Pay It Forward: Student Teachers Blogging with the Purpose of Learning from One Another

Dr. Tammy A. Feil
Associate Professor
Division of Education and Human Services
Neumann University
One Neumann Drive, Aston, PA   19014-1298

Dr. Cynthia A. Ferraro
Assistant Professor
Division of Education and Human Services
Neumann University
One Neumann Drive, Aston, PA   19014-1298

Abstract

This article examines the feedback of weekly gated blogs by thirty-three student teachers from a university in Pennsylvania over a period of fourteen weeks. As an extension of the gated blog assignment, six student teachers presented their insights regarding the gated blogs at a national student-teaching conference in Pennsylvania in 2015. All of the student teachers had welcomed the idea of weekly gated blogs as a means of sharing student-teaching experiences to help alleviate fears and concerns. These blogs provide an online forum where student teachers and their professors can share strategies, offer advice, ask questions, share memorable experiences, and collaborate. Additionally, blogging facilitates a practical understanding of how to align student-teaching dispositions to the required Interstate New Teacher Assessment Support Consortium (InTASC) standards. Findings suggest that student teachers value the weekly gated blogs as a protected social media environment to help ease the stresses associated with the student-teaching experience.

Keywords: Technology, collaboration, student-teaching practicum, teacher dispositions, professionalism

1. Introduction

That there is never enough class time to accomplish what really needs to be accomplished is a common frustration for most educators.   In the authors' weekly seminar class for student teachers, there is so little time and so much material to cover, yet often the only item of business student teachers really want to accomplish is to share their student-teaching experiences. There is a bit of sharing during the first class meeting, but all other class meetings are reserved for resume and cover letter writing, interviewing skills, certification process, application process, InTASC Standards, and completing the professional portfolio requirements. After pondering how best to let students share their teaching experiences, we realized that the answer to our frustration was within easy reach. Blackboard Learn is the virtual learning environment at our university and we use if for both face-to-face instruction and hybrid/blended learning environments. Blackboard Learn has a blog application built right into the program; thus, the key to sharing student-teacher experiences outside of the weekly seminar class was at our fingertips all along. As previously mentioned, the *gated blog* is defined as a typical blog entry within a restricted social media environment with the primary goal of eliminating unwelcome interactions that is consistently monitored by the blog designer. (Teachers First, 2015). This discovery encouraged us to immediately create a required weekly blogging assignment for student teachers titled *Pay it Forward: Student Teachers Blogging for the Purpose of Learning from One Another.*

It is important to provide a concise explanation of the InTASC Standards before presenting the analysis of the *gated blogs*. The InTASC Standards are grounded in research and a constructivist view of learning and teaching (Danielson Group, 2013).

More specifically, these ten standards outline "what teachers should know and be able to do to ensure every K-12 student reaches the goal of being ready to enter college or the workforce in today's world" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011).

We will show how student teachers have used Blackboard Learn Blogs to share personal reflections, comments, questions, and hyperlinks; to grown a strong sense of camaraderie; and to translate the InTASC standards into significant teacher dispositions. A formal definition of professional teacher dispositions is presented by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010-2014) that encompasses, "attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities. These positive behaviors support student learning and development. NCATE expects institutions to assess professional dispositions based on observable behaviors in educaional settings. The two professional dispositions that NCATE expects institutions to assess are *fairness* and the belief that all students can learn."

 An in-depth examination of blog entries reveals that the *gated blogs* provide a personal and collaborative method of exploring the challenges of student teaching while offering practical applications and dispositions related to the InTASC standards. Overall, this research will allow student teachers to recognize that they are not alone and that most of their experiences are common for all beginning teachers.

2. Rationale

Educators know student teaching is the most vital experience in the preparation of future teachers. Moreover, published research documents this time as one of the most stressful, emotional, and nerve-wracking semesters of the degree program. The emphasis on uncompromising teacher accountability and measurable student performance is also very challenging for beginning teachers. To this end, the InTASC Standards describe what novice teachers need to know and be able to do to achieve these rigorous student-learning gains.

It is common knowledge that most teachers deal with a lot of stress; however, too much stress can lead to teacher burnout and physical issues (Justice, 1998). Student teachers often feel isolated; most are thrown into a classroom environment with what may seem like a sink or swim approach (Swick, 1989). Listening to student teachers express their anxieties about sleep deprivation, being able to handle behavior management issues, being able to implement meaningful lessons, getting along with cooperating teachers and other school personnel, and handling the daily rigors and routines of teaching, motivated the need for the weekly *gated blog* assignment to support student teachers with a sense of comfort and reassurance from their peers and professors.

3. Nature and Limitations of the Research

Over one semester (spring 2015) and for a period of fourteen weeks, thirty-three student teachers from a local catholic university in Delaware County, Pennsylvania participated in a weekly *gated blogging* assignment. The findings involve a preliminary descriptive examination of the fears, concerns, stresses, and experiences of student teachers. This examination is limited to no more that thirty-three subjects at one four-year university because of the time constraints involved in analyzing and categorizing the data. The preliminary findings will serve as a baseline for future semesters and analysis of weekly *gated blogs*.

