# Reflective Collaboration Practices to Explore Personal Belief Systems in Teacher Preparation Courses

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the need for intentionally designed faith integration conversations to explore the personal belief systems and concerns of teacher candidates through the use of effective reflective collaboration strategies in their preparation courses. The influence of one's prior experiences and personal belief system cannot be underestimated when working effectively in a pluralistic society. This necessitates that all teachers be cognizant of how their belief system shapes interactions with students and families, as well as how they plan for instruction. Student voice and reflective collaboration techniques are important instructional tools that can be integrated into teacher preparation courses at Christian universities to assist pre-service teachers in reaching this understanding. Practical strategies to address faith integration questions are discussed in this article to assist instructors with incorporating student voice and reflective collaboration practices in their university classrooms.

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The purpose of this article is to examine the need for intentionally designed faith integration conversations to explore the personal belief systems and concerns of teacher candidates through the use of effective reflective collaboration strategies in their preparation courses. The influence of one's prior experiences and personal belief system cannot be underestimated when working effectively in a pluralistic society. This necessitates that all teachers be cognizant of how their belief system shapes interactions with students and families, as well as how they plan for instruction. Student voice and reflective collaboration techniques are important instructional tools that can be integrated into teacher preparation courses at Christian universities to assist pre-service teachers in reaching this understanding. Practical strategies to address faith integration questions are discussed in this article to assist instructors with incorporating student voice and reflective collaboration practices in their university classrooms.

## Introduction

When pre-service teachers enter the classroom for the first time, they often experience a myriad of emotions and questions: "Will the students listen to me?"; "How will I ensure my students learn the material I am supposed to teach?"; "Will they like me?" These thoughts and more race through their minds as they begin to establish themselves in the school community and the lives of their students. Personal and pedagogically based questions are normal and, through coursework and clinical experience, are answered before they embark into their own classroom. However, none of these questions really get to the heart of what they bring to the classroom as individuals. More telling questions to ask may be: "How does my life experience shape what I feel is important to teach?"; "How do my religious beliefs impact my view of the teaching and learning experience?" Questions like these encourage pre-service teachers to determine how they would address conflict in themselves and/or the school system according to their moral and spiritual philosophies. Asking thoughtful questions encourages deeper thinking about the course content and asks students to identify their viewpoints vis-à-vis their personal belief system. This identification process is an integral part of becoming self-aware and of working effectively with diverse perspectives. The influence of one's life experience and personal belief system on working effectively as a global citizen in a pluralistic society cannot be underestimated.

> Global citizenship requires having curiosity and openness to new cultures, ideas, and experiences. Citizens must be compassionate to the needs of others and critically reflect on their experiences in order to make ethical judgments. Serving others creatively and having the courage to make ethical choices is also needed. (Quezada, 2011, p. 419)

It is therefore necessary for every teacher to be cognizant of how their belief system shapes interactions with students and families, as well as instructional planning. This is especially true when the teacher candidates are preparing to teach in a public school setting.

## Christian Educators in Public Schools

The edict requiring separation between church and state has a strong presence in the halls of public schools. Nonetheless, there is often confusion amongst teachers as to what they can and cannot say or do pertaining to religion (Stronks & Stronks, 1999). This confusion is further compounded for teacher candidates who are not only learning how to teach during their student teaching internships, but also learning about school culture and the implicit professional expectations that go along with it. Mixed messages can be sent by various school

personnel, adding stress to the neophyte teacher as he or she tries to navigate reconciliation of personal belief systems in a secular environment. "Central to the notion of a Christian worldview…is the notion that all truth is God's truth" (Hughes, 2003, p. 6). How this central notion is realized in day-to-day life depends of the belief system of different Christian denominations. For example, in the Reformed traditions, anything secular is considered not touched by God; whereas the Roman Catholics feel everything in the natural world or human culture is valued equally. These different belief systems can shape what is and is not taught, the emphasis of course material, and how one interacts with colleagues, students, and families. Furthermore, the differing perspectives within Christianity itself means there is more than one way in which a Christian teacher's faith can be realized within the school context. While respecting these differences honors the individuality of the person, it can also make it more difficult for educators to have a clear picture of how they can live their faith within their chosen vocation.

