

Reflecting on Our Vexations and Ventures in Designing for Epistemic Empathy in Teacher Education

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MOTIVATION

Studies have shown that teachers' responsiveness to student ideas, feelings, and experiences is critical for promoting student agency, disciplinary engagement, and equitable participation (Colley & Windschitl, 2016; Kang 2021; Robertson & Atkins Elliot, 2020). Yet, what allows teachers to enact responsive teaching is less clear. Our work explores ways to foster responsive teaching by cultivating teachers' **epistemic empathy**—their capacity to tune into and appreciate students' cognitive and emotional experience in constructing and critiquing knowledge. **As teacher educators, we experienced various challenges and push-backs in this work.** Here, we outline tensions and "vexations" we are facing, and in turn, some "ventures" we undertook or plan to implement (Settlage & Johnston, 2014) to address our challenges related to designing for epistemic empathy, especially in the current political climate in which we operate.

ANCHORING VALUES & COMMITMENTS

Developing Asset-Based Orientations

Orienting to the strengths of students' ideas and forms of participation, in ways that allow teachers to foreground learners' sensibility, dignity, and humanity (Kayumova & Harper, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2000)

Recognizing the Value of Onto-Epistemic Heterogeneity

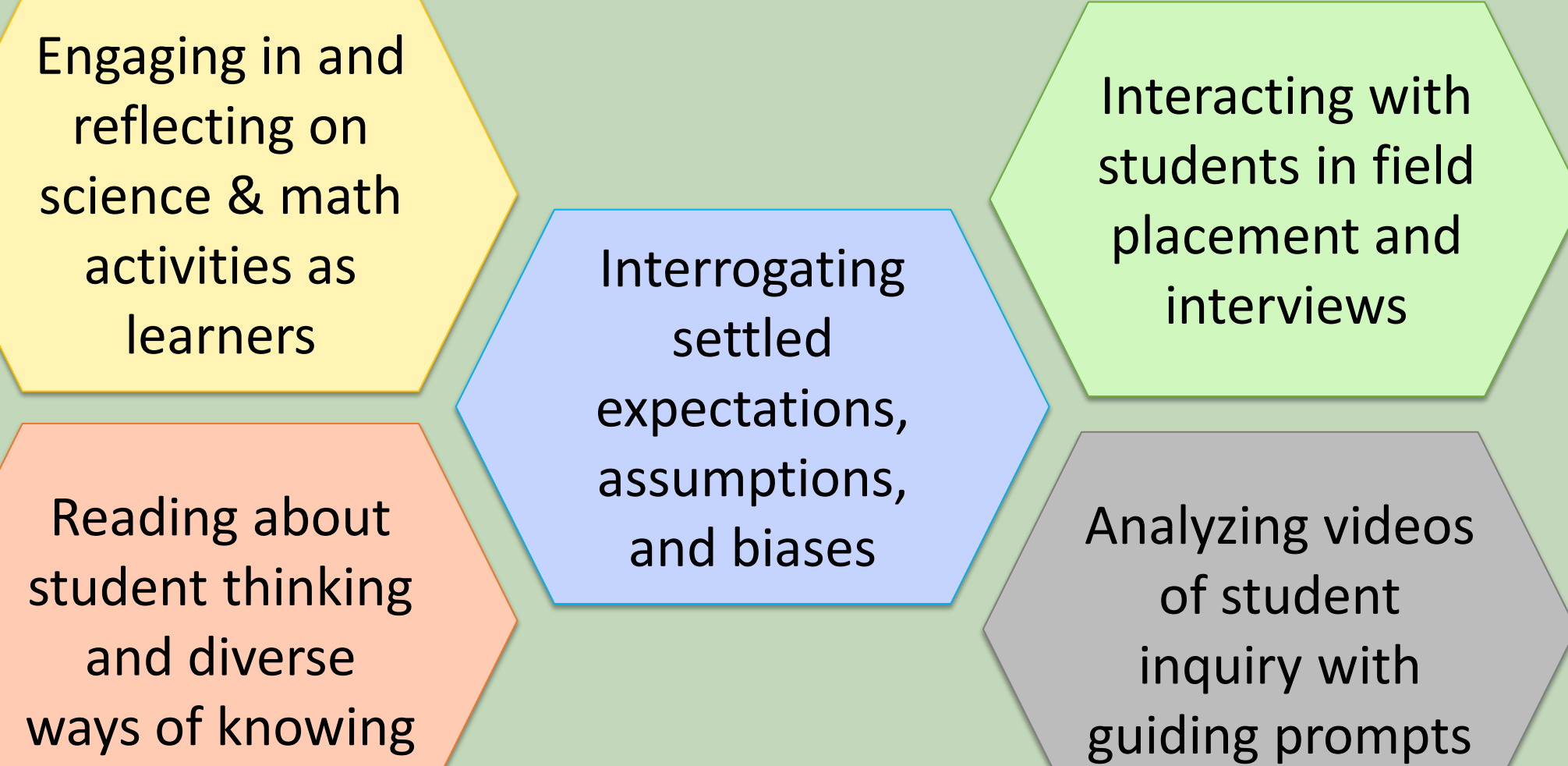
Acknowledging and appreciating the diversity of students' cultural practices, perspectives, experiences, and resources as fundamental to their science learning (Kayumova & Dou, 2022; Rosebery et al., 2010)