4. Literature Review

Current research on the topics of student blogging and student-teacher stress is quite extensive, and the presented literature highlights pertinent areas of research for both topics as they relate to one another within this article. We found that much of the research does not suggest blogging as a means to reduce student teacher stress. Overall, there appears to be paucity of research as well as an implied relationship between both topics.

Blogging is the abbreviated expression of the original term of "web-logging" created to promote online micro-publishing. Because of its simplistic nature, blogging has become a phenomenon in higher education as an online communication tool for knowledge dissemination, collaboration, reflection, debate, etc. (Williams, 2003). The rationale for student blogging is simply that the young population has grown up surrounded by digital technologies. Young people are more comfortable integrating technology into their daily life than people from prior generations. To this end, the purpose of blogging is to provide an online social- media forum where creativity and self-expression are encouraged and communities are formed. Blogging is an easy-to-use technology that allows people to offer comments and hyperlinks to other blog posts. Blogs also allow for critical and analytical thinking where student voices can be heard (Huffaker, 2004).

Gated Blog is a term coined by *Teachers First* for a type of blog that controls access and protects students and teachers from unwelcome interactions (TeachersFirst.com, 2015).

There is much research documenting student teaching as the *capstone semester* – it is perceived as the most vital experience in the preparation of professional educators. Contrary to this perception, student teachers often experience this time as the most stressful, emotional, and nerve-wracking semester of their college experience (Bullough & Young, 2002). Swick (1989) reveals that intrapersonal stress is not uncommon for veteran teachers; thus, intrapersonal stress for student teachers can be even more intense than the stress experienced by veteran teachers. Based on this fact, intrapersonal stress can result in feelings of inadequacy and potential *teacher-burnout* that necessitates stress-reduction programs. Furthermore, research indicates for both novice and veteran practitioners, collaboration and sharing teaching experiences are keys to growing a strong sense of teacher confidence, otherwise known as a *teacher-comfort-zone* (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005).

Teacher candidates no longer have the safety net of the university classroom to share, collaborate, and empathize with classmates regarding the rigors related to their profession. When they leave the university to enter actual school settings, there is a tremendous amount of pressure on teacher candidates. Student teachers find themselves in unknown territory upon entering their student teaching placements. They face high expectations from their university supervisor, cooperating teacher, university professors, and themselves. Challenges include implementation of classroom management strategies, stress of interacting with students, getting along with the cooperating teacher, planning and implementation of lesson and unit plans, assessment of their performance, and getting used to a new environment (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005). Overall, teacher candidates perceive this *capstone semester* as a sink-or-swim juncture in their academic career. Thus, the simplistic nature of the *gated blog*—which allows student teachers sharing personal reflections, comments, questions, etc.—makes it a sensible approach to assisting student teachers with stress reduction. The *gated blog* promotes a sense of camaraderie that allows student teachers to recognize that they are not alone and most of their experiences are common for all beginner teachers.

5. Participants

During the spring 2015 semester and over the course of fourteen weeks, thirty three student teachers from a local catholic university in Delaware County, Pennsylvania used Blackboard Learn to participate in a weekly *gated blog* assignment. From the thirty three student teachers who participated in the required weekly blog assignment, ninety-seven percent participated on a weekly basis with Weeks 1 and 14 as optional blogging weeks not factored into the participation percentage. The breakdown of the total number of blog entries comprises the calculations of *weekly required* blogs added to the *peer blog comments* (additional student-teacher comments on the *required blogs*) as provided in Table 1.

As an extension of the *gated blog* entries, six student teachers presented their insights and thoughts regarding the *gated blog* assignment at a national student-teaching conference in Pennsylvania during the spring 2015 semester. The presentation followed a focus-group approach with student participants expressing their opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about the impact of the *gated blog* assignment.

Table 1.			
Week #	**Required Blogs out of 33 students**	**Peer Blog Comments**	**Total Posts**
1	7 (Optional Week)	None	7
2	33	46	79
3	33	104	137
4	31	80	111
5	29	73	102
6	33	68	101
7	32	45	77
8	33	56	89
9	33	56	89
10	33	10	43
11	33	40	73
12	33	42	75
13	28	52	80
14	16 (Optional Week)	8	24
	407	680	1087

6. Data Collection and Methodology

The chosen method of data collection was fourteen weeks of Blackboard Learn *gated blogs* by thirty-three teacher candidates from a local catholic university in Delaware County, Pennsylvania as a required assignment in their Seminar II class. Seminar II is a required course in the teacher education degree program that requires teacher candidates to demonstrate proficiency in various areas related to the profession of education as dictated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). In addition to the weekly *gated blog* entries, six student teachers were selected to present their perceptions and feelings regarding the assignment at a national student-teaching conference in Pennsylvania during the spring 2015 semester. The presentation was an interactive focus-group setting where student-teachers shared ideas, experiences, thoughts, and feelings about the *gated blog* assignment with opportunities for questions and answers with the audience.