In considering these variables, Evans (2003) created what he calls the "Relevance Continuum". This continuum suggests that issues of faith are more likely to influence topics in certain subjects more than others. For example, math and science are likely to have fewer instances where faith comes into play than history and literature. The continuum also illustrates that questions of faith are ever present not only in the day-to-day interactions within the school community, but also in the content that is taught.

Christian institutions of higher education have a rare opportunity to address pre-service teachers directly on not only what the law says about the division of church and state, but also on how to be true to ones' belief system within public settings that falls within those legal boundaries. For example, one teacher education professor

> makes the point that when Christian teachers think about how knowledge develops, about matters such as classroom ethos, school climate, and curriculum content and structure, and when they plan how they will teach, they need to do so not as subversive agents bent on undermining the enterprise of the school but rather with an understanding about the nature of their task and the

perspective they bring to that task. (Stronks & Stronks, 1999, p. 45)

Understanding these intricacies takes time and intentionally constructed classroom lessons and activities.

**Reflective Voice in the Classroom**

The concept of student voice is resurging to the forefront of research-based literature on effective classrooms (Chappuis, 2005; Chappuis & Chappuis, 2008; Cook-Sather, 2006; Davies, 2007; McMillan & Hearn, 2009; Rodgers, 2006). Student voice refers to a student's expression of personal opinion related to his or her experience in the classroom or greater school community (Cook-Sather, 2006). Student voice is not a new concept. Educational leaders such as Dewey, Piaget, and Montessori advocated for active participation in student learning in the teaching practices outlined in their theories (Crain, 2000). The theories, among others, support the notion that every person has a unique background with different experiences and attributes to draw upon when learning new information. Thus, each person constructs knowledge in a distinct way. In order for teachers to provide appropriate learning experiences for each student, the student's voice needs to be heard. Student voice asserts that the opportunity to have input toward one's life experience is indicative of influencing the outcome of events, providing a greater sense of autonomy (Cook-Sather, 2006). However, this self-knowledge is not always easy to obtain. Thus, the reflective practices of thinking about how one learns and what has been learned assists in this process. This is known as student reflective voice and self-assessment. The student must first reflect and assess to have an opinion on a situation and facilitate the learning process. Thus, he or she learns to be acutely more aware of the metacognitive process.

Student reflective voice is the metacognitive approach where students actively reflect on their own learning process. This greater self-awareness leads to increased articulation of learning mastery, goals, and styles through self-assessment. It also guides students toward integrating knowledge and making better choices in future learning endeavors (Davies, 2007). Chappuis and Chappuis (2008) suggested the following three questions guide reflective thought and self-assessment: "Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap?"

(p. 3). Chappuis (2005) also wrote that, "We know the power of self-reflection to deepen learning for adults. It also works for students. One of the strongest motivators is the opportunity to look back and see progress" (p. 5). Teachers at all levels can use student voice, reflective voice, and self-assessment as tools to increase student engagement in learning, and this is true of all skills and concepts under study. Participation in reflective practices is critical for students in teacher education programs to guide their individual evolution into becoming a teacher (Quezada, 2011).

**Collaboration and Discussion to Promote Self-reflection and Understanding**

Learning is a social activity as language is a tool for thinking (Vygotsky, 1934/1978 as cited in Ketch, 2005). It is through conversation and discussion of ideas or issues that learning takes place. Discussion is valuable because it helps develop critical thinking skills, self-awareness, and the ability to listen to and learn from diverse perspectives. It also helps facilitate active engagement in one's learning (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009; Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004; Ketch, 2005). Discussion involves understanding and monitoring one's thinking, articulation of thoughts, and clarification of ideas based on the conversation. As stated by Ketch (2005): "…teachers recognize the value in providing time for students to reflect, form ideas, cite evidence of their evolving thinking and comprehend. Students actively engaged in the conversation process can, over time, become reflective, critical thinkers" (p. 8). Thus, discussion helps cement comprehension and development of a student's voice.

