

Facilitating Meaningful Collaboration Between Special and General Education Teachers Through Synchronous Online Learning

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Abstract

This essay presents a case of collaborative learning and lesson design between general and special education teacher candidates through a synchronous online class during the Covid-19 pandemic. We propose a theoretical framework of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) for inclusive history-social studies teaching and detail how we used the framework to organize and facilitate this collaboration. We focus on strategies and tools for online group activities in which candidates work together to develop subject matter knowledge, understanding of students, and pedagogical strategies for teaching and learning in inclusive elementary classrooms. We use teacher candidates' evaluations, reflections, and lesson materials to highlight the utility of online learning environments for engaging general and special education teachers in meaningful collaboration.

Introduction

We are assistant professors in a teacher education program at a

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public university in Northern California. For the spring semester of 2020, we planned two collaborative classes for teacher candidates from our respective courses: “Social Studies, Social Justice, and Literacy, Grades 3-6,” and “Curriculum and Instruction in Elementary Special Education.” We have facilitated in-person collaborative curriculum design sessions for our candidates over the past two years. Given our backgrounds, these collaborations focus on inclusive, literacy-based history-social studies teaching and learning in upper elementary and middle school classrooms.

We consider this crucial work. The “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) across levels of public education tends to silo general and special education teachers through school schedules, program requirements, and the use of classroom space (Blanton, Pugach, & Boveda, 2018; Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012). Teacher education programs and school districts often do little to mitigate this schooling segregation, establishing few to no opportunities for meaningful collaboration between general and special education teachers. These institutions thus tend to produce: general education teachers underprepared to serve the learning needs of all their students and inexperienced in collaborative practices (Keefe & Moore, 2004; Thompson, 2001); and special educators who lack background in the specific disciplinary content, concepts, and skills for which they are supporting students to develop. Ultimately, missed opportunities for general and special education teachers to collaborate result in missed opportunities for the students they serve.

In attempting to facilitate collaboration between our special and general education teacher candidates we have faced various challenges. For one, our courses are not usually scheduled concurrently, which means finding an alternative class time for approximately 60 people to meet together. For another, few spaces on campus accommodate collaborative work for such a large group: traditional lecture halls with fixed seats lack flexibility, smaller rooms are cramped and noisy, and spreading out across multiple spaces makes monitoring work difficult. Grouping teacher candidates by grade levels or school sites, given the range of their student teaching placements, is also often challenging, as is sustaining the collaborative work beyond our in-person class sessions.

In spring 2020, we were particularly optimistic about our collaboration. Our courses were scheduled at the same time of the week for the first time ever. Disconcertingly, the abrupt shift to online learning seven weeks into the semester happened just as we were preparing for our joint sessions. For a moment, we considered canceling the classes, assuming that a collaborative class online would be unfeasible logistically. We decided, nevertheless, to plan and facilitate our collaboration

through a synchronous, video-based class with all of our teacher candidates. As it turned out, the shift to online learning resulted in more efficient, flexible, and accessible ways to facilitate and possibly extend this collaboration.

Disquisition: Synchronous, Video-Based Collaboration

Powerful teacher education is grounded in theory and practice (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Allen & Wright, 2013). With this in mind, we used a theoretical framework of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) (Achinstein & Fogo, 2014) to map the collaborative practical work of our teacher candidates. This framework presents PCK as an amalgam of subject matter knowledge, understanding of students, and knowledge of practice (see Appendix A). Unlike other conceptualizations of PCK that seek to further parse and measure these domains for research purposes (see, for example, Park & Chen, 2012), we developed our framework to work with teachers and teacher candidates, specifically.

To do this online, we relied upon the Zoom video conferencing platform. We began our joint class with a mini lecture, which featured the Zoom shared screen function. The lecture included a Google slides presentation to showcase the PCK framework, highlight questions about its constructs, and illustrate how they relate to one another (see Appendix A). We then created breakout groups of four, mixing general and special education teacher candidates, for a small group discussion focused on different elements of PCK (see Appendix B). General education candidates began by explaining the social studies content, concepts, and skills for their student teaching grade level. Next, special education candidates described the different types of students they worked with in their student teaching placements and general education candidates described their students. Finally, the mixed groups of teacher candidates concluded their discussions by sharing ideas for instructional materials, strategies, and supports, appropriate for their particular social studies topics and students.