This research follows a phenomenological qualitative research approach, involving the use of coded and categorized student-teacher *gated blog entries* presented in a chart. Chart a (Appendix A) was used to illustrate relationships between the *gated blog* entries and the InTASC Standards and to provide descriptive statistical analysis of teacher candidates' personal reflections, questions, and comments. Chart a *(Appendix A)* was the basis for the presentation and interpretation of student blog entries with a focus on InTASC Standards and teacher dispositions. Additionally, a transcription of detailed written student notes of the focus-group presentations is presented as an extension of the *gated blog* analysis. This phenomenological approach attempts to offer insight and meaning to other teacher candidates with similar experiences.

7. Data Analysis

The initial step in qualitative analysis is evaluating the collection of documents that are to be analyzed. We read and reread all blog posts in attempt to become familiar with the content and to uncover themes and patterns. During this evaluation we compiled notes, often referred to as "analytic memos," as an essential *Action Research* technique to form tentative ideas and relationships (Gibbs, 2007). Blog posts were read, analyzed, and correlated to the InTASC Standards. The InTASC Standards can have multiple interpretations and meanings related to individual and varied experiences. Consequently, it is important to note that there is an overlap of blog entries and their relationships to the InTASC Standards. Based on this knowledge we correlated dominant blog post themes to the InTASC Standards.

8. Results

All prospective teachers in education degree programs are required to demonstrate proficiency in all areas related to the InTASC Standards and the related teacher dispositions. In Appendix A, "Chart A: Results of Blogs Related to Each InTASC Standard, Framework for Teaching Domains, and Related Dispositions" presents correlations of *gated blogs* to the InTASC Standards, Danielson's Framework for Teaching domains that serve as the foundation to the InTASC Standards, and dispositions that reflect each InTASC Standard. The Danielson Framework for Teaching includes four domains: 1) planning and preparation, 2) classroom environment, 3) instruction, and 4) professional responsibilities. As previously mentioned, teacher dispositions are beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that shape effective teacher behaviors.   The five primary dispositions for teachers are: 1) interactions with students, 2) professional ethics and practice, 3) effective communication, 4) planning and teaching for student learning, and 5) sensitivity to diversity and equity (Ros-Voseles, 2007).

The percentages and descriptive statistics for blog entries related to the InTASC Standards are presented in Chart a (Appendix A). The Total Number (N) is 10 with a Sum of 1,087. The Mean (average) is 108.7 with three primary areas of concentration, represented by percentages shown in Chart A (Appendix A): *Knowledge of Subject Matter* (15%), *Classroom Motivation and Management Skills* (27%), *and Instructional Planning* (30%). These concentrated areas of blog posts reflect the areas of greatest concern for student teachers. The Sample Standard deviation (s) is 116.73 and is representative of the numeric spread of the ten InTASC Standard blog comments.

As presented in Chart A (Appendix A.), there are 1,087 blog posts that offered student teachers the opportunity to have their voices heard. To this end, we carefully selected a wide array of blog posts related to each of the InTASC Standards to represent the dominant themes. One of the primary purposes of this project is to share this data with all involved in the student- teaching experience and to establish areas for future student teachers to concentrate on before, during, and after student teaching.

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It is our goal to present this data with the purpose of reducing student-teacher stress, promoting camaraderie, and increasing confidence during the student teacher experience.

9. Analysis Related to Individual InTASC Standards with Student Blog Comments

The following analysis concentrates on specific blog posts related to the InTASC Standards that highlight critical and recurring themes. These themes represent areas of concern for student teachers, as well as identification of hierarchal importance of the InTASC Standards for student teachers with supporting blog evidence.

9.1 InTASC Standard 1: Knowledge of Subject Matter

Math is Not the Enemy!

Knowledge of subject matter is one of the strongest InTASC standards to emerge from the student blog posts, especially concerning teaching mathematics. Student teachers offer multiple posts reflecting their apprehensions about being able to handle the rigor of teaching mathematics. Some blog posts include the need for confidence building and the development of more interactive lessons. For example, "I was teaching the concept of money for the past two weeks. In the beginning I was nervous because I felt as though it was my fault if the children did not understand." Another post displays an initial anxiety for teaching mathematics that eventually changes with more experience, determination, and the development of interactive and meaningful lessons. "I am teaching about money and it is SO HARD to figure out if the students actually understand my money lessons. A helpful technique was to make the lessons fun and to trick the students into thinking the lesson was not work but play. I came up with a menu for the students to play store. This strategy really seemed to help the students demonstrate their understanding of counting money to purchase items in their play store."

We are all human, and therefore we all make mistakes. Student teachers learn this life lesson eventually usually by making their own mistakes. The next post concentrates on making mistakes in front of students and in the realm of teaching mathematics. Making mistakes in front of students is a humbling and embarrassing experience for novice teachers as shared by the following student teacher: "I had a bad math experience. I was teaching probability and did not reduce a fraction all the way. I had a student correct me in front of the whole class. I was so embarrassed." Student teachers are taught that making mistakes allows their students to see the human qualities of the student teacher and to never cover up making mistakes—students will see right through a fumbling teacher, so it is best to admit an error and move on.

