Dawan Coombs and Kate Goodwin

Give Them Something to Talk About: The Role of Dialogue in Mentoring Relationships

Kate: I’m glad I caught you, Dawan. Do you have time to talk?
Dawan: Sure, I’ve got a few minutes. What’s up?

Kate: I just got off the phone with a frustrated parent, and I wanted to run something past you. She was upset about an independent reading project I assigned to the class, where students read a book of their choice and responded to it in various ways through different media. The mom’s complaint was that she didn’t understand why her daughter was creating a “grade school diorama” project for her honors high school English class. The whole conversation really made me second-guess the project and now I’m wondering if I handled this the way I should have. Do you think I responded appropriately?

The exchange above reflects the beginning of an actual conversation between Kate, a first-year teacher, and Dawan, her former university supervisor, concerning a challenge Kate faced during her first months teaching. Armed with the theory, content knowledge, and teaching strategies she learned in her teacher preparation program, Kate designed an assessment that honored student response and aligned with her own theories about reading and learning. However, in the unfamiliar context of her own new classroom and in the face of her first parental complaint, she understandably questioned herself.

While this experience is specific to Kate, the situation she found herself in was not unique. Like Kate, many beginning teachers find themselves constantly questioning themselves and their approaches to teaching amid the challenges they face during their first few years in the classroom. Despite extensive preparation in high-quality programs, these teachers face a daily deluge of moments when their understandings about teaching are called into question in the living context of their new classrooms. These encounters often challenge new teachers’ ideals about what teaching truly entails as well as their abilities to succeed in the profession. Once eager to begin teaching on their own, they find themselves working in isolation, wishing for opportunities to work through the challenges they now face within a network of like-minded colleagues, such as those offered by cohorts and university supervisors with whom their theories about the classroom coincide.

In the face of these and other pressures, some decide that they might not be cut out for the job, when what they may really be lacking is the necessary support system to aid this transition.

As a solution to this dilemma, we propose an increase in purposeful and meaningful dialogue. We believe ongoing, professional dialogues with new teachers can be used as a way to enculturate them into the profession, as well as support them as they navigate through challenges they often face in the first few years. Further, we believe these relationships also prove beneficial for mentors as these dialogues encourage engagement with the realities facing classroom teachers as well as opportunities to learn from the way new teachers deal with these situations.
For example, although Dawan’s official responsibilities as Kate’s supervisor concluded at the end of last year, as did Kate’s obligation to listen to Dawan’s feedback, our dialogues have continued. By establishing a dialogical relationship during student teacher supervision, what began as an official supervisor–student teacher relationship has transitioned into a collegial one full of mutually beneficial conversations. Because principles of dialogue exist as the common denominator between these exchanges, in this article we discuss how principles of Bakhtin’s dialogic theories that guide our teaching and learning can also apply to creating successful mentor-mentee relationships. Through a discussion of these principles, as well as descriptions of what these principles might look like in practice, we offer suggestions for both university supervisors and newly minted teachers who are interested in continuing the conversations they started during student teaching in ways that will benefit all parties involved.

**Principles of Dialogue for Practice**

Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin described the ideological becoming of the individual as “the process of selectively assimilating the words of others” into one’s own understandings of the world (341). According to this idea, as we develop as educators, the words of others inform our theories and beliefs, shaping our understandings. Dialogue exists as a crucial element of this development because it’s through dialogue that we come to better understand our relationships with each other, and thus ourselves.

Applied to the context of new teachers, they filter their experiences through the lens of others’ ideas. As a result, throughout the ideological becoming of new teachers, the theories and feedback they receive from those around them are a central component of these dialogues. Therefore, as central players in the education of preservice teachers, the words of university supervisors and instructors, as well as mentor teachers, exert considerable weight. For this reason, we posit that dialogue lives at the heart of supportive mentoring relationships.

What follows is not a prescriptive list of activities, based on these principles, designed to ensure mentoring that works. No one method could fit all types of mentor-mentee relationships, nor meet the various needs of mentees throughout their ideological becoming. Instead, the following sections offer a discussion of the structural supports, and the theory behind them, that enabled both of us to carry on important conversations that made a difference.

**Blogging as Understanding and Response**

Before she began student teaching, Kate maintained a blog as part of her coursework in her English education teacher preparation program. Originally this blog was intended to serve as a forum for Kate to journal about and reflect on her experiences as a student teacher. Although not Kate’s instructor for this particular class, Dawan, as her supervisor, was charged with the responsibility of reading the blog periodically to monitor Kate’s progress and experiences in her placement classroom. However, what started out as a simple tool for recording her experiences developed into a unique space for dialogue.