After the teacher candidates' PCK discussions, we shifted the seminar focus to Universal Design for Learning (UDL). We maintained the same pattern as in the first activity sequence, using a short lecture with shared slides to introduce Universal Design for Learning (UDL), followed by breakout room discussions. We presented UDL as a framework for learner-centered curriculum and instruction based upon multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement. We then used CAST guidelines (2018) to direct all the candidates' attention to supporting comprehension, communication, executive function, and self-regulation

in their lesson plans. After the lecture, pairs of special and general education candidates shared their understanding and examples of UDL in breakout rooms.

This progression of activities—the two mini lectures and two discussions—lasted just over an hour. We organized the discussions for teacher candidates to share their experiences and emerging expertise across social studies content, in consideration of particular groups of students, using inclusive teaching practices and materials. One objective of this discussion format was to assign competence to teacher candidates, positioning them in part as presenters and calling for candidates to learn from each other as students. In particular, general education teacher candidates described social studies content, concepts, and skills; and, special education candidates explained types of learning differences, UDL curriculum design, and inclusive instructional practices. Through such cross-program dialogue, we hoped to establish the expectation for our teacher candidates that general and special education teachers can and do collaborate with one another to better serve their students.

For the second hour, the class turned to a collaborative lesson design activity. Prior to the joint session, general education teacher candidates drafted a lesson plan for teaching a social studies literacy concept or skill, using a primary or secondary source, or a work of historical fiction. They worked individually, or in pairs, and used a common template for the lesson plan (consisting of objectives, materials, a timed outline of activities, scaffolds, and formative assessments). Candidates stayed organized in breakout groups with their partners from the UDL discussion for this lesson design activity (see directions for the activity in Appendix C). General education candidates began by presenting their draft lesson materials. Together, candidates then discussed the plan and materials in relation to the students for which the lesson was designed. We asked groups to consider how the literacies, learning styles, interests and experiences of their students related to the draft lesson's objectives, materials, and activities. Groups discussed the learning needs of diverse students and possible goals, accommodations, and/or modifications for students with Individual Education Plans. Finally, the groups worked on embedding specific UDL practices into the lesson plan's materials and instructional strategies. Candidates used the UDL planning guide (CAST, 2018) to scaffold and focus the lesson design and to address learner variability. Throughout this session, we took turns visiting breakout groups to monitor progress and to address questions.

We were initially concerned that the campus closure due to COVID-19 would make our collaborative work even more challenging than it had been in previous semesters. Soon into facilitating the online class,

however, we realized that working together through the video platform was less complicated and possibly more effective than collaborating in person. The platform provided a quiet and efficient space for organizing and facilitating a group of 60 students. Sharing documents online meant we did not need to hand out any papers. Breakout groups, which we had devised before class, allowed us to get into and out of individual, paired, and group activities without moving desks, changing rooms, or trying to manage noise levels of such a large group. Further, as co-hosts of the meeting we were able to trade off sharing screens to lead the direct-instruction components of the class, permitting us to co-teach seamlessly. We also used the chat box feature of Zoom to provide teacher candidates with opportunities for sharing out, asking questions, and responding to each other during whole group components of the class. As instructors, we used the chat box to post activity instructions and discussion questions, and teacher candidates used the feature to let us know when they completed different tasks throughout the class. Together, these features allowed us to engage teacher candidates in the theoretical and practical components of the collaboration and to monitor a variety of activities and groupings of candidates.

In order to evaluate the collaboration, we asked teacher candidates for feedback on the joint class. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive. Every general and special education teacher candidate described the session as important and worthwhile. Several claimed they “benefited” from the session, while others pointed out that the collaboration was “affirming” or “reassuring,” noting that they felt more confident about their lesson materials to meet the needs of their students. One candidate stressed their group’s “mutual respect of knowledge each (member) had and the desire to learn from each other;” while another appreciated “working together to build necessary knowledge about both general education content and special education supports.” Several candidates suggested further collaborative classes.