Although teaching mathematics generated much angst for student teachers, there was evidence of determination and increased confidence with the development of creative, interactive, and engaging lessons. "In the beginning, I was very nervous about teaching math as math is not my strong point; however, the children have been interacting with my lessons that involve manipulatives and seem to understand the content." Another student says, "I am now taking over math and I was really worried about that because math is not my strong suit. It went better than expected and my confidence gets higher every day."

Overall, the blog posts identified mathematics as the predominant skill subject that caused much anxiety due to a lack of knowledge and confusion about how to teach in this subject area. However, as time progressed most of the student teachers realized that *math is not the enemy*. Teaching math with relatable activities and manipulatives allows for mathematics to become more meaningful for students and student teachers.

9.2 InTASC Standard 2: Knowledge of Human Development

What Works and What Doesn't?

While *knowledge of human development* was not a dominant blog theme, it is important that teachers provide learning opportunities and lessons that support age appropriate intellectual, social, and personal development. A post presented by a secondary English student teacher displays a teachable moment through an emergent lesson that sparked an interest with the class, largely because of their intellectual age development and ability to identify with the focus of the lesson. "During this past week of student teaching, I had a very interesting experience. We have been prepping our students for a guided reading unit which includes three novels all having to do with WWII. Two of the books are memoirs from the Holocaust and one is a memoir from a Japanese Internment Camp. All three of these novels highlight on the suffering of individual groups of people with a common theme of these people being uprooted from their homes. A week prior to reading the novels, we engaged in multiple activities and viewing videos on this subject matter. One video I chose to show was Oprah and Elie Wiesel walking through Auschwitz in a special that Oprah had done about ten years ago.

I screened the video prior to viewing with the class as I knew there were graphic parts and wanted to make sure the video was age appropriate. Upon viewing this video, I never expected the students to react with such interest. I had to extend the lesson by two days to answer questions and engage in discussion activities that complemented this video. I was so impressed and proud of how well the students were able to handle such hard hitting material and to express such interest in this topic."

What works and what doesn't is a skill that teachers develop over time as they gain a solid understanding of human development. *Knowledge of human development* is a deliberate process, and yet it develops naturally with more classroom experience. This is illustrated by the following blog post: "As time goes on, I feel like creating lessons gets easier and easier, especially after you know what works and what doesn't work for students within your class." Students are taught human development theory in their teacher education coursework; however, human development appears to come alive for student teachers upon the practical applications and exposure to varied grade levels.

9.3 InTASC Standard 3: Adapting Instruction for Individual Needs

Daddy Division

Adapting instruction for individual needs should be common knowledge for all teacher candidates, especially in twenty-first century education. It is a fact that this topic is ingrained in all coursework within our university and that a one-size-fits-all philosophy is nonexistent. Even though this standard did not rank in the top three blog post themes, it is typically one of those ingrained habits that is accomplished unconsciously through the development and implementation of lesson plans. To demonstrate this innate skill the following blog posts display the development of instruction for individual needs. One student commented, "I have been learning so much from my students and cooperating teachers to see what works for individual students in a 2nd-4th grade autistic support resource room." Another student observed the strengths and weaknesses in a middle school special education classroom, which is indicative of the teacher candidate's inherent understanding of the need to meet the varied learning styles of the students.

Another post focuses on adapting instruction for one student in an eighth grade inner-city classroom. More importantly, this experience demonstrates the power of collegial collaboration to make a positive difference in the life of a student. "I am working closely with a new student to the school of about two weeks. She is a very sweet girl but it became apparent very quickly that she was well below reading and comprehension levels for eighth grade. I immediately informed my cooperating teacher who referred this student to the reading specialist who determined through testing procedures that the student was on a third grade reading level with symptoms of dyslexia. Since then, we have been working to obtain the formal support services for this student. In the meantime, I have developed individual literacy skill lessons where I truly believe I am making a difference in the life of this student. This is definitely one of the biggest highlights and eye-opening experiences that I will take away from student teaching."

A final example illustrates differentiated instruction in an elementary mathematics resource room, where a student teacher uses a mnemonic learning device to teach long division. The teacher candidate shares the following strategy: "My five resource room students were having difficulty remembering long division steps, so I introduced the following memorization strategy to help them remember the steps: 1) Daddy Division, 2) Mother Multiply, 3) Sister Subtract, and 4) Brother Bring Down. The students always write this strategy at the top of their papers to assist with memorizing long division steps."

It is evident that meeting the needs of individual students is a priority, but it is not a real area of stress for teacher candidates. With more experience in the classroom, beginning teachers will continue to develop a wide array of strategies to meet the needs of individual students.

9.4 InTASC Standard 4: Multiple Instructional Strategies

Centers ROCK!

The adage "learning is not a spectator sport" epitomizes the standard of *multiple instructional strategies*. Teachers should not be the sole providers of the learning process using direct teaching and learning methodologies. There should be multiple ways to learn content. Howard Gardner's research identifies the basic *multiple instructional strategies* as kinesthetic, musical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, auditory, linguistic, and mathematical. Based on this research, students should have multiple opportunities to explore how they learn best.