Working toward Political Clarity

Coming to a critical understanding of the contexts, knowledges, and assumptions that shape the spaces in which teachers operate (Bartolomé, 1994; Gutiérrez, 2013; Madkins & McKinney de Royston, 2019)

DESIGN-BASED APPROACH

Using a design-based approach, our project team designs and implements "**Learning to Listen**" educative experiences aimed at cultivating epistemic empathy in the context of a learning theory course early on in a secondary science and math teacher education program. As the instructors of the course, we engage preservice teachers in a suite of experiences:

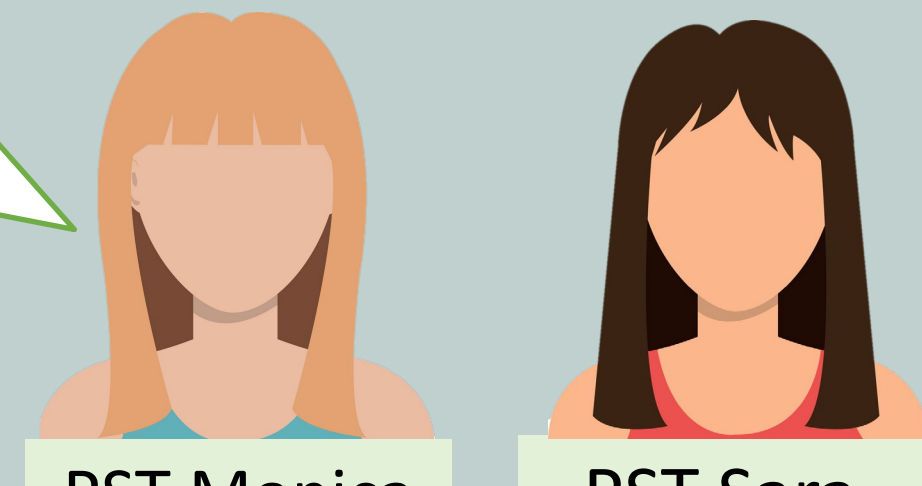


OUR VEXATIONS

How do we respond to PSTs' resistance and push-back in ways that optimize their learning?

As teacher educators, we sought to be empathetic and responsive to the preservice teachers (PSTs), endeavoring to position them as sensemakers and to build on their existing knowledge and beliefs. When PSTs expressed push-back and resistance, we grappled with how to respond in ways that make space for their sensemaking while maintaining our commitments as we invite PSTs to interrogate and expand their ideas and visions of teaching.

