, 2010, p. 241) in their efforts to learn. As such, pedagogical care encompasses the

> skills and dispositions that enhance the pedagogical relationship…activities that offer guided participation
> and practice, and…approaches to help our students become more competent in the content and skills of

the course, more self-directed in their learning, more cultivating of the value of relationships, and more capable in modeling an ethic of care to others. (Hawk & Lyons, 2008, p. 324).

The framework of pedagogical care allows me to consider my instructional practices, course materials, and relationships with and expectations of students through a different lens. It also offers a lens by which to consider my teaching in the context of the pandemic. Using the framework of pedagogical care in this self-study, then, supports my efforts to "achieve a more conscious mode of professional activity [in my teaching], in contrast to action based on habit, tradition, and impulse" (Samaras, 2002, p. xxiv).

Methods

Framed through pedagogical care, this self-study sought to answer two questions: 1) In what ways has my pedagogy changed in the ELA MG methods class through navigating the COVID-19 pandemic? 2) How have these changes reframed my pedagogical understandings and expectations?

The primary data for this self-study consist of syllabi and lesson plans for the MG methods course from three specific semesters: fall 2017, fall 2020, and spring 2022. The 2017 course represents my initial teaching of MG methods; eight students were enrolled in the course. The 2020 course represents my teaching during the pandemic; ten students were enrolled in this course. The 2022 course is representative of my current teaching of MG methods; in this year, 14 students were enrolled.

A point of clarification may be useful in understanding my choice of data for this self-study. To explore my personal pedagogy, I have chosen to analyze only personal pedagogical materials – specifically syllabi and lesson plans – that were developed from my individual pedagogical understandings and expectations. They capture, as best they can, my pedagogy at the time. These are in contrast to materials that were created in response to my pedagogy, such as students' submitted assignments or informal evaluations from class. Student-produced materials are a rich source of data for further examinations of my pedagogy, however, so I will draw from them during my presentation at the Castle Conference.

While this self-study is focused on my individual instruction, the "involvement of others [is needed] so that the learning outcomes are much more than personal constructions of meaning" (Loughran, 2005, p. 6). Accordingly, I worked with a student research assistant in the fall of 2022 to analyze the primary data. Using qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002), the research assistant examined the three sets of syllabi and lesson plans for agreements, disagreements, and repeating patterns. Regular check-ins ascertained the trajectory of the analysis and confirmed initial findings.

This analysis identified established, new, revised, and deleted elements of the syllabi and lesson plans. These were collected in a spreadsheet organized by the given categories. For example, an established element was the professor's contact information on the first page of the syllabi and the students' full names on the first page of the lesson plans. In the 2022 syllabus, my office phone number was not included and my pronouns were first added; in the 2022 lesson plans, I first included notes on students' expressed learning needs, as provided on a questionnaire.

Additionally, my self-study was supported through collaboration with a critical friend (Schuck & Russell, 2005), a fellow teacher educator who also teaches methods courses, although in a different subject area. We frequently discuss our respective practices and chosen curriculum, as well as student responses to these elements; within the last years, our conversations have also included considerations of care. During the Fall 2022 semester, these conversations were more intentionally focused on asking questions of and offering perspectives on pedagogical care. My scribbled notes following these conversations captured my CF's questions and conclusions, which both supported and challenged the ongoing analysis and my own understandings (Costa & Kallick, 1993).

Of note, however, is the additional insight offered by the student research assistant. This student had previously taken an adolescent literature course with me so, while not familiar with the MG methods course, he was familiar with my instruction and personality, and this familiarity added to our discussions of the data analysis. While I did not consider him a critical friend at the time, he did take on many qualities of that role: asking direct questions, complicating

understandings, and offering perspectives. Stolle et al.'s (2018) examination of what constitutes a critical friend reminds us that "complicated terms require complex characteristics" (p. 149).

Instructional Changes

My first question asks in what ways my pedagogy changed in MG methods through navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. My second question considers how these changes speak to my altered pedagogical understandings and expectations. Some changes were clear, some became clear only through further study, and all pointed to my – and my students' – experience of the pandemic as a catalyst to rethink instruction and learning.