InTASC standard 4 is similar to standard 3 in that multiple intelligences are deeply rooted in most teacher-education coursework. Once again, this standard did not rank in the top three blog post themes, but it is considered to be one of the critical areas in the profession of education and also appears to be instinctive for most teacher candidates.

"Centers Rock!" is what one student posted. Learning Centers promote *multiple instructional strategies* through interpersonal or intrapersonal development. Each center has supplies and materials to complete learning activities or mini-projects focusing on one theme or skill subject, or they can be interdisciplinary with multiple skill subjects. Another blog post focused on the development of Learning Centers in a kindergarten setting for a math lesson with a focus on addition. "I used technology, manipulatives, worksheets, puzzles, games, musical instruments, and dance to teach addition. The planning was time consuming, but the outcome provided meaningful and engaging learning with my students exploring multiple ways to identify strategies for addition."

Although *multiple instructional strategies* are considered fundamental for all teacher candidates, meeting the needs of diverse learners can be a huge challenge for novice educators. Differentiating instruction is no easy task with a class of over twenty students as the following blog post illustrates: "This is my fourth week teaching kindergarten. The students are trying to grasp that a number can be added with varied numbers to come up with the same number. For example, 3 +2 = 5 and 4 + 1 = 5. My students are having a hard time understanding this concept. I tried using manipulatives with some students grasping the concept and others still struggling. Can anyone help with other strategies?" Based on this concern, it appears that mastering *multiple instructional strategies* requires coaching and collaboration that can offer teacher candidates teaching strategies, support, and confidence to meet the needs of diverse learners.

9.5 InTASC Standard 5: Classroom Motivation and Management Skills

The Know-It-All!

"There are a few things that I believe I need to work on but two of the main things are time management and not being afraid to be stern with the children." This is no easy task for student teachers—most novice teachers want their students to like them. Based on this blog post, *classroom motivation and management skills* rank as the number two stress factor for student teachers.

The majority of the daily routine of teaching comprises *classroom motivation and management*. Motivating students to stay on task can be frustrating for even veteran teachers and seem impossible for student teachers as shown by the following blog post: "The most difficult part of student teaching for me is classroom management. I am still trying to figure out the best way to control the class."

The following blog posts exemplify the myriad issues related to classroom motivation and management skills:

- "So, I have a student in my second grade classroom who is definitely a 'know-it-all.' This is extremely frustrating when I am teaching. There are times he refuses to complete work as he claims the work to be inaccurate. Apparently, he spends much of his time watching BBC where he gathers most of his information. He constantly calls out and corrects me with *Well technically...or Actually...* In collaboration with my cooperating teacher, we are attempting different strategies to put our 'know-it-all" in his place.'
- "I have three students who are constantly disrupting the learning process. I have moved their seats, talked to each student on an individual basis, and now plan on calling home. I have exhausted all of my avenues and my patience in running low."
- "I have one student who has difficulty respecting me and following expectations when my cooperating teacher steps out of the classroom. He refuses to complete work, distracts others, and tears his materials during my lessons. My cooperating teacher suggested that I make him a helper. I have since asked him to be my helper and pass out papers throughout the day. He is now focused with a new sense of respect toward me and his classmates."
- "My 2nd graders are very chatty. I created a 'silent jar' which is a clear jar with popcorn kernels and glitter. I told the children that I have a special pixie friend named Lola and that she has given me special powers to spread pixie dust in our classroom when our classroom is too talkative. Believe it or not, this positive behavior strategy actually works and the kids love it!"
- "So I have a student in my class who constantly cries when she does not get her way. I will teach a lesson, and if she does not get called on, she will cry. She is also quite a sassy little girl.

She will bring in different things like toy erasers and will have them taken away from her and will cause a huge scene for not getting her way. She is pretty difficult to handle and does not pay attention in class. I am desperate for advice!"

It is evident that *classroom motivation and management* encompasses an almost endless variety of scenarios for beginning teachers. It is important for teachers to structure and organize their classrooms to create a positive and safe environment for student learning, confidence, and achievement to take place. Teachers need to possess strong multi-tasking abilities to handle preparation and organization of lessons, create a positive classroom environment, anticipate classroom discipline, and assess student learning. Overall, *classroom motivation and management* is a huge undertaking for beginning teachers who feel already feel overwhelmed by the rigors of curriculum and the daily routines of teaching.

9.6 InTASC Standard 6: Communication Skills

Ask 3 before Me

The art of communication comprises listening, speaking, reading, communicating through media, and the ability to speak through non-verbal cues. Teachers need to model and be highly skilled in all of these areas to excel in the profession of education, as well as to promote student inquiry, positive interpersonal skill development, and collaboration. Of all the InTASC Standards, *communication skills* ranked the lowest in the blog posts. We know that this does not diminish the significance of the development of communication skills; it simply shows that communication is not a high priority for beginning educators because it will inevitably develop through the many teacher interactions with students, colleagues, administrators, and parents. Overall, it can be considered a *learned behavior*. However, several blog posts do exhibit the art of communication through problem solving with directives and media.