I find it interesting that you can't tell students that they are wrong anymore. In my learning experience if I said a misconception, I would be told it wasn't true and told the real concept and ideas...I still made it to college with that method of learning!



This is not about right or wrong. Thinking about it in that way could lead us to miss the brilliance, the very creative work students are doing. A fundamental aspect of learning to teach is to listen intensively to be able to see merit in student ideas. There are risks that I respect that are worthy of discussion; it isn't that anything goes or that all is relative.

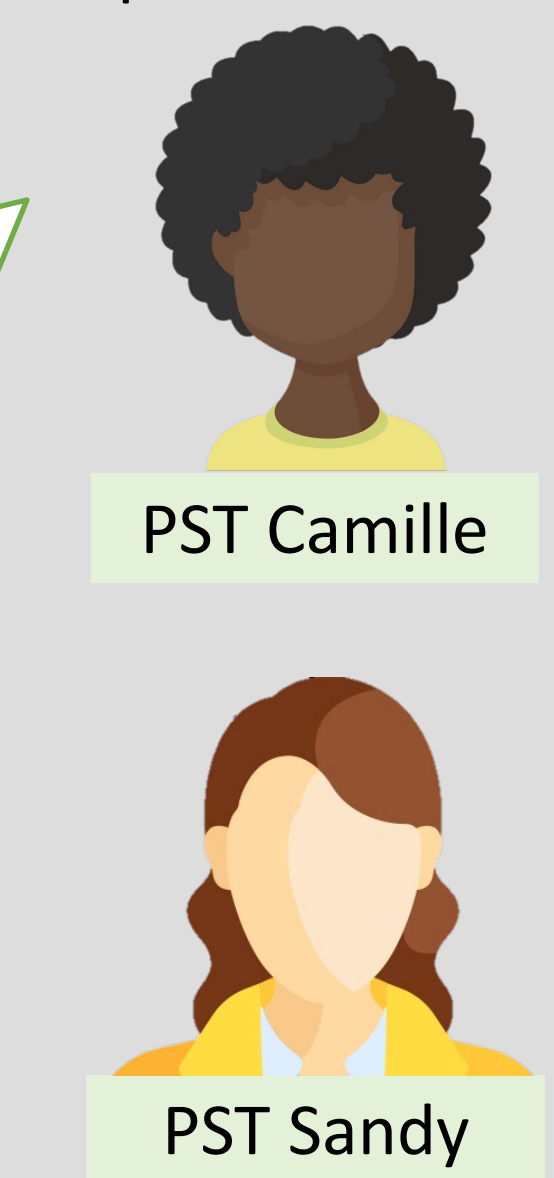


Dear Lama and Shannon, I wanted to talk to you both as a concerned student in the classroom. The point that you were trying to make is that the teacher should not correct the student, but rather encourage his thinking. However, as Helen and Monica were discussing their ideas, I felt as if you were telling them that they were wrong for thinking that way. I felt that it was quite hypocritical. Personally, I just felt that this conversation was not productive, but a way to let us know the correct way to teach.

How do we center issues of power, equity, and justice in the work of cultivating empathy?

How do we grapple with issues power in terms of who is being asked to do the empathizing and who is getting empathized with, especially in our current politicized and polarizing climate? How do we trouble internalized biases and assumptions that may influence how PSTs empathize with students?

I feel uncomfortable around white male students. I think back to how I was treated by my white male peers while growing up and the fact that I do not know what their parents say about black people at home. There are many closeted racists. Last semester there was a white male student who came into class with a TRUMP hat on. I avoided one-on-one interaction and only spoke to him when he would raise his hand in class. I know he was a nice kid, but it's difficult to separate my feelings on these things.