Additionally, we saw direct evidence of the collaboration when general education candidates revised and further developed their lesson plans after the joint class. Examples here ranged from adding and focusing lesson objectives, adding in audio recordings of texts, incorporating visuals across lessons, creating tiered versions of primary sources, simplifying and focusing graphic organizers, reorganizing and pacing lesson plans to allow more time for fewer activities, and developing additional options for students to demonstrate thinking processes. Each of these examples illustrated attention to supporting student learning through multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement.

Dispatch

The exponential increase in screen time during the Covid-19 pandemic has proven exhausting for teachers and students across all levels of education. Synchronous video-based classes have also further exposed and exacerbated issues of equity and access. Addressing these challenges remains paramount as we move forward with online learning. At the same time, recognizing and furthering the pedagogical potential for live video-based teaching is necessary to develop the types of robust, hybrid education platforms called for in times of distance learning.

In our first debrief of the collaborative session with each other, we discussed conducting future joint classes online, even when we return to in-class, face-to-face teaching. We found that the live video platform made the collaboration far more efficient and (in important ways) more focused than our previous joint class sessions. For example, we discovered that on Zoom, we could avoid the distractions and time-consuming transitions that come with facilitating multiple activity structures and groupings with large numbers of students in person. Zoom, though not necessarily designed for teacher education courses, supported various instructional strategies for organizing and facilitating both direct instruction and student-centered activities. As indicated by the comments of our teacher candidates, the online platform helped sustain productive collaborative work.

To be sure, we have a lot to learn about remote teaching. Our joint class was one of our initial experiences with facilitating synchronous online collaborative courses, and in the months since, we have worked on developing our teaching within this medium. For example, we have experimented with coupling Zoom with other online platforms to better facilitate group work—having candidates brainstorm together on a shared Google document, or build on each other’s thinking through posting and commenting on a Padlet. We have also worked on creating and monitoring breakout groups more intentionally. To do this, we have begun to ask our teacher candidates to rename themselves—a fairly easy function on Zoom, where participants can edit the name that appears on their video image. Through renaming, candidates can distinguish themselves in various ways, such as with the grade level or subject area they teach. This allows for organizing different heterogenous or homogenous groups throughout a class session. Moreover, we are becoming more adept at co-facilitating Zoom classes—namely, working together to get candidates into, through, and out of clearly timed activities, relying upon shared documents to support communication with and between breakout groups, and using the chat box to share resources and respond to candidates’ questions and

comments. We liken the experience to co-piloting: one instructor leads activities and the other runs and monitors the various technologies and features involved in Zoom classes. We find that co-teaching, even with relatively large groups of students, makes synchronous online classes easier to facilitate than leading them individually.

Further, we see potential in the online format to address scheduling issues that previously proved challenging for collaboration. Given the flexibility that comes with attending a video-based class, we are able to diversify times for collaborative work to accommodate the range of our teacher candidates' schedules and school placements, and are now in the process of planning multiple collaborative classes across our courses. This includes creating opportunities for general and special education candidates to engage in more extensive curriculum planning and to co-teach classes together. We are also currently working to bring faculty together to share online teaching experiences and discuss opportunities for co-teaching and collaboration across courses. While this work is emerging, we are optimistic about the enthusiasm it has elicited from faculty across disciplines and departments.