Attendance

While attendance became a flexible situation by necessity during the pandemic, my approach to attendance clearly changed over the last five years. In 2017, my syllabus stated that attendance was required and assessed, with students allowed only one absence without penalty. In 2020, I asked students to speak to me if there was an issue with their attendance so we could discuss how best to address the issue in a proactive and positive way. By 2022, my attendance statement had evolved further, as demonstrated in the syllabus language below (Figure 1):

Figure 1

Attendance Statement in Fall 2022 Syllabus

Attendance: If you are not in class, we will miss you, and then we will worry about you, so please *contact me ASAP* if you will not/cannot make it to class. • Barring extenuating circumstances, "I'll just join via Zoom" is not an attendance option for F2F classes.

With less officious and more personal language, I reminded students that they belonged to a community that would miss them. Communication with my students became the focus rather than the absence itself – and the students did communicate. Rarely did a student miss class without sending an email to alert me to their absence, giving me the chance to respond to their specific situation and direct them to next steps (e.g., stop by during my office hours, review the class Google doc for the day's discussion).

In their emails, students frequently asked if they could or should attend class online if we were meeting face-to-face. In 2020, I worked to accommodate those requests, often setting up my own laptop in the classroom to interact with students directly. In 2022, I did not. As my CF and I often mused, students were ill before COVID and clearly not expected to come to class; having the technology to do so now did not mean it was best for them to do so. Instead, I encouraged students to focus on their mental and physical health so they could return to class rested and ready. I then worked with them on an individual basis to determine what was needed to keep them on track—from truncating assignments to moving due dates—rather than expecting them to simply catch up once they returned.

Course Feedback

I have always made an effort to collect some form of feedback from students, in addition to the university's course evaluations. Whether through exit tickets or an online question form, I want to know what is working in the course and what needs to improve for their learning. In 2017, I collected this feedback mid-semester and end-of-semester. I collected feedback more often in 2020, usually in response to our constantly changing circumstances.

As my lesson plans revealed, in 2022, I gathered feedback roughly every four weeks, using some form of the same three questions each time: What is working well? What needs improvement? What else would you like me to know? While I used students' feedback to make adjustments as I could – by clarifying a rubric or explaining a concept – the feedback was more often used to revise the course for the following semester – by altering an assignment or dropping a reading. With more frequent checks in 2022, I had the opportunity to make adjustments throughout the semester, such as providing more wait time during discussions, capturing key points of class discussion on the board, or meeting with a student about a specific concern.

Perhaps the most informative aspect of this feedback, however, was what students shared in response to the third question. Answers ranged from the comical to the serious, yet students frequently had something they wanted to share: their enjoyment of a specific reading, their anxiety about an upcoming assignment, their happiness with an anticipated weekend event. Whatever they offered, this insight into the personal provided me with context for their learning in MG methods. For example, knowing they were not disengaged with the course material but exhausted from navigating their busy lives helped guide adjustments I could make to the course, such as moving a due date, rethinking an assignment, or taking time in the next class to share what was happening in their lives.

Questioning

Lesson plans cannot capture everything that happens in a classroom; as Posner (2004) notes, the official curriculum rarely matches the enacted. This was especially true through the pandemic, with planned lessons frequently pivoting between face-to-face and virtual instruction. However, syllabi and lesson plans indicate both a change in the questions asked of my students and the ways in which those questions engaged students with the material.

For example, I tend to open class with a brief activity of some sort, such as a written response or a quick question and answer. Depending on the instructional environment, these might be completed on a notecard, in an online app, or on the classroom whiteboard. Often, these activities reference the day's readings in some way. Over time, these opening activities moved away from comprehension-type questions (e.g., What were the author's main points in today's readings? What are two questions you have after reading?) to more open-ended questions (e.g., How might you apply something from the readings in your practicum classroom?). They also moved away from the readings entirely: Students might complete a quick freewrite (e.g., What is one way you will turn off during spring break?) or respond aloud to a topic (e.g., share something interesting from your practicum).

I also began to incorporate more big picture questioning into MG methods. Starting in 2020, I added an overarching question to each assignment's description in the syllabus. For example, in 2022, I asked "How can visuals engage critical thinking?" for an assignment that required students to illustrate an adolescent novel's theme (see Figure 2). For a curriculum rationale of that same novel, I asked "What does this text offer to student learners?" These questions were not directly addressed, i.e., I did not require students to write a response to them, but they guided my teaching of the concepts under study and, ideally, the students' engagement with those concepts.

Figure 2

Example of an Assignment's Overarching Question in Fall 2022 Syllabus

YA theme
How can visuals engage critical thinking?
Using the medium of your choice, illustrate a key theme of your YA novel. • You will bring whatever visual medium you select (e.g., Canva, collage, original artwork) to class. • With the exception of the novel's title and author, you must use <u>only</u> images (i.e., no other alphabetic text <u>at all</u>).

