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## **Beyond “Empty Verbalism”: How Teacher Candidates Benefit From Blogging About a Tutoring Practicum**

TESOL programs and courses around the world are increasingly offered partly or wholly online. Online instruction offers both new affordances and distinct challenges for effective instruction, particularly when it comes to supervising fieldwork. This article compares 2 distinct online formats for student reflections on their tutoring experiences in the practicum component of a course on teaching second language reading. In particular, the article examines how 2 different reflection formats afforded qualitatively distinct student reflections on how they modified their understandings of learning, learners, teaching, and the contexts of learning through (a) interacting with their tutee, (b) implementing new instructional practices, and (c) interacting with their peers about their tutorial. Findings are discussed in terms of the affordances and challenges provided by distinct ways of configuring the online reflection for these field experiences, comparing student work in blogs, discussion boards, and reports submitted individually to the instructor.

### **Introduction**

A primary goal of teacher education is to introduce novice educators to theories and research based on systematic investigations of language, language learners, language learning, and effective teaching approaches. One key role of fieldwork is to provide novices with an opportunity to implement in concrete situations of practice the theories and approaches to which they have been introduced. In their fieldwork experience, teacher candidates are expected to use subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge as tools

for problem solving and thinking about the actual teaching situation. As Johnson and Golombek (2011) argue, the goal of teacher education is to move these candidates from a reliance on the “everyday concepts” based only on their limited prior experience, to “scientific concepts” based on systematic investigations of a particular phenomenon. Fieldwork, thus, is organized as a form of mediation of the learning experience, providing tools, concepts, and social spaces in which teachers transform their thinking and internalize new forms of understanding.

This study takes a sociocultural approach to teacher learning to investigate how two distinct online formats for students to report and reflect upon their experiences afforded specific types of teacher development and reflection. Drawing on a language socialization approach to teacher learning, this study explores how novice teachers changed their understandings of language, student learning, learners, teaching, and the learning context through (a) engagement with their tutee, (b) implementation of new instructional practices, and (c) interaction with other students in the course. In particular, this article will examine how the implementation of a blog format for reflecting on and sharing their experiences in their tutorials fostered richer opportunities for learning, reflection, and interaction.

### ***Teacher Professional Development as Language Socialization***

Scholars of teacher professional development for K-12 contexts have long highlighted the need for teacher collaboration and interaction, knowledge sharing, and problem solving of relevance to authentic instructional contexts (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). According to these researchers, important opportunities for professional socialization occur when teachers share their knowledge, set goals for inquiry and learning, and connect theories and research to their own unique teaching contexts. In *Second Language Teacher Education* in particular, Johnson and Golombek (2011) applied a sociocultural lens to teacher education and professional development, arguing that teachers’ thinking about their instructional practice arises out of social activity. They argue that teachers must go beyond simple content knowledge to the procedural knowledge needed to apply what they know about content in the context of teaching: “It is hardly surprising that teacher candidates are often left with *empty verbalism*, where they can name the scientific concepts that are relevant to SLTE but have not internalized these concepts in such a way that they become psychological tools for thinking” (p. 3). This learning within field experiences is mediated by tools that guide learners’ thinking as they move from externalized concepts, such as theories and approaches to teaching, to internalized concepts that they can apply in their own contexts of

practice. “These tools, or mediational means, represent cultural artifacts and activities, concepts, and our social relations with others” (p. 4).

Language socialization research examines how, through participation and interaction with others in authentic social and cultural activities, novices develop the knowledge and practices that constitute their community’s ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world. Language socialization research has investigated, for example, how novices in a range of professions develop professional skills, values, dispositions, and social practices (Goodwin, 1994; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Mertz, 2007; Philips, 1982; Roberts, 2010). Goodwin (1994) argues that the material tools of a profession—such as a soil color chart for archaeologists—mediate novices’ engagement with the conceptual knowledge of their field, demonstrating that this mediation occurs within specific social, interactional, and material contexts. The soil color chart, then, represents a cultural activity and artifact that mediates novices’ internalization of archaeological concepts in ways that allow them to apply these concepts to the archaeological practice of analyzing soil samples. Interaction with more expert archaeologists further mediates novices’ problem solving by providing feedback and guidance throughout the process. Through participation in these activities, novices acquire the skills and symbolic practices of their professions. They learn to “see” the phenomenal world in novel ways through the lenses of their profession’s conceptual frameworks. For novice teachers, the field experience is infused with a number of mediational means that move learners toward internalizing the scientific concepts in our field to the everyday practice of teaching students.

This study examines how teacher candidates transformed their understandings of teaching, learning, and learners through engagement with the mediational tools provided in two versions of a reading methods course for engaging in, reflecting upon, and interacting with peers about their tutorial experiences. Following Duranti (2010), the analysis draws upon Husserl’s notion of “modification” to elucidate the ways in which teachers’ understandings undergo change through their participation in the course. This concept relies on the assumption that we, as humans, “constitute” the world around us through our ways of relating to that world. As Duranti explains, Husserl’s concept of “modification” refers to shifts in the ways we understand and constitute the phenomenal world—shifts in our ways of feeling about it, making sense of it, attending to it, and acting toward it. In other words, “The ‘phenomenon’—in the sense of what it appears to be for us—changes as a result of our way of relating to it” (p. 209). Duranti proposes that we view language socialization as a series of such modi-

fications through time that lead novices to think in particular ways about the phenomenal world that they encounter.

Furthermore, Duranti argues that such modifications involve a shift from a “natural attitude”—“the practical, moral, and aesthetic stance that we ordinarily take toward the surrounding world, human beings included”—to a “theoretical attitude”—“when we make a particular experience into an object of our reflection” (p. 213). He points out that the natural attitude arises because “After years of socialization, the way we do things has come to feel as if it is the only possible way (Dortier 2002:5). We cannot imagine another way of being and our mind and body just cannot ‘go there.’” (p. 220). The theoretical attitude, on the other hand, occurs when we step back from our experience, reflect upon it, question it, and evaluate it. In teacher education this means that teachers move away from their assumptions and misconceptions to question and reflect upon them. Another way of thinking about this is that they move from relying on their “everyday concepts” to increasingly using the “scientific concepts” of their profession as tools for rethinking and reevaluating language, the learner, their own teaching practice, and the learning context in which they are engaged. The analysis presented below examines how teacher candidates reflect upon their tutorial experiences in ways that may lead to modifications of their attitude toward their professional world.