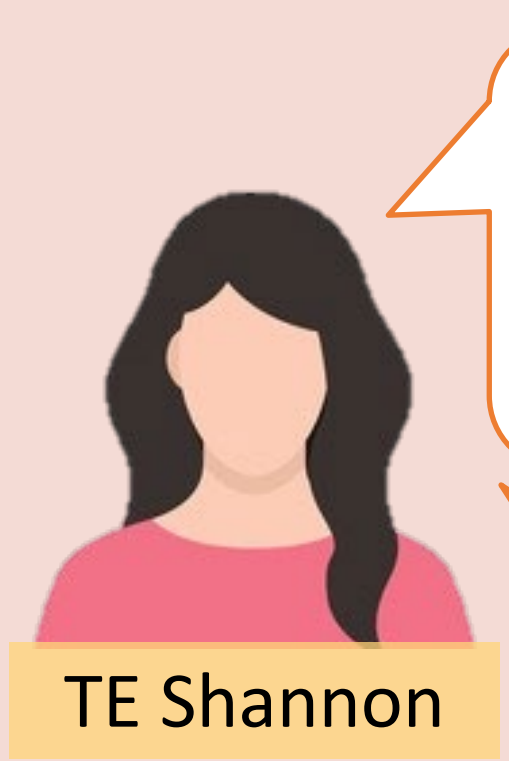
I grew up in a predominantly white, affluent, Christian town, and even though I do not personify with all of those descriptions, they are still what I am familiar with and what I previously considered "normal". I am comfortable around people that match those descriptions because I grew up around people who match those descriptions, so I understand their culture, beliefs, and problems, with relatively little effort. Conversely, when I meet people who do not match those descriptions, I find myself a little wary at first because I know I will probably have trouble relating to them.

How do we work through and grapple with our own emotions as teacher educators?

How do we process and honor our own feelings and emotions as teacher educators, especially when epistemological, ethical, and political tensions arise? How can we channel our emotions in ways that allow us to grow as we facilitate and support PST's growth?

And I worry, sometimes in these moments [of resistance], by not speaking up and coming to [the student's] defense, perpetuating something? I was upset ... but in hindsight, this felt personal.

I think I'm being very defensive right now and I just need to let my guard down and not have a snap



I found myself in class feeling super alert about how I am talking and framing things... I caught myself making an intentional effort to keep a straight face and say things in less "expressive" ways, and even in a more assertive and confident tone!

I just want to crash!



OUR VENTURES

- Taking a deep breath, and then a deep dive to unpack and understand the root of the resistance, through in-depth debriefs and empirical analyses.



The "hypocritical" part is interesting to me because I feel like we are trying--maybe overly trying--to be very careful and cautious to not say like "your thinking is wrong".. but I just feel like our efforts have been missed regardless of how intensely effortful we have been.

- Making intentional efforts to open space for PSTs' tensions and vexations while also explicitly foregrounding our goal to cultivate their capacity for listening to and learning across differences in viewpoints and perspectives.
- Collaborating with a new field placement site where PSTs have opportunities to observe more student-centered approaches to instruction.

- Working to become more educated on issues of equity and building our own repertoires and toolkits to better support PSTs towards empathy and critical awareness.
- Making intentional efforts to integrate conversations of race, power, historicity, and identity--and the feelings that arise in these conversations--as part and parcel of the work of teaching and learning within the discipline.
- Striving to build trust within our community (safe and courageous spaces) so that we-PSTs and TEs alike--feel willing and encouraged to wrestle with these issues and to lean into instead of shy away from the discomfort.
- Being in conversation with other teacher educators and engaging in ongoing reflection and discussions about what else we might do.

- Creating intentional spaces of normalization and commiseration where as TEs we debrief and share emotions with one another.

Today was a lot. I know you're feeling unsettled about it, and I understand why.

Let's remember what the cognitive load is for a teacher educator doing this, right? It's so hard!

- Engaging in critical self-reflection and analysis of our own experiences and instructional practices to learn and grow.
- Being in conversation with other teacher educators across institutions wrestling with similar emotions and vexations.

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