Once Dawan began commenting on Kate’s entries, her journaling began to take the shape of inquiries for feedback. As Kate began crafting each entry toward an anticipated response, sometimes even directing the focus of her writing toward Dawan’s previous comments or questions, the blog began to function more as a dialogue journal that offered a space to enter into conversations about Kate’s experiences. The more Kate and Dawan entered into this space, the more they developed/built
a relationship that centered on understanding and response.

According to Bakhtin, these two components lie at the heart of dialogue: “Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (282). In Bakhtinian terms, Kate’s blogs became oriented “toward the listener,” and written in anticipation of Dawan’s answers (281). Likewise, Dawan’s responses to Kate’s queries contained questions that called out for their own responses. This distinctive characteristic transformed this reflection tool into a forum for meaning making. In this way, the blog became a place where we both entered into dialogues about how the ideas Kate encountered in her cohort classes connected to the issues she faced in her classroom.

Using journals—even dialogue journals—as tools for reflection is not a new idea in teacher preparation programs, nor is the use of a blog for this purpose. But the way in which Kate and Dawan developed this blog allowed them to push the boundaries of reflection. Although other teacher educators encourage the use of dialogue journals as a space for teacher candidates and their supervisors to enter into conversations about issues in the classroom, they also recognize the difficulties that arise because of requirements mandating a minimum number of entries and time demands on the part of the teacher candidates (Garmon 45). However, rather than recording daily activities on her blog, Kate used hers as a way to reflect on significant moments in her classroom, which allowed her to focus on deep analysis of her experiences rather than trying to meet a mandated number of entries.

Furthermore, the journaling took on additional depth of meaning because of the time Kate invested in her reflections. For example, Kate found the act of journaling provided her with time to reflect on what happened in her classroom before she shared it with someone else. By the time Dawan saw what Kate had written, Kate had already processed the experience two times, once when it actually happened and once as she thought and wrote about it on her blog. In turn, although Dawan couldn’t observe Kate in the classroom each day, her blog entries offered glimpses of those moments of triumph and challenge in an easily accessible form that could be viewed (and returned to) at individual convenience.

The dialogues that took shape on this blog did more than provide a chronicle of Kate’s experiences. They also helped foster a dialogic relationship between Kate as a student teacher and Dawan as her supervisor where the two talked freely about Kate’s ideas about teaching. In her responses to Kate’s reflections, Dawan often referred to her own experiences as a classroom teacher, or articles and books about teaching she herself had been reading. Sometimes these comments tied directly to issues discussed in Kate’s classes, but many times they consisted of some of the minutia that didn’t seem to fit neatly into a lesson or reading assignment.

Ultimately, these exchanges allowed both Kate and Dawan to understand one another and create bonds that would offer support later on in the year, as the challenges of student teaching intensified. In other words, “[t]hrough writing and sharing . . . these bloggers built a community that mattered” (Dean and Warren 50). Furthermore, because Kate and Dawan built a community digitally, the dialogues did not stop when Kate moved out of state to begin her first year of teaching. Instead, Kate has continued to blog about her experiences as a way to reflect on her teaching and Dawan continues to check in and read these blogs intermittently, even across hundreds of miles.

**Interviews and Observations as Dialogues**

Monthly observations also existed as a central component of Kate’s teacher training and are typical of most teacher education programs. Traditionally, student teacher observations are characterized by supervisor observations of student teachers teaching followed by feedback about what the student teachers did well and what could be improved. However, rather than viewing observations as opportunities for feedback, many student teachers anticipate these moments with feelings of dread for the obligation
to record experience as well as for the critiques that follow. But we believe this is often because both supervisors and student teachers view observations as critiques done according to a checklist of behaviors and acts that vary in their degree of pertinence to the classroom.

In a dialogical mentor-mentee relationship, observations and feedback sessions are positioned as opportunities for student teachers to receive constructive, supportive feedback rather than punitive moments intended to quantify teacher success. These sessions serve as a chance for the mentee and mentor to view the classroom as another text with which to dialogue, ensuring that the student feels supported and encouraged by a mentor who truly wants him or her to succeed. These types of qualitative discussions produce a deeper understanding of “what,” while systems in which a student is evaluated quantitatively each time can turn into a tiny (and at times critical) snapshot of what happens in the classroom.

The dialogues that result from such exchanges can only occur when the supervisor and student teacher are positioned in a relationship that allows for a back-and-forth exchange of ideas, rather than in a hierarchical one. Viewed through a Bakhtinian lens, this leveling of hierarchies does not necessarily mean the student and teacher possess equal power, but that both can learn from the dialogue and believe the voice of the other brings understandings to contribute (Fecho and Botzakis 550). From this perspective, responsibility for feedback and improvement becomes a team effort rather than a punitive measure.

