

Scaffolding Liberatory Practices in Preservice Teacher Education

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Section II. Abstract Information

Target Audience Level

- All

Keywords

- Attack on public education
- Censorship
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Short Abstract

Pre-service teachers who experience liberatory practices in their teacher education program are more likely to enact them in their teaching. In this Research to Action presentation, we explore the potential of thinking walls and exhibitions of learning as innovative entry points to nurturing liberatory student-centered practitioners in a teacher education program. We will discuss how modeling these tools transforms pre-service teachers' understanding of teaching and learning for student agency and self-directed learning. We present these tools as an accessible and effective entry into democratic teaching. Participants in this session will have opportunities to engage in these practices and reflect on how these tools could be effectively integrated into their own contexts.

A. Statement of the issue.

Education aims to achieve liberation through humanizing practices (Bartolomé, 1994; Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994). However, pre-service teachers often find it challenging to align this goal with the realities of their field placements. Despite the push for creative and understanding-driven classrooms, U.S. schools are restricted by outdated structures, including rigid "evidence-based practices," high-stakes testing, and off-the-shelf curricula. These systems prioritize mass replication over individualized learning and student voice. To truly transform education, pre-service education programs should emphasize and model teaching methods that boost student-driven learning and agency without venturing into contentious topics.

B. Literature review.

In the prevailing sociopolitical climate, Viesca and colleagues highlight a challenge: while liberating, creative, and critical thinking-based pedagogies are essential, they are often mistaken for indoctrinating the youth. Given the harsh criticism faced by educators, as evidenced by Renkl (2022), there's a delicate balance to strike. We need to encourage new teachers to be innovative while ensuring they aren't made scapegoats. Pre-service teachers should be equipped with effective teaching methods and curriculum design that transition classrooms from teacher-centric to student-centric models without any political bias. Yet, many of these prospective teachers have not benefited from such practices during their own K-12 schooling. Hence, training programs must offer both significant and secure guidance to help pre-service teachers appreciate and implement liberating educational approaches.

Documentation of learning is one such tool that preservice teachers can experience and learn as they develop student-centered pedagogies. Grounded in the work of Reggio Emilia (Edwards, 2002), documentation of learning encourages creative thinking, links new knowledge to existing mental frameworks, and empowers students. Harvard's Project Zero has articulated and curated a collection of effective models and tools to develop student-centered arts-integrated classrooms (Gardener & Rinaldi, 2001). Both Reggio Emilia and Project Zero emphasize key components of creativity and understanding: metacognition, process over product, and collaboration over rote learning.

Feldman (1994) defines creativity as "the purposeful transformation of a body of knowledge, where that transformation is so significant that the body of knowledge is irrevocably changed from the way it was before" (p. 86). To transform "a body of knowledge" requires a deep understanding of the ideas within the body of knowledge and the spaces in which these ideas are interpreted (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). "Understanding," according to Hetland (2013), is the ability to flexibly apply knowledge to novel situations, contrasting it with mere rote memorization. This interpretation and application of knowledge, or "doing," constitutes the essence of understanding.

Hetland (2013) asserts that modern schools should prioritize educating for understanding, emphasizing dispositional knowledge or habits of mind, such as observation, reflection, and experimentation. These core practices of artists are the foundation for creative thinking. Teachers, who are positioned closest to students in modern schools, must have opportunities to practice cultivating their own and others' understandings.

Documentation of learning over time, reflection on learning, and frequent moments of synthesis are essential practices in democratic models of education. Two especially effective tools for nurturing these include thinking walls and exhibitions of learning. Thinking walls are intentionally created spaces where students articulate and make visible their thinking on a particular concept, question, or lesson over time. Exhibitions of learning are opportunities for students to share the process of their learning with an audience. In our work, we found that modeling these approaches, and having pre-service teachers explore the shift in their own learning as a result of using these tools, helped our pre-service teachers re-envision how to approach their own pedagogy and practice in ways that would help develop student agency, voice, and thinking.