The following blog post concentrates on communication in the context of classroom management, with students collaborating and relying on one another for answers to content questions. "I communicated a strategy to prevent student outbursts for when they need assistance with independent work. The strategy is referred to as the Ask 3 Before Me strategy. The students are instructed that before asking an adult for guidance on where to look for answers, they need to ask 3 classmates for assistance before asking an adult for help."

Communicating through technology is ingrained in youth culture. Using technology is no longer optional for teachers because it is an integral part of their students' lives. One example of communication through technology is presented in the following blog post: "I allow my students to do a Google search to seek out answers to questions during group discussions. As well, my students submit assignments via Google Docs. I have learned so much about how to use technology inside and outside of the classroom."

As previously mentioned, communication is a *learned behavior* and the more beginning teachers teach, the more they will continue to develop a *teacher-comfort-zone* regarding communication skills.

9.7 InTASC Standard 7: Instructional Planning Skills

Mentally Drained

The number one stress factor for student teachers is *instructional planning skills*. The following blog posts provide evidence of the pressures on developing lessons and units:

- "I didn't realize how much work there is to put into all the lessons and I feel slightly overloaded with already teaching two out of three classes. I do all the planning and have absolutely no life!"
- "As we come into our final weeks of student teaching I am completely mentally drained with doing lesson plans. Lesson and unit planning is definitely taking a toll on me. Does anyone else feel this way?"

Planning, delivering, and evaluating instructional plans is a primary concern for beginning teachers. A lesson plan is a vital blueprint for the delivery of content. Student teachers spend most of their time planning lessons. Developing appropriate lesson plans using a structured lesson plan template allows teachers to stay organized and on track while teaching. The better prepared a student teacher is, the more likely she will be able to handle any classroom diversions during the implementation of a lesson. And as important as lesson plan development is, it is equally important for teachers to assess their lessons. As one blog post explains, "It is important for teachers to reflect on lessons that were developed and taught. By reflecting on what worked and what did not work, teachers can refine and / or adjust their lessons for future reference."

Teacher flexibility is also a critical component to lesson development, as stated by one student teacher: "I think the biggest thing I learned during student teaching was that lessons don't always go as planned. Even though we are taught to prepare ourselves for this, it is something that I needed to learn and experience on my own. And, that is to have a backup plan and to not show your students any signs of frustration when a lesson doesn't work out."

Instructional planning is a focal point for all educators, but is a critical area of concern for beginning teachers. To make matters even more stressful, there is tremendous pressure for lesson and unit plans to meet the rigor of academic and / or core state standards. Once again, as teachers gain more and more experience in the profession of education; *instructional planning* will become second nature.

9.8 InTASC Standard 8: Assessment of Student Learning

Tensions

In the face of standardized testing in every nook and cranny of education, it is no secret that assessment is stressful for student teachers, veteran teachers, and students alike. Although *assessment* did not rank in the top three student-teacher concerns, student teachers are cognizant of the standardized testing craze as illustrated by the following blog posts. Student teachers have a tendency to adapt to the pressures of standardized testing simply because they have no choice as they enter into the profession of education.

- "So everyone else has posted, PSSA has begun. I am in a first grade classroom, so I am fortunate to only be a secondary victim of this test. Everyone in the school is affected by PSSA. Our schedules are mixed up which is really difficult for my students."
- "This week is PSSA's and my school has half days and every part of our days have been devoted to this standardized test – and, I am sick of it!" "We have taken pre-practice and then practice PARCC tests for the upcoming New Jersey standardized tests that will take up about two to three weeks – REALLY!"

Of course, there is more to assessment than standardized tests; however, there is an increasing reliance on standardized tests and state standards to shape our nation's curricula. There is much controversy in the area of assessment, but student teachers do not have enough experience in this area for it to be a great cause for concern—at least not yet.

9.9 InTASC Standard 9: Professional Commitment and Responsibility

Lifelong Learners

"We are taught in our education classes that teachers are lifelong learners, and now I know what this means as I have attended many valuable learning experiences during in-service workshops with a focus on reading and mathematics programs." *Professional commitment and responsibility* encompasses a wide variety of professional development opportunities that are critical to the development and growth of student teachers and teachers in general.

Another critical aspect of *professional commitment and responsibility* is the development of professional relationships, as illustrated by the following comments:

- "The Job Fair was definitely a beneficial experience for me. I conversed and distributed my resume to many school districts and got the opportunity to practice my interviewing skills."
- "I really enjoyed the Opportunities and Expectations Program, because we had the opportunity to network with principals, superintendents, and other school administrators regarding teaching opportunities and interviewing expectations."

Professional commitment and responsibility also relies on collaboration with colleagues and other teachers on a daily basis. The following post displays the importance of collaborating with cooperating teachers: "I sit with my cooperating teacher every day to discuss what I am going to teach, lesson planning, and how to improve on a lesson. Collaborating with my cooperating teacher is really helpful to grow as a professional teacher."

Based on these posts *professional commitment and responsibility* is not an option; it is a requirement related to teachers as lifelong learners. Education is in a constant state of change. Therefore, staying on the cutting edge of educational research and practice is essential for all educators.