While it's clear that discussion is a valuable tool for learning and developing student voice, it is especially helpful for understanding controversial topics. Controversies stem from differing points of view on issues deemed important by everyone involved in the conversation. Jacobs (2010, pp. 291-292) stated several reasons, supported by research, to use controversial topics in the classroom:

> (1) Perhaps the most frequently cited benefit of controversy is that is spurs thinking. Dewey (1916) explains, "Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheeplike passivity and sets us at noting and contriving…Conflict is a

sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity" (p. 188).

> (2) Controversy can also provide a glimpse of the complexity of the real world and encourage a tolerance of ambiguity (Budner, 1962).

> (3) Encounters with a range of views on a complex issue can lead students to re-examine and possibly revise their own ideas (Piaget, 1975).

> (4) Working with others to present one's position(s) in a controversy and hearing the views of others may lead students towards greater appreciation of the benefits of cooperation (Deutsch, 1949).

> (5) Enjoying the struggle involved in researching, grasping and presenting views can provide intrinsic rewards that spur similar future engagement with the same or other controversial topics (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

> (6) Controversies promote deep processing of information and ideas, rather than memorizing of information for exams (Craik & Lockhart, 1972).

Based on the research supporting discussion of controversial topics to promote learning, it is evident that this methodology is a viable instructional approach for faith integration topics important to teacher preparation students. Discussion topics can come from the curriculum and readings. For increased student voice, discussion topics can be generated by the students. For example, one group of students indicated discussions on morality, religion in schools, common beliefs among major religions, how to handle religious holidays, character education, equity and social justice issues would be especially compelling (personal communication, December 8 and 9, 2010). These discussions can be integrated into virtually any teacher preparation course and are most relevant in courses that look at foundations of teaching, school law, professional issues, diversity, and classroom management.

Thomas Groome (1999) proposed the Shared Christian Praxis model as a self-reflective process. Groome described this approach as "a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical

reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith" (p. 184). The Shared Christian Praxis model involves five movements implemented in a flexible cycle for individuals to connect what they have previously known and understood in their faith journey to new experiences. The five movements include "(1) discovering life experiences, (2) reflecting on life experiences, (3) sharing the faith story, (4) integrating the faith story into my life, and (5) living the faith story" (Quezada, 2011). The framework of this model is helpful to draw upon when implementing ongoing reflective collaborative techniques in the university classroom to ensure the full reflective cycle is completed for enhanced personal development. Furthermore, hearing one's personal voice and the voice of others on faith integration issues assists students in beginning their reflective journey to understanding how their faith connects with their vocation and negotiating the division of church and state.

## Instructional Strategies for the University Classroom

Successful discussions are best facilitated through intentional design and instruction in the classroom. It can be assumed that college level students understand how to hold effective discussions, although this is not always the case. Dallimore, Hertensing, and Platt (2004) found, in their study on enhanced quality of participation and effectiveness of discussion in college classrooms, that students felt the following elements were essential: "(1) required/graded participation, (2) incorporating ideas and experiences, (3) active facilitation, (4) asking effective questions, (5) supportive classroom environment, and (6) affirming contributions/constructive feedback" (p. 103). A critical component of effective discussions is for teachers to create an environment where students feel safe to express themselves and that they are respected by peers and the teacher (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009). Furthermore, explicitly teaching the skills of discussion is important. Students need to learn how to express their own views while also courteously listening to the viewpoints of others. While it is fine to disagree, it must be done so courteously. These communication skills can be taught through modeling and collaboratively discussing with the class appropriate ways to disagree with respectful comments. Establishing

guidelines for the type of discussion, as well as clearly describing the format further facilitates the process.

## Reflective Practices to Promote Discussion

Providing an opportunity to reflect prior to a discussion can give students the time necessary to formulate thoughts and opinions to articulate. Often, students are not ready to participate immediately upon a question being asked, or an activity being launched, without reflective time to ponder their direction. Happily, there are a few quick and easy methods by which an instructor in the classroom can assist the quality of student discussion and participation: QuickWrites, partner talks, think-pair-share, and dialectal journals, all of which encourage this reflective thought.