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C. Contribution

In this enlightening presentation, we delve into the intricacies of how seemingly straightforward tools can be harnessed to achieve profound depths of learning. Drawing inspiration and evidence from our personal journeys and experiences, we aim to showcase the power and potency of these methods. Stories, anecdotes, and firsthand accounts of our practice aren't just narratives; they offer a rich tapestry of insights, revealing the tangible outcomes of these tools in real-life scenarios. According to Clandinin & Connelly (1995), such narratives and examples serve as a beacon for introspection, inviting individuals to gain invaluable wisdom from lived experiences and engage in reflection about their own methods and approaches.

Furthermore, the sharing of these stories creates a platform for collaborative learning, as mentioned by Souto-Manning (2011). When we share, we open doors for colleagues to not only familiarize themselves with unfamiliar strategies but also to rethink and rehearse them collaboratively. For participants, these shared narratives are not passive tales, but they serve as catalysts. By absorbing and reflecting upon them, educators are empowered to reimagine and reshape their own classrooms and teaching programs. The overarching objective is the transformation of traditional educational spaces into ones that embrace freedom and liberation.

Emphasizing participation, this presentation doesn't merely impart knowledge but stands as a testament to the spirit of collective inquiry and growth. The structure and ethos of the presentation mirror the values it espouses, providing a space for collaboration, inquiry, and mutual growth. As Day (2004) notes, in these challenging sociopolitical times, it's imperative for us to band together, and, more crucially, to equip preservice teachers to adeptly maneuver through them.

D. Relevance

An essential part of teaching for liberation is ensuring students are familiar with liberatory ideas about the nature and purpose of democratic schooling. Teaching theory does not necessarily provide a roadmap to change practice. New teachers often find it hard to see how theory becomes relevant at the classroom level. This work requires that teachers and preservice teachers learn ways to document learning, facilitate engagement, student voice, and higher-level thinking. Thinking walls and exhibitions of learning show pre-service teachers how to be co-researchers with their students. Because pre-service teachers may not have experienced these liberatory learning practices in their own K-12 experience, and they are unlikely to experience them in their practicum of field placement, their teacher education programs may be the only place they can explore how to create these tools to transform learning and teaching.

In the complex U.S. landscape, teachers face external pressures on teaching content and methods, often equating critical thinking with ideological bias. This makes schools restrictive environments for all involved. Yet, simple tools like thinking walls and exhibitions of learning, which foster profound understanding and interconnectedness, hold a radical potential to create liberatory classrooms. Amidst the current sociopolitical challenges, these techniques offer "safe" avenues for teachers to strive for liberatory outcomes. While recognizing the current cautious nature of teaching, our aim is forward-looking—to craft a more liberated and just future. We provide this space as a platform to challenge prevailing pedagogical norms and offer pre-service teachers an alternative vision to consider for their practice.

E. Implication for Action

Transforming schools into liberatory spaces requires a shift in focus for teachers from emphasizing outcomes to valuing the learning process and student growth. By making thinking visible, students' reflections gain prominence as essential products of education, fostering deeper understanding and lifelong learning practices.

Preservice teachers must have opportunities to experience and learn ways to document learning in the classroom as an effective tool for facilitating high-level thinking and personal engagement. Thinking walls and exhibitions of learning offer opportunities for learners to make their thinking visible to classmates, teachers, and members of the community. These simple practices provide insight into what is often invisible—how and what students are thinking. These strategies are really assessment strategies, assessment in its truest sense—understanding what learners are thinking and knowing in order to help them grow. These practices are also fruitful in demystifying what happens in classrooms. Amid today's sociopolitical climate, where schools and teachers are often accused of indoctrinating students, these tools offer innovative yet non-controversial support for educators who want to create democratic spaces for learning.