9.10 InTASC Standard 10: Partnerships

Superhero Monday

A *partnership is* an important standard, but the blog posts show that it is not of utmost concern for student teachers. However, student teachers did have experiences with this standard through in-service programs, faculty meetings, parent-teacher conferences, community-service activities, and collaboration with cooperating teachers. For example, one blog post focused on school spirit week and how the whole school raised awareness for diabetes. "This week at my school is spirit week. Today was Superhero Monday, tomorrow is Team Tuesday, then it is Wacky Wednesday, Thursday is favorite decade day, and finally, Friday is your class color day. As part of Superhero Monday, the students and teachers took part in a community walk to raise awareness for diabetes."

Another post focused on parent-teacher conferences as uncharted territory for student teachers. As noted in the following blog post, it takes a lot of practice to promote positive and meaningful relationships with parents during a parent-teacher conference. It is no easy task for beginning teachers to understand how a student's home environment—their family circumstances, socioeconomics, health, etc.—strongly influences their life and learning. "One of the most challenging parts of teaching is parent-teacher conferences, and I was happy to be able to participate in my school's parent-teacher conferences to observe how to handle tricky situations." Based on this observation, it is important for teachers to foster positive partnerships with parents that offer parents the opportunity to be part of their child's learning experience.

Another important aspect of *partnerships* is collaboration and partnerships with colleagues, "I value having the opportunity to meet with my cooperating teacher on a daily basis as she always has a few tricks up her sleeve that I would never have tried without meeting with her every day."

Partnerships establish meaningful relationships inside and outside of a school. These relationships can prove to be long lasting, with the ultimate goal of promoting student learning and their well-being.

10. Student Teacher Comments from the National Student Teacher Conference

Comments from the national student-teacher conference confirmed the value of the weekly *gated blogging* assignment. As one student explained, "Blogging supported my student teaching experience because it gave me the opportunity to share things in a safe environment. Our Blogging page is a judgment free zone where I can share my successes, failures, fears, suggestions, and so on. I can ask my fellow student teachers for help and advice. This page is really where we can encourage each other to be the best educators we can be."

The discussion of the issues raised by the *gated blogs* also mirrored many of the patterns in the blogs themselves. *Instructional planning, classroom management and motivation, and knowledge of subject matter* were discussed as major focus areas for student teachers in ways that were consistent with the student-teacher blogs. Some of the discussion focused on difficulties with teaching mathematics. As another student teacher noted, "Teaching varied skill subjects is very difficult because I have to keep up with the subject matter and be at least two weeks ahead of the students—and, this is frustrating." With regard to lesson planning, the discussion concentrated on the time-consuming aspects of lesson / unit plan development. "There is never enough time to plan as much as I want to, because I am exhausted after a full day of teaching. Then, I go home and plan lessons." *Classroom management and motivation* consumed most of the discussion in that "keeping students engaged and on track for an entire day is draining."

The students all agreed that the *gated blog* assignment provided inspiration for one another in their efforts to become successful educators. By sharing experiences, concerns, and strategies, the student teachers were able to have their voices heard and could discuss concrete ways to overcome the stresses of teaching.

The following quote, presented by one of the student teachers during this conference encompasses the profound impact that teachers have over their students—and, shows how teaching is a complicated and difficult profession that requires passion, commitment, and a huge support system.

<div align="center">

Teacher
I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom.
It's my personal approach that creates climate.
It's my daily mood that makes the weather.
As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous.
As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous.

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I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration.
I can humiliate or heal.
In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized."

By: Haim G. Ginott

11. Conclusions

This research was conducted to support student teachers and all of those involved in the student-teaching experience. Student teaching is just one phase of learning to become a professional educator; learning to teach is a process that happens with years of experience in the classroom. Student-teacher blogs provided a forum for teacher candidates to share student-teaching concerns with one another and have their voices heard. Student teachers must wear many different hats and be able to hone their multi-tasking skills during this critical semester in their teacher education program. To this end, sharing experiences through weekly blogging provided useful support, camaraderie, and a safe environment to share strategies. Sharing concerns, ideas, and strategies using a weekly *gated blogging* environment may assist student teachers and future student teachers by providing concrete ways to help them succeed during the student teaching experience.

Recognizing student teaching as a crucial and stressful experience, the weekly *gated blog* assignment provides a virtual learning environment and forum for dispensing thoughts and ideas to support student teachers. This forum supports the exchange of valuable knowledge and practical applications that may lead to a less stressful and a more rewarding experience. Future research delving into the specific fears and anxieties that student teachers experience would complement this research and other studies related to student-teacher factors. It can be said that subsequent studies of calming strategies for student teachers are essential to provide evidence of research-based data for a deeper understanding of how student teachers can be supported.