QuickWrites are just that – an opportunity for a brief reflection on a given prompt or question posed by the instructor in class (Dodge, 2005; Himmele & Himmele, 2011; Keely, 2008). Generally, students are given one to two minutes to complete the prompt, providing the students time to process information and connect it to their schema (Dodge, 2005). The QuickWrite can be used at any point during a lesson. It can be useful as the foundation of a discussion, or it can be used in its written form as a formative assessment tool for the instructor to assess what students are thinking on a given topic.

Often times, a QuickWrite can lead to a partner talk or think-pair-share. Partner talks involve the instructor asking a question and students turning to their neighbor to discuss the answer, rather than the instructor calling on an individual student for an individual answer (Dodge, 2004). This approach gets everyone involved in the discussion. Partner talks can be taken one step further in a think-pair-share. This format differs in that the instructor asks a question, students think about their answer for a given period of time, turn to their neighbor to share the information, and finally, share out the information in some way to the class (Glass, 2009). Both approaches ensure all students are participating in the discussion. Both approaches also have the added benefit of well-prepared students, if an instructor chooses to follow-up these private discussions by calling on individual students for public answers.

These types of strategies can also lead to better discussions for the whole class. For example, an

instructor may ask the question, "What would you do if a student asked you what your religious beliefs are? Explain the rationale behind your decision." Students can either jot their answer down for a QuickWrite or think about it for a minute. In doing so, the students are primed for discussion. Holding the initial conversation with a partner instead of the whole class not only ensures everyone participates, as noted above, but it is also a safe way to share one's thoughts, especially on a controversial topic. A whole class discussion can then be held with everyone prepared to speak, if desired.

Dialectical journals are a form of journaling specifically for reading responses. It's also known as a double-entry journal (Glass, 2009). It is set up with two columns; students use the left column to write down a quote or excerpt from the text which makes an impression on them, the right column is where the student writes down a personal response to the selection. Guiding questions can also be used in the left column in place of text excerpts (Dodge, 2005; Glass, 2009). Dialectical journals enable students to personally connect with the reading. This type of journal entry is especially effective for reading selected articles or chapters in a text that may evoke a personal response. For instance, students may be given an article to read about the impact of poverty in student academic performance. Students can respond to the text with a dialectical journal, bringing the completed entry to class for discussion. Students would be prepared to talk about the issue at hand, but would also have the groundwork for a discussion on servant leadership.

**Small Group Reflective Discussion**

Cooperative learning is an approach to crafting small group discussions to improve student understanding on a topic. Cooperative learning helps students recognize the benefits of working with and learning from one another. Research on cooperative learning shows that it helps student achievement, the development of social and communication skills, and enhanced satisfaction with learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). The five elements of cooperative learning include positive interdependence among group members, personal interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and group skill development, and group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 1998; Kagan, 1994). The benefit of utilizing cooperative learning techniques for discussing controversial topics is that it establishes an expectation of teamwork, trust, communication, and shared ownership of outcomes. In addition, cooperative learning strategies are student led. This dynamic ensures ownership of the process and outcomes to the students, as opposed to the instructor influencing the direction of the discussion. Three-Step Interview, Roundtable Discussions, Academic Controversy, and Debate Team Carousel are four methods that can be implemented for successful results with relative ease.

The Three-Step Interview (Kagan, 1994) is a way to structure interviews and sharing of opinions within a small group. To begin, a small group comprised of four to six members. Within that group, pairs break off and interview each other on a set of questions. The interviewer asks clarifying questions as necessary and records the responses. Then, the roles switch so both partners are interviewed. When the whole group reconvenes, each person shares out a summary of the key points their partner discussed. An example of how this could work for faith integration discussions is on the topic of holiday celebrations in the schools. The class as a whole can come up with the interview questions, such as, "What holidays have you discussed in class or celebrated? Why?" and, "What are your feelings on how this was handled? What would you do differently?" Interviewing peers on what's been done in their classrooms and what could be done differently provides the opportunity to share personal experiences and search alternate ways of handling situations. This method encourages listening to others, communication skills, and full participation of group members.