From this position, these observations become opportunities for us to extend the dialogues that began in our blog exchanges into the living contexts of the classroom. Opening up these sessions to the ideas and reflections of both mentor and mentee positioned the feedback Dawan offered as a co-construction between both positions, rather than a list of Dawan’s critiques. In this way, Dawan and Kate were able to make meaning together regarding the challenges she faced, supporting Kate’s process of becoming as a teacher in an organic way.

In addition to these observations, Dawan and Kate met once a month for an interview to discuss the theories and practices Kate valued and wanted to incorporate into her own teaching. Research in the field of teacher education discusses the value of opportunities to engage in the free exchange of ideas and reflection over time (Kuechle et al., 26). In this way, the interviews allowed Kate yet another forum in addition to the blogs and her monthly observations to focus on her goals as a teacher and the theories she saw working or wanted to apply.

For Kate, these interviews proved a valuable supplement to the observations in several ways. First, because they took place outside of her placement school and thus the teaching environment, Kate did not feel the stress associated with being a student teacher quite so heavily. She was not distracted by preparing for another class coming in or worried about grading because she was in a removed environment. Furthermore, because these interviews were conducted outside the school schedule, Kate and Dawan had a potentially unlimited time to talk, allowing conversation to flow more freely and organically because they were not moving through a post-observation routine confined by a limited amount of time.

In addition, because these talks were less structured than her observations, both the prepared and spontaneous questions Dawan posed pushed Kate’s thinking and guided her development immensely. Although these interviews would be characterized as semi-structured and open-ended opportunities for dialogue, Dawan purposely resisted jumping in with corrections on Kate’s ideas about theory or classroom practice. Rather, she tried to allow Kate to talk through her own ideas and followed up with questions that pushed her answers.

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ideas about teaching and learning. Dawan and Kate created an environment open to dialogue by eliminating the binary that can sometimes exist in evaluations. Instead of viewing lessons as going “well” or “poorly,” and instead of viewing theoretical applications as “good” or “bad,” Dawan and Kate took a more critical look at the issues Kate was dealing with in her process of becoming an educator. The way Kate and Dawan discussed experiences and theories did not center around making instant judgments but rather on careful and constant reflection. After Kate responded to Dawan’s questions, Dawan usually followed up with more questions, so that the interviews were not about finding a definite “answer” to an issue but instead about finding new ways and theories through which to think about an issue. These interviews helped Kate learn how to think through her challenges and successes in the classroom, a skill infinitely more valuable than merely receiving praise and criticism.

Once Kate graduated and began her first teaching job out of state, the distance made it impossible for Dawan to continue to observe her as well as for them to continue their interviews. However, the relationships formed during this time made continuing these conversations in other ways a priority and became the basis for continued interactions as Kate began her first year of teaching.

Exchange of Articles and Experiences to Inspire Theory-Based Practice

Bob Fecho describes a dialogical classroom as “one in which literacy is used to immerse teacher and students in an ongoing reflective conversation with the texts of their lives” (8). Although he was talking about teachers and students in high school classrooms, we feel like this idea works with mentors and mentees as well. The sharing of actual texts and the “text” of Kate’s classroom pushed both of our ideas about theory and teaching.

During her first year of teaching, after Kate called Dawan or blogged about a particularly difficult issue, Dawan would frequently respond with resources and research that was relevant to the situation. Dawan’s vetting and passing on of research proved beneficial to Kate because it made it possible for her to easily incorporate solid theory into her practice because she did not have to spend the time searching for these articles on her own. Especially as a first-year teacher, Kate did not have the luxury of ready access and exposure to as much research as she did in her teacher education program. However, because Dawan worked primarily in an academic setting, she had a wide range of resources and knowledge of where to find additional information that she could pull from to send to Kate.

In turn, although no one really keeps score, Dawan often draws on Kate’s experiences for both her writing and her work with undergraduate preservice teachers. Similarly, the scenarios Kate faces in her own classroom and blogs about often coincide with concepts Dawan teaches to her undergraduates. By drawing on the experiences of Kate and other teachers with whom Dawan remains in contact, the undergraduates in her course see how the theories and approaches they discuss in class play out in the context of real teachers’ experiences. By swapping research and experiences, Dawan was able to help Kate to support her practice with theory, while Dawan was able to connect the theory she taught to Kate’s real-life teaching scenarios for preservice teachers.

Challenges and Suggestions

We both realize creating the kind of dialogic exchanges we described here will not be without challenges for both mentors and their new-teacher counterparts. However, we believe establishing strong foundations for these dialogues in teacher education programs will leave students with the desire to continue these relationships beyond their preservice teaching experiences and into their first years of the profession.

For example, as a university instructor, Dawan realized the sheer number of students she taught would not allow for these kinds of in-depth dialogues with every student. However, because her supervision duties focused on a smaller number of students, it became more practical to focus on initiating more extensive dialogues with those with whom she had the most interaction—her su-
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that came up, and then she would think it over until it was time for her to explicitly write about it. This method allowed Kate not only to carve out the time to write about her experiences but also to find a way for her to mull things over in her head, so that the blog entries were less of a record of what happened and more of an analysis followed by an authentic dialogue. Anticipating comments also encouraged Kate to post regularly.