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Appendix A

Chart A: Results of Blogs Related to Each InTASC Standard, Framework for Teaching Domains, and Related Dispositions

INTASC STANDARDS *N=10*	Number of Blogs & % Related to InTASC Standard *Sum=1,087*	Framework for Teaching Domains	Related Dispositions
Standard One: Knowledge of Subject Matter *The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structure of the disciplines he or she teaches and can create learning experiences that make these aspects of the subject matter meaningful to the students.*	**161/1087=15%**	**Domain 1: Planning and Preparation** 1a. Demonstrating Knowledge of Content and Pedagogy 1c. Setting Instructional Outcomes 1e. Designing coherent instruction **Domain 3: Instruction** 3c. Engaging students in learning	• The teacher stays current with all skill subjects recognizing that all subject matter evolves over time • The teacher shows enthusiasm for subject matter and presents subject matter in multiple and meaningful ways
Standard Two: Knowledge of Human Development *The teacher understands how children learn and develop, and can provide learning opportunities that support their intellectual, social, and personal development.*	**3/1087-.3%**	**Domain 1: Planning and Preparation** 1b. Knowledge of students **Domain 2: Classroom Environment** 2a. Creating an environment of respect and rapport	• The teacher appreciates individual differences and shows respect for all students with the ultimate goal of facilitating self-confidence and successful learning • The teacher understands student strengths and weaknesses
Standard Three: Adapting Instruction for Individual Needs *The teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and creates instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners.*	**43/1087=4%**	**Domain 1: Planning and Preparation** 1b. Knowledge of students **Domain 2: Classroom Environment** 2a. Creating an environment of respect and rapport **Domain 3: Instruction** 3b. Using questioning and discussion techniques 3c. Engaging students in learning	• The teacher is sensitive to diversity and student's diverse family backgrounds • The teacher believes that all children can learn and adapt to high levels of instruction with a strong sense of determination for all children to succeed • Values differentiated learning strategies

Chart A: Results of Blogs Related to Each InTASC Standard, Framework for Teaching Domains, and Related Dispositions

INTASC STANDARDS N=10	**Number of Blogs & % Related to InTASC Standard** *Sum=1,087*	**Framework for Teaching Domains**	**Related Dispositions**
Standard Four: Multiple Instructional Strategies *The teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage students' development of critical thinking, problem solving and performance skills.*	**22/1087=2%**	**Domain 3: Instruction** 3c. Engaging students in learning	• The teacher facilitates the development of students' discovery learning, independent learning, critical thinking, and analytical thinking • Flexibility in teaching to the needs of diverse students
Standard Five: Classroom Motivation and Management Skills *The teacher uses an understanding of individual and group motivation and behavior to create a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation.*	**290/1087=27%**	**Domain 2: Classroom Environment** 2a. Creating an environment of respect and rapport **Domain 3: Instruction** 3c. Engaging students in learning	• The teacher promotes a positive learning environment • The teacher promotes civic responsibility and democratic values as the foundation to learning • The teacher utilizes motivational strategies to meet the needs of individual students • The teacher promotes a sense of respect for diversity
Standard Six: Communication Skills *The teacher uses knowledge of effective verbal, nonverbal, and media communication techniques to foster active inquiry, collaboration, and supportive interaction in the classroom.*	**2/1087=.2%**	**Domain 3: Instruction** 3a. Communicating with students 3c. Engaging students in learning 3f. Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness	• The teacher uses a wide variety of communication skills and values diverse learning styles and cultural differences • The teacher uses varied modes of technology in the learning process and to make the subject come alive

Chart A: Results of Blogs Related to Each InTASC Standard, Framework for Teaching Domains, and Related Dispositions

INTASC STANDARDS N=10	Number of Blogs & % Related to InTASC Standard Sum=1,087	Framework for Teaching Domains	Related Dispositions
Standard Seven: Instructional Planning Skills *The teacher plans instruction based on knowledge of subject matter, students, the community, and curriculum goals.*	**321/1087=30%**	**Domain 1: Planning and Preparation** 1b. Demonstrating knowledge of students 1e. Designing coherent instruction	• The teacher engages in collaborative long and short term planning • The teacher recognizes and values flexibility with lesson and unit design • The teacher concentrates on time management skills
Standard Eight: Assessment of Student Learning *The teacher understands and uses formal and informal assessment strategies to evaluate and ensure the continuous intellectual, social, and physical development of the learner.*	**135/1087=12%**	**Domain 1: Planning and Preparation** 1f. Designing student assessments **Domain 3: Instruction** 3d. Using assessment in instruction	• The teacher promotes assessment for learning gains for all students • The teacher values assessment as essential and ongoing within all lessons and is willing to redesign assessments to meet the diverse learning styles of students
Standard Nine: Professional Commitment and Responsibility *The teacher is a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of his or her choices and actions on others (students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community) and who actively seeks out opportunities to grow professionally.*	**85/1087=8%**	**Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities** 4a. Reflecting on teaching 4e. Growing and developing professionally 4f. Showing professionalism	• The teacher is committed to the profession of education as a lifelong learner • The teacher is open to change, willing to support others when needed, and willing to receive support on an as-need basis
Standard Ten: Partnerships *The teacher fosters relationships with school colleagues, parents, and agencies in the larger community to support students' learning and well-being.*	**25/1087=2%**	**Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities** 4c. Communicating with families 4d. Participating in a professional community 4f. Showing professionalism	• The teacher respects the privacy/confidentiality of student and family issues • The teacher will collaborate with other professionals and adults to improve the well-being of students • The teacher is willing to collaborate with students and their families