### **Background and Setting**

This article focuses on a pedagogical innovation that took place in the online versions of the course in which this tutorial experience took place. This course is a required course in a TESOL master’s program at a California university, and the fully online version is offered once per academic year. The tutoring component of the course requires students to implement a range of tools, instructional strategies, and assessments for second language reading. The tutors report background information about the learner, the learning context, and the learner’s needs, and after each tutorial session they describe the session and reflect on it (see Appendix A for a description of the Tutorial Report assignment). During the tutorial sessions, student tutors investigate their tutee’s background, literacy experiences, motivation, and strategies through a range of surveys or assessments. Students in the course also conduct basic assessments with their learners and investigate the context of the learner’s instruction (depending on the learner’s level), such as the grade-level standards with which they are working in school, adult education standards that may apply, high-stakes tests they hope to improve upon, or any curricular goals that may be relevant to reading in the tutee’s current courses or program

(see rubric for the Assessment Plan in Appendix B). Based on these considerations, the student tutors develop tutorial sessions that are appropriately fitted to the individual tutee, and which include ongoing assessment of the learner's progress.

While the tutorial requirements remained the same, the two versions of the course being compared here differed in the format in which students reported and reflected upon their tutorial experience. In the first section of the online course, offered in Spring 2014, students' Tutorial Report—reports and reflections on the learner and the sessions—were individually submitted only to the teacher. In addition to those reports, they were required to post to online discussion boards within a small group of students who were interested in similar target teaching levels (professional learning communities, or PLC; see Appendix C for a description of this assignment). The main innovation in the second version of the course was to remove the PLC discussion-board component and to replace it with a whole-class blog. Rather than having students submit their reports individually to the instructor, they submitted their reports publicly on the blog; and rather than discussing, in a general way, problems of practice with peers in the discussion board, they replied to their peers' blogs about the tutorial in particular. The rationale behind this change was my frustration with the discussion-board posts in the original course, which were overly vague and theoretical. In addition, student feedback on the course had indicated that they desired opportunities to interact with students beyond their PLC and to hear more about what their peers were doing in the tutorials. The two versions of the course, therefore, differed from each other in important ways (see Table 1). Whereas

**Table 1**  
**Elements of Course Redesign**

<i>Course element</i>	<i>Original course</i>	<i>Redesigned course</i>
Instructional format	Online	Online
Tutorial reporting and reflections	Submitted to instructor	Published as blog to whole class
Discussion board in PLC	Yes	No
Networking with classmates	Target-level professional learning communities	Self-selected (whole class)
Tutorial Report assignment	Yes	Yes
Assessment Plan assignment	Yes	Yes

Spring 2014 students submitted their tutorial reports directly to the instructor, Spring 2015 students submitted these as a blog that could be read by their classmates.

## **Methods**

### ***Goals of the Project***

One goal of this project was to examine how teachers were able to modify their thinking about learners, learning, and teaching through the practicum component of the course. Another goal was to investigate how an innovation in the format for engaging in reflection and interaction about the tutorial experience affected the quality of these interactions. Research questions included the following:

1. How did student reflections on their tutorial experiences in the distinct formats (blogs, discussion boards, and individually submitted reports) differ?
2. To what extent did learners report modifications in their thinking about learners, the process of learning, or their teaching practice in these distinct formats?
3. To what extent did the various mediational tools in the tutorial experience (those afforded by interaction with the learner, engagement in instructional practice, or interactions with their peers) lead to these modifications?

### ***Design of the Study***

As is typical of the language socialization tradition (Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012), this study investigated students' actual discursive activity and social interaction in an authentic learning context for instances in which learning was evident, as well as examining changes in students' ways of thinking about and discussing multilingual learners and the teaching of reading over time (the academic quarter). The data consisted of students' written submissions, posts to online, interactive forums within the course, while analysis of the data examined the discourse produced by students, the written social interaction between students that occurred in these contexts, and the situational context of these interactions. In many ways, this was conducted as an ethnography of online communication examining how students reported and reflected upon their tutorial experiences in two very different formats for doing so, as well as how they interacted with each other as they did so.

### ***Data Collection and Participants***

Students who enrolled in each section of the course were invited

to voluntarily participate in this study, resulting in 12-13 participants from each version of the course, as follows: Spring 2014 participants included six males and six females, three at IEP/adult target level, two at elementary target level, two at middle/high school target level, and five at university target level; Spring 2015 participants included six males and seven females, five at IEP/adult target level, one at elementary target level, three at middle school target level, one at the high school target level, one at the community college target level, and two at university level. Participants' course submissions related to the tutorial were gathered into an NVivo (a qualitative analysis tool) workspace for coding and analysis, including: discussion board postings and responses to classmates (Spring 2014 only); tutorial write-ups and reflections; assessment assignment write-ups and reflections; tutorial blog postings and responses (Spring 2015 only); weekly reflections (Spring 2015 only). Data were made anonymous by replacing tutor, tutee, and place names with pseudonyms, and each student was given a distinct student code before entering the data into the qualitative analysis software.

### ***Data Analysis***

All qualitative data were read through in their entirety, and initial codes were created based on the broad themes and patterns that emerged. A grounded content analysis identified broad categories of instances in which tutors raised issues pertaining to cultural and linguistic diversity, instances in which tutors mentioned new understandings of second language learners, and instances in which tutors mentioned changes to their educational practice. As I read through the data, I created analytic memos about the relationships, interactions, dialogues, and reflections evident in the data. Initial codes were in turn recursively refined for finer-tuned phenomena: These codes emerge from grounded observations of what was evident in tutors' written posts about their conceptual growth, cross-cultural understanding, pedagogical content knowledge, and educational practices.