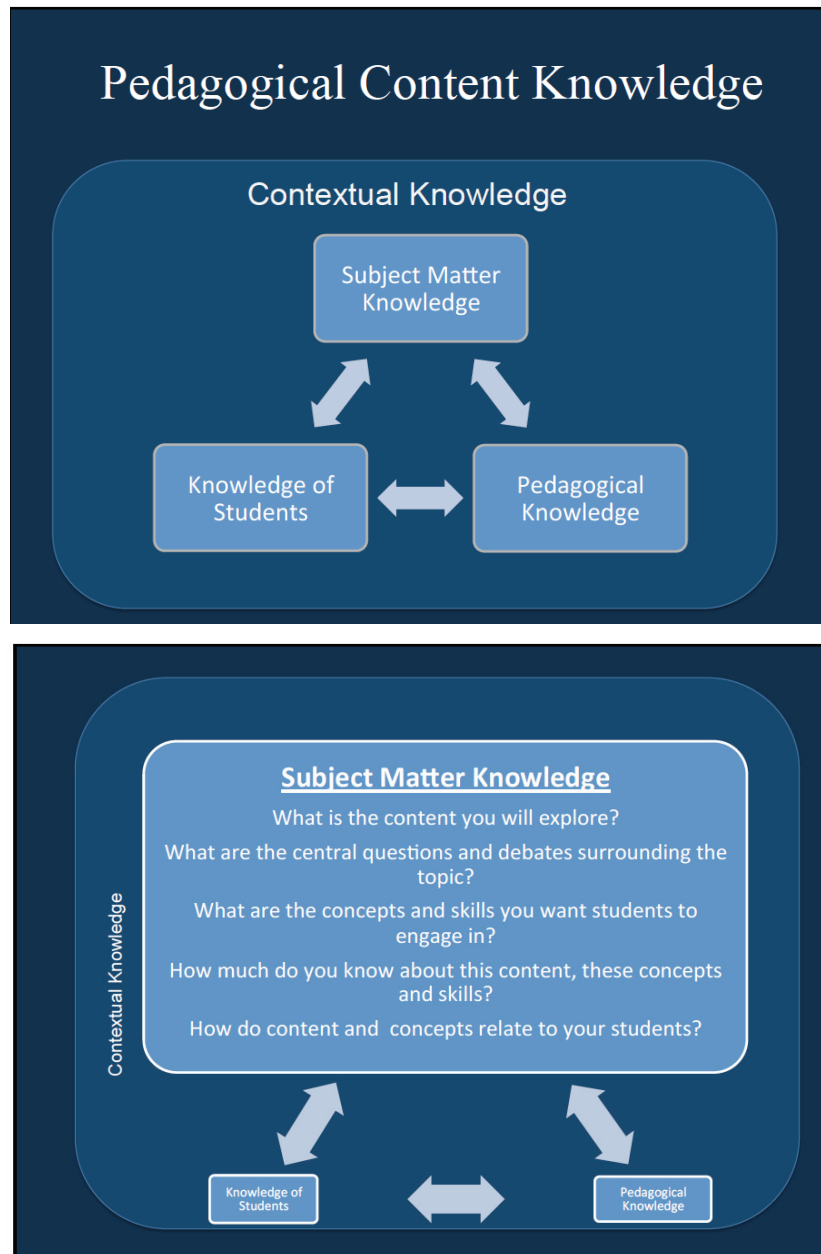
We do, of course, realize the limitations of our experience. One class session with one particular group of students warrants little in terms of generalizations. Nevertheless, considering our online class as part of an ongoing collaboration--addressing challenges encountered in our past work while providing direction for next steps--highlights the utility of our experience. Video conferencing may not match the potential of in-person collaborative work, but the flexibility and efficiency of working together online does hold promise for encouraging cross-disciplinary teaching and learning with instructors and students in secondary education, elementary education, special education, and/or early childhood education programs. Indeed, we see opportunities to reconfigure the "grammar of schooling" that has historically siloed general and special education teacher candidates and teachers. Collaborative opportunities such as ours can move us toward a unification of programs to better prepare teacher candidates to work together in the profession. When we first moved our classes online, we considered scaling back or discontinuing our collaboration. We are now poised to expand and improve ways for our teacher candidates to learn with and from one another through virtual collaborative work.