Another way that Kate worked through the time issues was to use each method of dialogue with Dawan strategically, so that she could get the specific type of feedback she was looking for. The hardest, but also sometimes the most meaningful, element of the ongoing dialogues consisted of what was characterized as spontaneous conversations. These phone calls were rarely scheduled and mostly came up organically as the need arose. By combining these phone calls with blogging, Kate and Dawan put a value on making time for dialogue but also respected the intense demands of both schedules. For example, when situations popped up that warranted immediate support from Dawan (like the event that spurred the phone call that begins this article), Kate would call her. However, when Kate felt that a certain event deserved careful reflection and did not need an instant response, she would use the blog as a way to dialogue about it. By adapting the methods to meet her needs, Kate ensured she would get effective support in a meaningful way that allowed her to either immediately or eventually gain greater insight into an experience.

Ultimately, building these relationships is not something that will work with every single student teacher and mentor. However, it’s also important to consider that not every student teacher or first-year teacher wants this kind of constant feedback. We encourage both supervisors and student teachers to establish a strong relationship during preservice mentoring experiences so once students graduate it seems natural to continue these conversations with those who want to continue this relationship.

Supervisees. Through observations of student teachers and close interactions with them, she felt more able to address their needs and encourage these kinds of conversations.

Another challenge Dawan encountered as a supervisor concerned the depth of students’ reflection in their blogs. Because some students saw the blog primarily as an assignment where they made weekly entries, it became more of a travel log rather than a dialogue blog. But when student blogs served only as a record of their weekly activities, students didn’t seem to get to the same depth of insight from their student teaching experience as Kate. One way that Dawan found to combat this tendency was to help preservice teachers see their blogs as a means of communication and reflection early in their cohort experience, as well as with minilessons focused on how to write the substantive and reflective blogs supervisors could respond to.

Similarly, Kate found that by looking for events or milestones to document in her blog, her focus shifted away from fulfilling a number requirement. For instance, instead of simply blogging two times a week, she used her blog to process those first moments, such as when a lesson went horribly, her first real issue with student defiance, the first time she found herself totally scrapping her plans in the middle of the lesson, or the first time she successfully differentiated a lesson. Or, in an effort to prevent problems from occurring, Kate also used her blog as a place to anticipate and think through how she might respond if negative situations should occur. Regardless of the focus, assuming this sort of a perspective felt more authentic for both parties because both the teacher and mentor had an “issue” they could dig into, centered on an event that happened in the classroom.

Kate considered one of the most challenging elements of continuing these conversations to be finding the time to communicate with Dawan. As a first-year teacher, Kate was already stretched thin with her basic teaching duties. Without the support of a cohort environment or the built-in pressure that results from class requirements, it was easier not to prioritize reflecting on and dialoging about her experiences. One way that Kate worked through this issue was by picking a specific day of the week to write about her experiences. During the week, Kate would write down any event or issue
Dawan and Kate found that this didn’t take much of an effort beyond the course of the already occurring professional interactions. Through observations, interviews/extended conversations about teaching, and blogs, the relationship developed organically, and Dawan and Kate learned to use these different mediums to communicate and dialogue strategically. These provided a solid framework so when things got more difficult and chaotic as Kate began her first year of teaching, continuing the conversation was a priority.

**Deeper Reflection and Increased Understanding**

Educational researcher and philosopher Nel Noddings discussed the untapped potential for reflection and inquiry available when teachers are encouraged to share their stories. She wrote:

> Teachers, like students, do not know everything about the phenomena of teaching, but they know some things, and they, too, can be encouraged to develop their own themes and to probe deeply into their own situations. They do not have to be researchers. Instead they should be credited with the special knowledge of teachers, and interaction with researchers should raise the consciousness of both groups. (219)

When applied to the context of mentor relationships between new teachers and their university counterparts, the central focus of Noddings’s ideas aptly summarizes the benefits of dialogue: deeper teacher reflection and inquiry as well as increased understanding on behalf of the new teachers and their mentors.

These kinds of dialogues contribute to both the mentor’s and the mentee’s process of becoming. On one hand, they allow the mentor to understand where the mentee is coming from and provide the mentor an opportunity to share feedback that will inform the way the new teacher approaches the classroom. On the other, these dialogues bring the struggles of the classroom to the forefront of the mentor’s attention, providing an additional lens to consider as the mentor shares advice and recommendations. Furthermore, as the relationship between the mentor and mentee develops, their dialogue affects not only each other but also the students and future teachers both work with on a daily basis.