Roundtable Discussions helps students discuss key ideas about a topic and ensures all group members participate. Group members must support their answers with evidence. The leader facilitates the discussion and makes sure everyone participates. The steps are as follows (Dodge, 2005; Glass, 2009):

1. The leader reads the question.

2. The leader asks everyone in the group for ideas.

3. Each group member reports out their answer to the question in no particular order.

4. The leader records the responses and makes sure everyone contributes.

5. After everyone has shared his or her response to the question, a new leader reads the next question and starts the process all over again.

The value of Roundtable Discussions is in hearing all voices respond to the same question. Often, when a group discussion takes place, only one or two people respond to the question before conversation naturally takes the responses away from the original question. This leaves students out of the mix who are quieter, require more think-time to formulate an answer, or simply just missed the timing to respond. This can happen when a discussion topic is particularly close to heart, such as teaching morality in the schools. This method ensures all voices are heard and considered, an essential component when dealing with a controversial issue.

Academic Controversy is a variation of a traditional debate. Originally designed by Johnson and Johnson (1995) to put a creative twist on debate and foster positive interdependence in the class, Academic Controversy is a highly engaging strategy that has students examine and defend all sides of an argument (Jacobs, 2010). The following steps are commonly followed (Jacobs, 2010):

1. Students are grouped in fours. They are then divided into two groups of two, each pair assigned to defend oppositional sides of a controversial topic. For example, one pair will be assigned to defend the right for religious student groups to meet after school for a club. The other pair is assigned to argue that it is not appropriate for the religious student groups to meet after school for a club. There is a designated amount of time for both sides to prepare their arguments with the goal to be as persuasive as possible, and regardless of how they personally feel about the issue.

2. Each pair presents their side while the other pair listens and makes note of compelling comments.

3. A rebuttal is allowed for both pairs to point out weak aspects of the opposing argument and to defend their position.

4. The pairs then switch sides, taking on the viewpoint that they just argued against. In doing so, they repeat steps 1-3 from the other perspective. Pairs are encouraged to add to the previous arguments posed, or strengthen them, rather than to just repeat what their opponents had said.

5. The two pairs come together to form a common position. If consensus is not reached, then they can report the points of view of the group members.

Academic Controversy puts students in a position to research, reflect upon, and defend oppositional sides of an issue. In doing so, they learn the value of taking a more objective look at issues that may personally impact them. In addition, students benefit from processing information with a group and learning the value of collaboration to reach consensus. This is a skill that is highly regarded in professional settings, regardless of the issue.

Debate Team Carousel (Himmele & Himmele, 2011) is similar to Academic Controversy in that it encourages students to look at and defend both sides of a controversial issue. However, Debate Team Carousel is initially presented by written word, instead of through a series of discussions. To set up the debate, students are placed in groups of four. Each student sets up a piece of paper divided into four quadrants. The first quadrant asks the students to give their opinion and explain their thinking on a topic, such as ethical considerations for teaching values through character education programs. The second quadrant asks a different student to read the response in the first quadrant and add a supporting argument. The third quadrant asks yet another student to read the first two responses and add an opposing argument to them. The fourth quadrant is for a final student to read the first three boxes and provide and defend his or her own opinion on the topic. The students in the group each start by answering the first quadrant question and then pass the paper to the right, filling in the next quadrant they receive from their group members' papers. When they get their original paper back, the group can either discuss the results to try to come to consensus or they can report out findings for a larger group discussion. This strategy is very versatile and encourages students to analyze and evaluate a topic from different perspectives, challenging assumptions and solidifying understanding in the process (Himmele & Himmele, 2011).

**Post Discussion Reflection**

Discussions must come to an end at some point during a class period. However, that does not mean the students stop thinking about the issues at hand. Time to reflect and synthesize is an essential element of wrapping up a successful discussion. Two ways to encourage further reflection and synthesis are with a Chalkboard Splash and journaling.