Discourse analysis was conducted on candidates' dialogue about the tutorial sessions on their blogs, reflections on their tutorial experiences, assignments pertaining to their tutorial work (Tutorial Report and Assessment Plan), and weekly reflections on each course topic. I looked for instances in which some kind of modification occurred as a result of (a) interaction with the learner; (b) engagement in instructional activities; (c) interaction with a peer. Two kinds of evidence demonstrated a modification—either a shift in the student's views, attitudes, or practice early in the quarter versus later in the quarter, or an explicit statement from the student describing such a shift.



## Findings

### *Discussion Boards: General, Theoretical, and Hypothetical*

In the earlier version of the course, students individually submitted reports to the teacher; hence these reports were not intended to provide opportunities for direct peer mediation of fellow students' tutoring experiences because they were submitted only to the instructor. Instead, students in that version of the course engaged in a discussion board in which they were asked to discuss problems of practice raised by the weekly course materials (see assignment description in Appendix C). The professional learning communities (PLCs) for these discussions included four groups of four to five students each: elementary level (PLC 1); middle/high school level (PLC 2); adult/intensive English program (IEP) level (PLC 3); university level (PLC 4). Because my expectation and goal was to foster dialogue among peers around issues of praxis, I encouraged students to discuss their concrete experiences teaching, learning, or tutoring a second language. To examine to what extent the discussion board was used to engage in dialogue and to seek feedback on their tutoring sessions, all of the discussion-board posts were coded for instances in which the writers discussed an example from their current or prior teaching, their experience learning to read in a second language, and their current tutorial sessions.

This analysis revealed that little to no mention of the tutorials was made in the discussion boards: Tutorials were mentioned only 20 times out of approximately 180 posts and replies to those posts, and 12 of these mentions occurred in PLC 3 by two specific students. In general, the discourse within the discussion board in all of the groups included either generalizations (generalizations about how "students" learn), hypothetical/potential statements (how things "should" or "would" be taught), or concrete examples from their current teaching. In the two groups that focused on K-12 teaching (PLC 1—elementary and PLC 2—middle/high school), there was almost no interaction about tutoring. In PLC 1 there is a singular mention of tutoring that extends across two modules, and in PLC 2 only one student mentioned tutoring once. Overall, these two PLCs included very experienced classroom teachers, and they shared a great deal about how they approach classroom teaching, their teaching experiences, and very practical suggestions about how the course topic for that module applies to their classroom teaching context in general ways, as opposed to reflection on specific and concrete examples from their teaching or tutoring experience, as I had hoped.

In contrast to these two groups of experienced educators, PLC 4—the university level group—included primarily students who had

no teaching experience whatsoever. I would have expected this group to draw heavily on their tutoring experiences, given the absence of teaching experiences that they could reflect upon in relation to the course content. Yet there were only two instances in which a student mentioned her tutoring experiences among the hundreds of posts and replies to the discussion board. Furthermore, only a handful of times did students in this group reflect on their own learning experiences. In fact, the discourse in this group's discussion board was dominated by framing themselves as nonexperts, making hypothetical or future statements about teaching, and stating generalizations about university students and contexts. For example, in Module 2, Student A9 stated, "As a future ESL teacher I will encourage L2 learners to draw from their past experiences in *instructional activities* so they can make the transition easier to comprehending English." Note how this statement characterizes the writer as a nonexpert (a "future ESL teacher"), states what she "will" do in the future, and generalizes about "L2 learners" in "instructional activities" in general. This type of framing occurred throughout this group's discussions, with characterizations of themselves as "future" or "potential" educators, and hypothetical or future framing of practices that they "will," "would," or "could" conduct with a general set of ESL students in an imagined university context.

PLC 3—which was focused on an adult or intensive English teaching context—included a range of degrees of teaching experience among its members. While most of their discussion revolved around their own teaching or learning experiences, they also engaged in a good deal of general or hypothetical discussion about what they would or could do in their classrooms. However, this group contained the largest number of mentions of the tutorial (12), primarily from the least experienced teacher in the group. In fact, these mentions of the tutoring experience were specifically framed by characterizing their own lack of experience teaching, with very little feedback or dialogue from peers in any of these reflections on the tutorial experiences. For example, one student wrote, "This quarter is my first attempt at teaching reading and during the course of the tutoring assignment I have been constantly wondering what would be the best way to go about teaching reading comprehension." After this statement, he continued to describe in detail a series of modifications and adaptations he made in response to challenges faced in his tutorial sessions. The author of the original post did, in fact, reply to this student with tips for teaching reading comprehension: "What are the best ways to teach reading comprehension? It seems that I have been trying to avoid the question that you are asking, but now I will put forward some ideas. ..." While these tips provided a form of mediation by explaining a range of strat-

egies for teaching reading comprehension, they remained on a general level rather than engaging problem solving about this particular tutee.

What we find, then, is that the way students actually engaged in the discussion board did not constitute a communicative space in which they normally sought feedback from their peers on their tutorial experiences, nor dialogue with each other about what was occurring in those tutorials and how it related to the course materials. Rather than reflecting on the particular details of their tutoring sessions, their learner, or their learner's development, students overwhelmingly discussed teaching in general, hypothetical terms. Hence, the discussion board failed to serve as a mediational tool in which student tutors modified their current perspectives on teaching through discussing their interaction with a particular learner (their tutee) or through dialogue with their peers. These interactions among students exemplify precisely the "empty verbalism" about which Johnson and Golombek (2011) warned us: Rather than demonstrating how to use course concepts as tools for problem solving within a concrete situation of practice, they are merely demonstrating that they can explain or articulate these concepts in a generalized way.