Integrating thinking walls and exhibitions of learning into preservice teacher education is one way to prepare culturally relevant and responsive practitioners who focus on innovative interdisciplinary learning for all students as a pathway to creating a liberatory classroom. Thinking walls create a foundation for self-regulated, creative, interdisciplinary learning across all age groups and skill levels. Simultaneously, they help develop preservice teachers' self-reflection, voice, and identities. Exhibitions of learning help preservice teachers see the value of making thinking visible and celebrating learning-in-process rather than product, pushing back on the rigidity of standardized curricula and high-stakes testing.

F. Methods

In this session, we will provide paper, markers, and tape, encouraging participants to add their notes and ideas to our thinking wall as the presentation unfolds. We will start with an overview of the purpose of thinking walls and exhibitions of learning, contextualizing both strategies in the Reggio Emilia pedagogy and the Making Thinking Visible framework from Harvard's Project Zero. Participants will then have a few minutes to add their notes to our group thinking wall, gather more supplies, then return to their seats. Next, we will present a vividly illustrated slide deck that documents our preservice teachers creating collaborative thinking walls. We will discuss how to scaffold the use of this tool. Participants will be invited to turn and talk and write reflections on what they notice in our photographs, questions that arise for them, and ideas for integrating thinking walls into their own preservice programs. There will be a short break for participants to add their ideas to our group thinking wall.

We will then move into slides about exhibitions of learning, illustrated with photographs of our preservice teachers engaged in exhibitions of learning in our own teacher preparation program. We will discuss how to scaffold the use of this tool. Participants will have time to turn and talk and write reflections on

what they notice in our photographs, questions that arise for them, and ideas for integrating exhibitions of learning into their own preservice programs. There will be a short break for participants to add their ideas to our group thinking wall.

Finally, we will model an exhibition of learning, providing the audience with post-it notes and giving them time to read through the group thinking wall and respond in writing to each other's thoughts with new reflections. Our session will end with time for

Section III. Content Learning Objectives

1. Participants in this session will understand how students use thinking walls and exhibitions of learning to document and reflect on learning,
2. Participants in this session will understand how the research of Reggio Emilia and Project Zero can apply to practice in an elementary teacher preservice program.
3. Participants will articulate how documentation of the learning process increases preservice students engagement, metacognition, and self-directed learning and implementation of similar processes in the field.

Section IV. Aligning with AACTE Strategic Priorities and Core Values

1. **Advocate for high-quality educator preparation. Graduates of educator preparation programs will be profession-ready and prepared to meet the needs of PK-12 districts and schools.**

Schools in the U.S. are bound by outdated structures that limit innovative teaching. The emphasis on "evidence-based practices", high-stakes testing, and standardized curricula prioritize outcomes over the holistic learning process. To create liberatory spaces in schools, there's a need to shift from outcome-centered to process-centered education, starting with pre-service programs. Teachers who have experienced liberatory practices in their own learning are more likely to use them in their classrooms. Pre-service teachers who experience liberatory practices in their teacher education program are more likely to enact them in their teaching.

2. **Prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion. Educator preparation programs and their faculty, students, and communities will provide successful learning environments that demonstrate diversity, equity, and inclusion.**

Education for diversity equity and inclusion should challenge oppression and pursue liberation through humanizing practices (Bartolomé, 1994; Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994). Achieving this purpose requires moves toward education for creativity and understanding, which allow pre-service teachers the tensions with the practices they experience in their field placements.

3. **Advance educator preparation policy, practice, and research. The use of leading-edge research and models of innovative practice will advance the field of educator preparation and strengthen public education for all students.**

Incorporating thinking walls and learning displays into preservice teacher training can effectively equip educators to be culturally attuned and responsive. This fosters innovative interdisciplinary education, benefitting all students and paving the way for a liberating classroom environment. Thinking walls act as a bedrock for independent, imaginative, and cross-disciplinary learning for all age brackets and competencies. In tandem, they enhance preservice teachers' introspection, voice, and individual identities. Showcasing the learning journey encourages preservice teachers to prioritize transparent thought processes and to value the journey of learning over the mere end product. This counters the constraints of standardized teaching methods and the pressures of high-stakes examinations. We are also including our research results and a preview of our on going research in this domain.