A Chalkboard Splash takes the collective insights from a discussion and synthesizes the information for a conclusion. As such, it is a valuable tool for discussion. It is typically done after a QuickWrite, partner talk, or discussion has taken place and the students have already taken time to reflect on and answer a question posed by the instructor. A Chalkboard Splash asks students to write down their responses to a question on random or designated places on the board so the whole class can see what everyone is thinking on a given issue. Once students have written down their responses, they can compare, contrast, and note surprises in the responses from classmates (Himmele & Himmele, 2011). At that point, students could either continue a discussion based on what they note or write a reflective journal entry to attach personal meaning to the process and insights.

Journaling is a versatile strategy that can be implemented in the classroom in a number of ways in the classroom to encourage reflection. Journaling in its most basic form asks students to simply write about their thoughts and impressions on a given topic or prompt. When done consistently over time, the journal helps the student and instructor see how the student has progressed in his or her learning (Boden, Cook, Lasker-Scott, Moore, & Shelton, 2006). Journaling has a positive impact on both understanding the subject matter and improving self-awareness. It also enhances critical thinking and personal connections to the topic, which in turn increases comprehension, retention, and application of what was learned to novel situations (Boden et al., 2006; Dodge, 2005). When looking at complicated issues of faith integration in the classroom, reflective journaling helps processing and articulation of feelings on the topic. For example, when studying ethical issues confronting teachers in the schools, students can reflect daily on the class discussion with the guiding questions, "Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap?" (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2008, p. 3) to reach a personal resolution.

**The Power of Reflective Collaboration**

The use of reflective collaboration techniques employed throughout teacher preparation courses can yield powerful results for teacher candidates as they connect school culture and practice with their vocation. Sara, an elementary teacher candidate, said:

> I believe that God gives each of us many different gifts to use in our life. And these gifts appear in many different forms. These gifts often bring us joy and provide us with a purpose and drive in our life as we work to fulfill God's will. One of these gifts is our vocation. Many different experiences in my life have led me to believe that teaching is my vocation, what God has called me to do with my life. (Comi, 2012)

Being called to serve as a teacher has its unique challenges to address in the schools today that are beneficial to reflect on and discuss with peers in order to integrate and live ones faith story. This is evidenced with the reflection of Siri, a secondary English teacher candidate about to embark on her full time student teaching. She states:

> I have witnessed our common humanity in my time here at Whitworth, because again and again I have heard my friends and I cry, in all sorts of ways- unspoken or spoken, that desperate question: "God where are you?" "Where is your goodness in this broken world?" "When have I seen you?" And to that question, Jesus answers with a clear reply in Matthew 25.
>
> He says, "Siri, I am with the least of these. Did you know that when you sat in that San Francisco classroom helping quiet, well-behaved John*, who always did his work without complaint, always tried his best to focus when the other students were taunting or throwing things, always hungry to learn and understand that you were helping 'the least of these'? Did you know that he doesn't have a home to go to after he leaves school? Did it cross your mind that he might not have had enough to eat yesterday and today? That perhaps he always wears that same black sweatshirt for a reason?"

Slowly, but surely more similar silent and painful secrets about John and many of the other students in my class were revealed to me through conversations with students themselves and with other teachers.

It broke my heart in ways too deep to express. It's overwhelming. So it's easier to allow their voices to be drowned out by thoughts of school budget cuts or even the frantic feeling of desperation about finding a job once we graduate. But Jesus once again stops me and asks, "Siri, you say you want to see me? You will find me through those children, the ones which society has over and over again shunned as 'the least of these.'" (Carlson, 2012)

## Conclusion

The field of education is complex. It requires students, teachers, parents, administrators, counselors, and specialists to work together toward the common goal of educating children to enable them to reach their full potential. The specific discipline of K-12 teacher preparation necessitates training our future teachers to be educators of mind and heart, capable of working effectively inside and outside classroom, and to be well rounded, highly skilled, culturally competent, and caring professionals. Understanding one's personal belief system and how it impacts professional decisions in schools is a critical element of creating self-aware teachers who will positively impact their school community. Student voice and reflective collaboration techniques are important instructional tools that can be integrated into teacher preparation courses to assist students in reaching this important understanding.

*The name of the student has been changed to protect identity.

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