### ***Tutorial Blogs: Modifications to Tutors' Understandings***

In contrast to students' lack of discussion of their tutorial experiences in the discussion-board format in the original course, student tutors' participation in blogs in the redesigned course was a more effective mediational tool for reporting, reflecting upon, and interacting with fellow students about their tutorial experiences. Let us start by comparing how these two formats were situated in relation to other course activities. The mediational tool in the discussion board was similar to the blog in that both were publicly shared and interactive formats; however, they differed in how students were prompted to participate in these formats because of the way the assignments were structured (see Appendix A for the blog assignment and Appendix C for the discussion-board assignments). While the discussion board required the discussion of "issues of practice" and interaction with peers in discussions of course materials, students in Spring 2014 were required to specifically report on their tutorial sessions in an assignment submitted only to the instructor. In Spring 2015, the blog assignment combined these two functions—that of reporting on one's tutorial sessions and that of interacting with peers about issues of practice—into one format, requiring students to focus specifically on their tutorial in their discussions with peers. Hence, the tutorial blog as a mediational tool included a more structured focus on tutoring experiences combined with a public and interactive format. I found that the individu-

ally submitted reports from Spring 2014 were significantly shorter and less detailed than those reported in the blog format (about half the length compared to blogs, based on averaging the word counts for both formats). Furthermore, students participating in the whole-class blog in Spring 2015, unlike those restricted to PLC groups in Spring 2014, were able to choose which blogs they would read and comment on. I found that they overwhelmingly chose to interact primarily with students focused on other target teaching levels rather than with their own target teaching level. This indicates that the public and interactive blog fostered lengthier descriptions and reflections, as well as interactions with a broader range of fellow students than did the configuration of assignments in the earlier version of the course.

The blog, therefore, afforded a richer space in which modifications of student tutors' understandings could take place and/or be explicitly reflected upon in student reports. These modifications could include new ways of perceiving, understanding, or feeling about learners, about the concept of literacy, about how literacy is acquired, about practices for teaching literacy, or about how literacy is assessed. Student tutors could also reflect upon themselves as teachers, their relationships with learners, colleagues, and families, the social and cultural contexts in which they teach, the institutional contexts in which they operate, the learners' families, or other aspects of the social context.

In this section we explore how blog posts showed evidence that tutors modified their understandings (a) through interaction with specific learners, (b) through engagement in new types of instructional practice, and (c) through interaction with their peers. The first two types of modifications could have occurred in the original course, but they were not as likely to be demonstrated to the instructor in the individually submitted reports, which remained brief and less specific than the blogs. The third type of modification through interaction with peers was not afforded by the individual reports, and it did not occur in the medium provided for interaction with peers—the discussion board—as described above.

***Modifications through interaction with the learner.*** Encountering the particularities of an individual learner can foster modifications in how students constitute learners with deepened complexity. Through questionnaires, surveys, and assessments in both versions of the course, tutors gained detailed knowledge of learners' motivation, preferences, learning styles, and learning strategies, as well as their background and experiences (see Appendix B for a description of the Assessment Plan that was used in both versions of the course). The blog format, by focusing in more concrete ways on the particu-

lars of their work with students and allowing students to share these experiences with each other, allowed for deeper reflection on learners. To illustrate this, let us take the case of one middle school-level tutor (MS-2). Her 14-year-old, seventh-grade tutee had come to the US from Mexico two years prior and was suggested as a tutee to her by his after-school teacher. As reported in the blog post, the learner's Language Arts teacher described him as struggling in school, and he had been characterized as "lazy" and unmotivated by other teachers:

After speaking with Matthew's 7th grade Language Art's teacher, I learned that Matthew is not doing very well in that class. The teacher told me that Matthew is lazy and that I should work with a different student ... "someone more motivated and who cares about school." I got the impression from the teacher that he felt that Matthew is checked out and refuses to try.

In the first session, the tutor's work with the student on a grade-level text seemingly confirmed this other teacher's characterization, as Matthew did not engage fully with the tutorial session. After conducting a detailed assessment of the tutee's reading level, interests, and motivation—assessments that were required for our assignments—the tutor changed course and found a book closer to the tutee's reading level and interests. After this session, she reflected that she was able to see him in a new way and to modify her attitude about him:

This experience contrasted greatly with our tutoring session two weeks ago. I had not assessed my tutee yet at all then. I just worked with him on a poem that his Language Arts teacher had provided me. The poem was incredibly advanced and Matthew did not understand any of it. He appeared bored and uninterested that day. ... Today was the best day so far. Matthew started getting into the story after we read some of it and it was evident that he was succeeding at reading (decoding and comprehending) and discussing the book with me. I asked him if he liked the book and if he was curious to know what was going to happen next. He said that he was and that he wants to keep reading the book at the next tutoring sessions.

Through participation with her learner in an instructional activity focused on a text that was close to his level, she was able to see her learner as motivated and engaged in his own learning. At the end of the course, her final reflections showed that this was an important aspect of her growth in the tutorial experience:

With regards to English learners, I learned that their proficiency with the second language will more than likely have an impact on how well they perform in their classes in school. For example, my tutee was reading at around a 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level, but he was expected to complete work in his classes that required him to read at a 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. He couldn't do it, so the result was that he failed all of his classes this year. ... Teachers, like my neighboring Language Arts teacher who had my tutee as his student are not necessarily prepared to deal with beginning English learners. Sadly, this teacher misunderstood my tutee's inability to perform in class as lack of interest and defiance.

This tutor, like other teachers at her school, may at times constitute learners such as Matthew as disengaged or unmotivated. By choosing an appropriate text for the learner and working with him on the text, the tutor was able to reflect on the reasons for his behaviors and to modify her understanding of his seeming boredom as, instead, a reaction to being frustrated with grade-level texts that were too difficult for him. This student's trajectory shows how the mediational tools provided in the course for gathering detailed information about the tutee (see Appendix B for the Assessment Plan) afforded a deeper understanding of the individual's linguistic, psychological, cognitive, social, and personal characteristics. Engaging in tutorial sessions by session, tutors were able to experiment with instructional decisions that better served the individual learner. By understanding the complexity of their individual tutees and how instructional practices affected the learner, tutors were able to modify their attitude toward the learners in ways that allowed for more beneficial instructional decisions. The tutorial blog provided evidence that such modifications were very common in these tutorial sessions, especially as pertained to understanding their tutee's motivation, reading level, and individual interests.