The 2020 syllabus revealed the addition of intentional reflective questioning with a summative reflection assignment. In this assignment, students were asked to reflect on their development as a teacher using five provided questions. Three of these related to the course's overarching questions; one addressed personal growth; the last addressed the

pandemic. I altered this assignment in 2022, making it a face-to-face conversation with the professor rather than a written paper. Students were provided with a short list of topics – such as one class reading you disliked or one way you developed as a learner – as a foundation for the meeting but our conversations varied according to the students' responses and their own questions. These 20-minute conversations, held in my office throughout finals week, were more informal than a paper yet provided a deeper understanding of students' thinking with the opportunity for clarification and explanation.

Pedagogical Care

Examining my MS methods course before, during, and after COVID through the lens of pedagogical care offers the opportunity to better understand not only how my instruction has changed but why it may have done so. I have always cared about my students – even if manifestations of that care looked different than students might expect (e.g., Shoffner, 2014) – but this self-study offers insight into how I have adjusted my teaching to care for my students.

Some adjustments are clearly in response to the pandemic. The 2020 syllabus, for example, added information about student assistance options on campus and specifically addressed students' mental health. That information is also included in 2022 (and will remain in my syllabi going forward). Adjustments to my lesson plans are not so clearly connected yet, upon reflection, have likely evolved from my experiences with students through the pandemic. For example, each semester's lesson plans are a continuous document; each document starts with a list of students' names and pronunciations. My lesson plans in 2022 also included notes on students' individual needs as learners, gathered from an introductory survey and my own observations. These notes range from "diagnosed with ADHD" to "prefers hard copies of materials" to "needs time to think before class discussion."

The changes in my approach to attendance, my collection of course feedback, and my reconsideration of the types of questions used in class reveal pedagogical care for my students. They are more student-centered in tone and language; they respond more clearly to students as individuals; they connect the MG methods course to issues beyond the classroom. They are also better aligned with my efforts to create a constructivist learning environment (Richardson, 1997), where students are involved in a collaborative community to direct and engage in their own learning.

More broadly, these changes reflect consideration of Noddings' (2012) tenets of relational care: the need to listen to students, think critically about enactments of care, create a caring classroom, and connect care to life beyond the classroom. While not expressions of pedagogical care, per so, these tenets identify actions that shape care in the classroom and, by extension, guide pedagogical care. These changes are also indicative of relational teacher education (e.g., Kitchen, 2005), which is grounded in "respect for adult learners and…a genuine belief that each prospective teacher must construct [their] own meaning as a curriculum maker" (p. 201).

Conclusion

As the pandemic has emphasized, we need to listen to our students in order to (try to) respond to their needs, whether academic, personal, relational, or emotional in nature. Responding to students as individuals and adults – albeit developing ones – helps to create a caring instructional environment, one that considers students' lives beyond the classroom as relevant input on pedagogical actions.

The question that opened this paper – "Am I being more flexible now or do I just not care enough?" – was offered by my colleague (and CF), admittedly somewhat flippantly. However, it captures an important point: She was questioning not whether we care for our students but whether we care about our teaching.

In responding pedagogically to both events and students throughout (and, eventually, after) this pandemic, our courses and our teaching have changed. We have changed. We check in more frequently with our students: at the beginning of class, in the hallway, and via email. We are more flexible with absent students, late assignments, and missed deadlines. We revise our assignments, as well as our expectations, in response to more issues than before. So, when my colleague and I compare our teaching now with that in the before times, we find ourselves wondering: Are we wasting instructional time? Have we lowered our expectations? Do we care less about teaching than we used to?
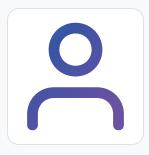
Pedagogical care assures us that we are not, have not, and do not. While not always successful, I am responding to where my students and I find ourselves now rather than before. I am adjusting my efforts to define, engage, and model necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions in an intentionally caring environment. I am rethinking how to develop students' competency with their course content while responding to them as individuals with lives outside my classroom. These are ongoing efforts, of course, that will continue to be shaped by any number of factors (hopefully none of them on the scale of COVID-19). My examination of these efforts through self-study, however, ensures that I can "proactively consider and plan not only for the academic and professional learning of my students, but also for the socio-emotional aspects of my classroom" (Martin, 2020, p. 320). In doing so, I may be able to build "authentic relationships [that] are reciprocal and foster growth and change for [all] those involved" (Trout, 2018, p. 44).

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