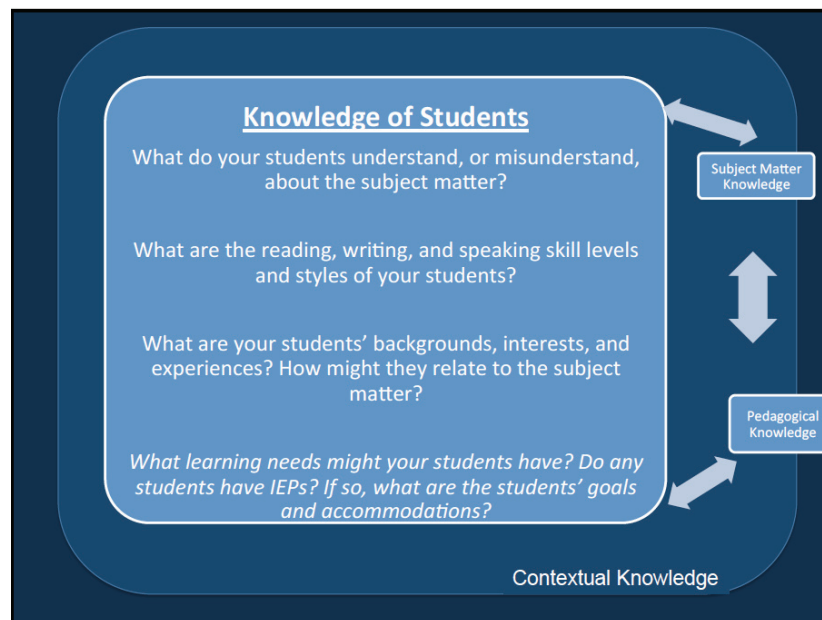
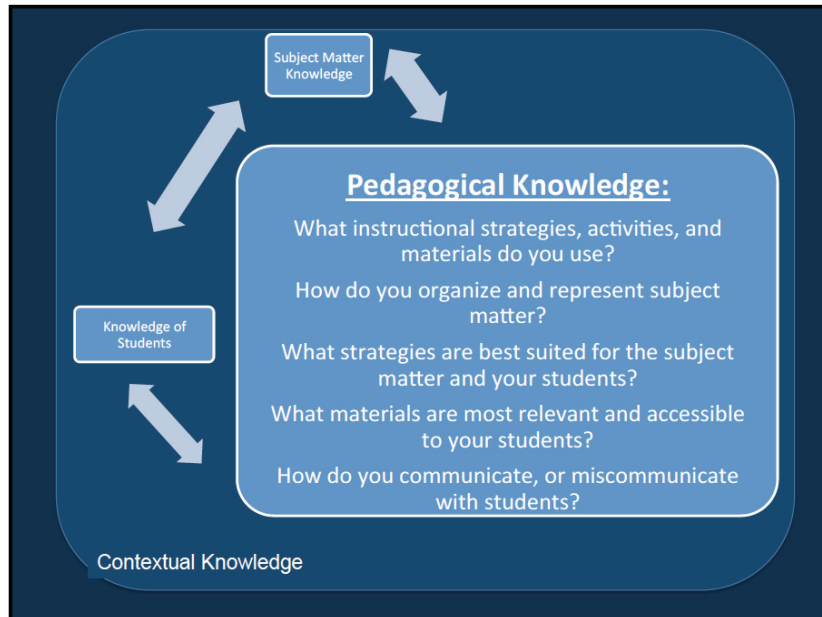
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Appendix A:
Pedagogical Content Knowledge Framework





Appendix B: Group PCK Discussion Questions

- (1) Introduce yourselves, what school you teach at, and your teaching assignment.
- (2) Elementary teachers explain the social studies curriculum for the grade level you have designed your lesson. Make sure to discuss: content, concepts, and skills.
- (3) SPED teachers describe the different types of students you work with and settings you work in.
- (4) Elementary teachers describe the students you are working with this semester.
- (5) Together, share ideas for the types of instructional strategies, materials, and supports you think might be appropriate and effective for the students and subject matter discussed above.

Appendix C: Lesson Plan Activity Instructions

- (1) Elementary teachers present draft lesson plan materials to SPED teachers.
 - Include a description of the lesson's topic, possible objectives, questions, materials, and instructional strategies.
- (2) Together, discuss lesson plan materials in relation to the classroom of students for whom the lesson is designed.
 - What are the reading, writing, and speaking literacies and learning styles of your students?
 - What are your students' interests and experiences? How might they relate to the subject matter?
 - What learning needs might your students have? Do any students have IEPs? If so, what are the students' goals and accommodations?
- (3) Together, using the UDL checklist, discuss strategies for differentiating or adding elements of UDL to the lesson plan's materials and instructional strategies.