***Modifications through reflection on instructional practice.***

Sometimes, a teacher's conceptions of learning, learners, or the context of learning can be modified as he or she engages in instructional activities with a particular learner. This is similar to what Baquedano-Lopez, Solís, and Kattan (2005) refer to as "adaptations"—changes in instructional practice that arise out of tensions within the learning situation. The experience of engaging with an individual learner, rather than a classroom full of learners, can highlight tensions or issues that may go unnoticed in the whole-class situation. In fact, this is a central feature of tutoring versus classroom teaching: Tutors must be flexible and adapt to the ongoing instructional activity. In their blogs and reflections, students sometimes mentioned such issues or tensions that

led them to change course either within a particular session or between sessions. For example, the only elementary-level teacher in the class was not an experienced teacher. He was working with a 7-year-old bilingual child in an after-school context. Early in the sessions, he chose a text that was well above the reading level of the learner, and through time he realized that this text did not work. In the first session, he stated:

I borrowed three books so I could do a little “Book presentation” to her and see which book she would find more appealing. I picked *Stuart Little* by E.B. White, *G.I. Joe at IWO JIMA* by James Kelley and *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate Dicamillo. I was hoping to motivate her to practice extensive reading and start choosing literature that she wanted to know more about. I wanted her to know that I was super excited about reading and books so she could see that reading is fun and that I liked it.

One point of emphasis in course materials and required exercises was to choose appropriate texts for learners, yet this theoretical exercise had not yet reached this tutor’s on-the-ground practice. Furthermore, without experience teaching this age group, many novices would not have a sense of which texts to choose. While these three books seem like “children’s books” to an adult, in fact they are well above the reading proficiency of most seven-year-old first graders who are still learning English. The interaction with the tutee during the first two tutorial sessions brought this to light. In the first tutorial session, the tutee, Ariana, was excited about the story but struggled when she was asked to read it:

I showed Ariana the three books I had with me and I began talking about each one of them making funny noises and exciting remarks about the characters of the books, Ariana was very engaged, she ended up picking *Stuart Little*. She began reading it, I could see that she was struggling and I tried to help her. I would correct her mispronounced words but I stopped soon after because it just distracted her and I felt I should just let her read and try to correct her own pronunciation if possible. We took turns reading because at about 15 minutes into reading she told me she was tired and did not want to read anymore, she is a very slow reader. I don’t really know how much I should have her read, so I told her I would continue to read because the book was so interesting.

In his reflections, the student noticed a struggle with reading and comprehension, but he did not identify the issue as being related to the reading or vocabulary level of the book. In the second session, he brought the same text and described even more of a struggle when he asked Ariana to read. He described a series of instructional adaptations during the session—explaining difficult words, asking questions along the way, telling Ariana to ask him questions when she did not understand something, and so forth. None of these adaptations was working—Ariana simply could not handle this text, and she was becoming increasingly frustrated and distracted. In his reflections, the student discussed several changes that may have improved the future sessions, but he did not mention the difficulty level of the book. He does, however, seem to have a sense that the book was the problem, as he stated, “I am going to change the book to a science book so Ariana can be a little more interested, not sure which one yet but I will go to the bookstore in the next few days.” At the beginning of the following session, he stated, “Ariana seemed excited to learn about the planet we live in, I will have her read Planet Earth by Miles Kelly and I think she will enjoy the book.” This book was designed for kindergartners or first graders, so it was likely to be more appropriate for Ariana’s level. Reflecting on the session, the tutor notices the difference, saying, “I think Ariana and I both really enjoyed this tutorial session. Ariana was engaged the whole time, she likes challenges. This time she hardly ask me for help, she wanted to do it all by herself.”

Through his instructional interactions with this learner, this student was able to modify his understanding of how texts are fitted to learners. Going from a general sense of texts that constitute “children’s literature” to knowledge of individual interests and struggles with vocabulary and comprehension, this tutor gradually adjusted to find a more appropriate text in terms of its difficulty and interest for this particular learner. As Brandt (2006) pointed out, rather than “being told” how to teach, educators need to go through a process of “finding out” about instructional practice—a process that “builds on existing knowledge, allows for different learning styles, provides opportunities for problem-solving, encourages autonomy, and is reflective” (p. 362). Through their tutorial experiences, students in the course were able to “find out” how the theories and practices in course materials could be of benefit to their learners.

After this student had changed the text that he used with the tutee, he engaged in some course exercises that highlight this very issue. The student’s understanding of how to choose appropriately leveled texts with the interests of the learner in mind was reinforced by these activities (see Appendix B, “Assessment Plan Rubric”). Rather than



simply “being told” about text leveling, this student had already found out through engagement with the learner. His final reflections on the tutorial examined this issue:

I made quite a lot of mistakes; I have no previous teaching experience so this was all new to me. I picked the wrong books for my tutee; they were a higher-grade level than they should have been. After using the Lexical Tutor website to find out the profile of the text, I noticed that the books were a bit of a higher reading level than they should have been. In the future, I will use these tools before I actually start tutoring a student. I will obtain a report from Fry Readability graph and figure out exactly what my tutee needs.

This and many other instances in the blog posts provided evidence that the tutorial was effectively allowing students to modify their understanding through engagement in instructional practice with a particular learner. While such modifications were, one hopes, occurring in the original version of the course as well, the brief and less detailed tutorial reports submitted to the instructor did not lead the students to describe their experiences in as much detail or to reflect on them in as much depth.

***Modifications through interaction with peers.*** There are several ways in which interaction with one’s peers could cause a modification in a student’s understandings of teaching practice. First, feedback on one’s instructional practice in responses to a blog post could initiate a rethinking of one’s prior understandings or highlight a new perspective. Second, reading and responding to another student’s blog post could highlight new ideas or perspectives. I expected to find a multitude of instances in which student tutors modified their understandings based on the responses to their own blog posts, yet this was not the case. In fact, I was hard-pressed to find clear instances in which peer responses to blog posts resulted in demonstrable modifications by the student who had written the post. On the contrary, tutors often seemed oblivious or resistant to helpful feedback that they received from peers. Instead, reading and responding to *others’* posts became the main vehicle by which tutors learned and modified their understandings through the blog format.

Some students seemed to be perceived as authorities by others, as their posts garnered relatively more attention and replies to their posts than did those of their peers. Examining these cases provides a useful illustration of the dialogue that arose in these blogs. While most students received five to eight responses over the whole term, one student

tutor at the university level (Uni-2) received 17 responses from eight different students, and another student tutor at the high school level received 20 responses from nine different students. At first glance, it seems as though these two students became sought-after authorities on the subject of teaching reading, but in fact the nature of the responses and dialogue were different in the two cases. Sometimes students responded by stating what they learned from the blog that they planned to apply to their own practice. At other times, a critical dialogue and tension arose regarding the practices described in the blog. In the case of the student Uni-2, many of the responses mentioned what they learned, or useful resources that they had acquired from the blog. For example, the following comment from the community college-level tutor states how she plans to adapt her practice based on ideas in Uni-2's blog:

Hey Uni-2, As usual, great post. ... you managed to keep your tutee focused on reading-related materials even when he seemed to want to venture into other territory. I think I'll borrow a play from your book. In other words, the next time my tutee wants to discuss writing I'll have her read an excerpt about effective writing and discuss it with me. Have a great day!

Similarly, one of the middle school-level tutors (MS-2) comments that she will use Uni-2's blog post as a resource for ideas about teaching vocabulary:

You have summarized the high points of what we studied in the Vocabulary module very well. Your tutee is lucky to have you as you gave him such a comprehensive list of strategies for learning and then remembering new vocabulary words. I will refer to your post as I reminder of the many different ways vocabulary can be taught.

The high school-level tutor (HS-1) also seemed to serve as a model or authority for other students, receiving a higher level of traffic than did other students. Responses to her posts came from students in each of the other target levels, and these students often returned multiple times to her blog, responding between two to four times during the term. These responses included compliments and praise as well as critique and suggestions. Many students described what they learned from her blogs:

Student IEP-2: Thanks for sharing your experience with your tu-

tee. Recording tutee's voice is very interesting. It must be helpful to check his mispronounced words and correct them. I would like to do that. Let me know how it works next tutorial session. Thanks.

Student ES: I really like how you structure your plan for the session and the "I do, we do, you do" model that you follow. I will try to use this with my tutee so she too can see examples of creating sentences.

Student MS-2: I saw how you and Uni-2 mentioned Mikulecky page 40, so I checked it out. What a great page! So many strategies are all mentioned. I am going to refer to that page as I read with my students, as well as with my tutee.

This tutor made some decisions about her tutorial that turned out to be somewhat controversial among her peers. Early in the term, she decided to focus on strategic reading of a difficult grade-level assigned text with her tutee, rather than allowing the tutee to select a text at his own level. This brought some critical and questioning comments. For example, one student (CC) commented that she might want to reconsider this choice and select a text that was more motivating for the student:

You can also practice more extensive reading to spark interest in him to want to read more, maybe he isn't very interested in the 'Lord of the Flies' book but he can become a better reader if you motivate him to bring a book of his choice next time around.

The controversy led other students to question the decision but also to suggest some possible ways to strategically engage with the text. An IEP/adult-level tutor's comment reflected on what she had done, showed surprise at the difficulty of the text, and added a supportive comment suggesting some strategies for supporting the learner's comprehension:

Hello HS-1, Based on his interest in war and history, you've chosen an excellent and very challenging book. It is understanding that he showed a bit unwilling to initiate reading by himself. In the first session you were there for support through some difficult vocabulary. Although his reading level is below his grade level, you've given him something to think about. He knows you have expectations, and through your encouragement he'll come to en-

joy the story. Wow! I've skimmed through sections of the book and see that the descriptive imagery is quite detailed. There are a lot of geographical references describing land features (vegetation, terrain, etc.). In addition, the action-packed sequences are non-stop. As you know, he needs to paint this flowery imagery into his imagination. He also knows what it's like to fit in with peers, and which kids vie to dominate. Since this story is such a descriptive piece, you may have to introduce the characters and setting with video at some point after he's made his guesses. It'll help him picture the characters and landscape as he tries to read alone. Words of warning: (beginning of Ch. 2) gesticulated, martyred, and ebullience. Interested to see how he comes along. Good Luck.

And a middle school-level tutor added another strategy to support the learner's engagement with this difficult text:

Hi HS-1, This is quite challenging. I think I would frontload by teaching difficult vocabulary from the selection before your tutee even reads it. That way your tutee will better understand what he reads. Frontloading is really helpful. Anything you can show your student before he reads can help give him prior knowledge. At my school, we have a license for Brainpop. It presents short videos on just about everything! I found this one on *Lord of the Flies*. [Gives web citation.]

These latter two comments demonstrate how reading another student's blog can inspire a new perspective on teaching and learning. While most students in the course focused on teaching texts at the appropriate level (possibly because of what the course materials conveyed about text leveling and selection for the purposes of guided reading, extensive reading, and fluency instruction), this student is taking a more strategic approach, and these responders have stopped to reflect on what that means and how that kind of approach can be implemented more effectively. The student tutor's surprising approach, which they encounter in the process of reading about those sessions, causes them to pause, question, consider, and evaluate a new possibility for engaging with their learners.

Interestingly, students did not mention this important aspect of their learning in their final reflections on their tutorial experience overall. While these reflection essays often mentioned (a) what they learned by working with an individual student, and (b) what they learned by engaging in new instructional practices, this final aspect

of their learning—through reading other students’ blogs—was not reflected upon. In postcourse surveys (from both terms combined), 58% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that “The feedback from my peers in the discussion board or the blog provided beneficial support to my tutorial experience.” With the current findings, it is clear that this survey question should be revised to specify what they learned by participating in the discussion board or blog, not just from responses of their peers. In fact, one student added the following comment, which indicates an awareness of the benefit of reading about peers’ experiences in addition to receiving responses on her own blog:

I fully enjoyed reading blog responses and offering my two cents. Things that I may have overlooked in my blog were sometimes caught by a class member. It really helps to have others offer advice and suggestions. It was really interesting to read how my classmates dealt with adversity and the joy they felt when they had successful sessions. Receiving comments from those that also tutored someone of the same ethnicity helped me gain additional insight into what I was and wasn’t doing.

The primary means by which interaction with peers in the blog fostered modifications among the tutors differed from what I would have expected. I was looking for instances in which peers’ responses interrupted tutors’ misconceptions or incomplete knowledge about learners, teaching, or teaching contexts, and these responses initiated a dialogue about the issue or caused a modification in the tutor. What I found instead was evidence that reading about their fellow students’ tutorials initiated productive engagement in a “theoretical attitude”—evaluation—that led to modifications in the responder’s understandings. While the example presented here was chosen as an especially rich case with which to illustrate this phenomenon, in fact this type of reflection on modifications that were inspired by reading about their peers’ practice regularly occurred in many of the tutorial blogs, not only in the blogs of those whose blogs had garnered higher traffic. Unfortunately, the assignment prompt for final reflections on the tutorial experience and the postcourse evaluation survey did not specifically lead students to reflect on this important aspect of their learning, so a specific question about what they learned by reading their peers’ blogs should be included in the future prompt for this assignment.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The research on teacher professional development argues that educators must not only learn new skills and competencies, but they

must also shift their previous understandings of learners, teaching and learning, and the learning contexts in which instruction occurs—what we term “modifications” following Duranti (2010). Such modifications arise when teachers adopt a “theoretical attitude” about experience by pulling back to examine, question, critique, and evaluate it. The concrete experiences of practice with a specific learner in a particular context, consisting of opportunities to experiment with new forms of instructional activity that characterize a tutoring situation, provide rich fodder for precisely this kind of reflection. Furthermore, the opportunities provided in this course to dialogue with peer networks about the tutorial demonstrated that colleagues are crucial sources of knowledge for educators (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997), and that interactions among educators can lead to transformation and change in the way that teachers constitute their professional worlds.

One important idea in the scholarship on teacher professional development is that of a “critical friend”—a person who will provide support and gentle critique of a teacher’s practice. Initially, I had expected that these peer networks would afford a kind of critical friendship among peers. On the contrary, I found that peers engaged in little critique of each other’s practice and when they did, the critique was rarely taken up or addressed by the person being critiqued. Instead, this study found that teachers sought ideas and tips for teaching by reading about the teaching practices described by their peers. That is, they sought out models of instructional practice and expertise in their peers’ blogs about their tutorials. Furthermore, when given the choice about whom to connect with, they overwhelmingly sought new information by engaging actively with peers *outside* of their target teaching contexts, by learning about instructional practices that occur in contexts with which they were less familiar. In fact, these connections were less about engaging with a critical friend and more about observing others’ practice and engaging in reflection and evaluation of that practice. These educators moved beyond their “natural attitude” and shifted from the preconceptions and assumptions built up during the course of their lifetimes through a process of venturing into the unknown.

This adventure into the unknown occurred not only through engagement with peers outside of their familiar teaching contexts, but also through engagement with the particularities of individual learners. Whereas field experiences in a classroom setting lead to reflection on a group of learners as a whole, the tutorial-as-practicum guided these educators to explore the individuality of one student—her cultural background, linguistic proficiency, literacy practices, strategies,

learning styles, motivations, and desires. This investigation highlighted information about the learner that may not have been visible in whole-class contexts. For example, tutees' motivations, strengths, interests, and backgrounds were explored in depth through course assignments, and this at times led to changing understandings of learners' behavior and underlying traits. Furthermore, the tutor's engagement with that person through many sessions also revealed how the tutor could positively influence his or her growth, as one student summed up in the reflections:

I really enjoyed the opportunity to be one on one with a student. I usually teach small classes so I rarely work with just one student at a time. I found that with one student it is very easy to adapt each lesson to their personal needs and interests. (Student Uni-1, Spring 2015)

Furthermore, tutors' experimentation with new instructional practices also provided opportunities to modify their understandings of how to work with learners most effectively, such as their experiences trying new ways to encourage extensive reading, teach vocabulary through reading, build fluency, and teach reading strategies. By making the strange (other teaching contexts, an individual learner, or new instructional strategies) familiar, they were able to make the familiar (their own prior or current learners, teaching or learning experiences, and contexts) strange. This strangeness, in turn, led to reflection on and questioning of their own practice. The original version of the course—general discussion boards coupled with reports submitted individually to the instructor—provided limited opportunities for students to dig deeply into these reflections. The whole-class blog, on the other hand, focused on tutors' concrete experiences in tutorial sessions and fostered more in-depth descriptions and reflections on what happened in the tutorials, providing a richer space for this type of reflection. Hence the blog, as a mediational tool for fostering student learning about tutoring second language reading, provided a more clearly directed space in which to reflect on the tutoring experience and thus a clearer window into students' changing understandings of the learner.

On the contrary, the discussion board in the original course was not a space in which these novice educators made the strange familiar or reflected on what they encountered in their tutorials. These discussions were limited, by the instructor, to networks of educators who shared a similar teaching context (PLCs). The discourse within these discussion boards remained largely general and theoretical, with

little connection to the particularities of the tutorial experience. In this format, students discussed new concepts, theories, or pedagogical content from the course in hypothetical or future terms—a prime example of the “empty verbalism” resulting from teacher-training programs in which candidates become knowledgeable about our field but do not use this knowledge as tools for solving problems of practice. The tutorial report submitted by the students in that same course was, on the other hand, a tool designed for them to reflect upon their experiences more concretely, yet this study found that the report submitted individually to the teacher was much less detailed than was its publicly shared counterpart in the redesigned course, the blog. The blog format allowed teachers to expand their social networks and to “observe” their peers’ instructional practice. In the blog format, students may have been more aware of their public audience, challenging them to put more effort into the assignment in order to be judged positively by their peers. Perhaps the positive models of in-depth descriptions and reflections provided by their peers’ blogs challenged others to meet the same standard of quality.

The language socialization approach to this investigation has conceptualized the process of teacher professional development as a fundamentally social process. Teachers engage in their social networks by seeking out opportunities to gain new information and insights from experts in their field. They also seek to gain knowledge and resources from reading about and vicariously observing the instructional practices of their colleagues who teach in unfamiliar contexts. Such explorations provide opportunities for engagement in a “theoretical attitude” in which they can question the “natural attitude” that they have brought to the table—their ordinary ways of constituting and relating to learners, to instructional practice, and to the learning contexts in which they are engaged. Blogging about their experience and engaging with peers’ blogs created a space in which these educators shifted their thinking, engaged with new “scientific concepts” as problem-solving tools, reconstituted the world of teaching and learning, and creatively forged new modes of instructional practice.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Tutorial Report Assignment Description**

For this assignment, you will tutor one (1) second language learner of English in reading. You must identify a learner of English who specifically needs assistance or support in his/her reading. You will describe characteristics of the context and the learner. You will also assess the learner (this also involves our “assessment assignment” where this aspect is described in more detail) using the tools that we encounter in our course. Please complete Part I after your preliminary meeting and *before* the first tutorial session, so that you can plan or strategize your teaching before getting too far along. Finally, you will plan, implement, and reflect on each of the five tutorial sessions, and you will write a brief reflection of the overall experience.

#### Part I: Gathering Information and Strategizing for Your Tutorial

##### **1. Description of the teaching context and standards (5 points)**

a) Please describe the teaching context. This will include a description of the type of school, the type of program, the level of the students, and the goals of the curriculum. In the appendix, please include a signed copy of the “Confirmation of Permission to Complete Tutoring Service” from the teacher or program administrator.

b) Please identify the set of relevant standards that guide the level at which the learner is currently studying. Our blackboard site identifies some standards for learners in California. Include a URL (link) where the standards can be found on the Internet.

##### **2. Description of the learner (5 points)**

When you first meet the learner, gather information about him/her by speaking with his/her teacher, the program administrator, and/or the learner herself. Please describe the learner’s age, grade, previous L2 experience, academic success, L1 literacy, and any particular aspects of reading that he/she needs to work on.

### **3. Assessment (5 points)**

This aspect of your project will be better developed in our assignment on assessment. Please describe here one assessment that you undertook with the student in order to work on the issue that was identified, by his/her teacher, administrator, or themselves, as most challenging or most needing work. What did you learn from the assessment? How will you try to address this in your tutorial sessions?

### Part II: Planning, Implementing, and Reflecting on Your Tutorial Sessions

#### **4. Tutorial Sessions I-V (10 points/each)**

a) (Before the session): What is your plan for the first session? What are your goals or objectives (what do you hope to accomplish with the learner)? How will you try to achieve those goals/objectives?

b) (After the session): Describe what you did in the session. A brief step-by-step description or summary will suffice.

c) (After the session): Reflect on what happened in the session. How did it go? Did you feel that you succeeded? What could you have done differently? What will you do in the next session? How did this experience relate to the theories and concepts in our course readings?

#### **5. Respond to your peers (20 points) (Spring 2015 only)**

Respond to two of your peers' blogs, commenting on what happened in their tutorial sessions. Whenever possible provide extra resources or tutoring tips. Otherwise, be supportive and reflect on how it fits with your experience, or how it pertains to ideas we are encountering in the course readings and materials.

#### **6. Reflections on the Tutorial Experience (15 points)**

Now that you have completed all of your tutorial sessions, take a moment to reflect upon the experience. "Reflecting" just means to think about and discuss what you have learned about yourself, your teaching, English language learners, the contexts of learning in which ELLs are taught, or other aspects of the experience. Some of the things you may want to address are: What did you learn about English language learners? About teaching reading? What mistakes did you make, or

what challenges did you overcome, and how would you do things differently in the future? What did you learn about teaching reading that you can apply to your future teaching contexts? What concepts or theories from our course materials were reinforced by your experience, and how? What concepts or theories from our course materials were challenged or called into question by your experience, and how?

**Appendix B**  
**Assessment Plan Rubric**

Component of Plan	Point Value/ Critique
<p><b>Part I. Getting to Know the Learner</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learner’s personal background information is included.</li> <li>• Learner’s literacy background survey was conducted; results are included as Appendix A.</li> <li>• Learner Motivation was assessed. Results of the survey are included as Appendix B.</li> <li>• Diagnostic assessments (San Diego Quick Assessment and Graded High Frequency Word Assessment—if appropriate) were conducted. Results are clearly and accurately reported.</li> <li>• Candidate reflects on the implications of the information gathered in the assessments, and reflects upon what further assessments may be needed in order to work most effectively with the learner.</li> </ul>	_____/30
<p><b>Part II. Planning Assessment and Adapting Instruction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Text selection and Vocabulary: Text’s level <i>and</i> vocabulary profile were evaluated. Appropriate text was chosen for the learner, with reference to level and motivation.</li> <li>• A student’s vocabulary level was assessed.</li> </ul>	_____/30
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High Stakes vs. Classroom-Based Assessment: Candidate’s response displays knowledge of these two assessment types, evaluates their strengths and weaknesses, and explains how they inform instruction.</li> </ul>	_____/30
<p><b>Format</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appearance is professional, word-processed. Text is written in clear, academic prose. Proper APA citation style is followed.</li> </ul>	_____/10
<b>TOTAL</b>	_____/100

## Appendix C

### Discussion Board Prompt (Spring 2014)

**Discussion Board:** You will engage in discussion boards, posting/sharing instructional materials and assessment tools, useful links, and other activities. Each week, each group member will:

a) **Your weekly contribution** (75 points) Post a journal to your group's discussion board reflecting on some aspect of the weekly topic. These journals should discuss an issue related to practice in your target teaching context that is raised by this week's readings or course materials. You may wish to discuss one of the issues raised by the instructor in our weekly "questions for reflection" (see course syllabus), or to discuss an issue raised in the readings that relates to your own experience or knowledge as a teacher, tutor, or learner. Effective postings will do all of the following: (a) summarize, paraphrase, quote, or explain an idea from the readings; (b) discuss how it relates to the practice of teaching reading, giving concrete examples from one's experience (whenever possible); (c) provide practical recommendations or implications for others to consider; (d) raise a question to be discussed.

b) (25 points) Briefly **respond to and dialogue with** at least two of your fellow group members' postings. **Effective responses will include showing agreement or disagreement with reasons for doing so, and may also include advice, suggestions, resources, different perspectives on the issue, etc.** Weaker responses simply summarize or agree/disagree with the post without giving reasons for doing so.