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**Multimodal collaboration boards in rural online teacher education**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we highlight our use of multimodal collaboration boards and provide theoretical and empirical grounding for their use in teacher education courses. We illustrate and reflect on how multimodal collaboration boards were implemented as a curricular structure for one graduate-level rural teacher education course exploring equitable classroom management practices. Finally, we present a short how-to guide for using this approach across various content areas and teaching modalities in teacher education.

*Keywords:* multimodality; collaboration; dialogic annotation; virtual learning; teacher education

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## **What Are We Talking About?**

Like many, the unexpected and sustained transition to online learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced us far out of our pedagogical comfort zones (Kambui Pierre & Starke, 2020). As teacher educators who teach primarily through discussion and collaborative activities, a switch to teaching asynchronously through an online learning management system, as well as teaching via live stream, left us daunted in how to create a socially collaborative space that was still meaningful and motivating for our students. It was challenging to conceptualize an online course that was accessible and flexible for our students' hectic lives situated within an ongoing emergency. We knew that if our classes did not reflect autonomy, personal relevance, community, flexibility, and care, students would be less likely to engage with the coursework and their development as new teachers would suffer.

The purpose of this practical article, written from my (William's) perspective, is to share a teaching approach we are referring to as multimodal collaboration boards. In the past three years, I have used this approach within both in-person and online teacher education courses and have found it to be effective, social, and engaging for students. The approach involves the creation of a set of online collaborative slides through which students employ various expressive modes to reflect on their learning and engage in peer dialogue. My coauthor, Johnny, helped to articulate a framework of multimodality in education that organizes our thoughts regarding the benefits of this pedagogical approach. In this article, we highlight the affordances of multimodal creation and social annotation, and we suggest that teacher educators of all areas and modalities (synchronous, asynchronous, or a mixture) can easily adapt this pedagogical strategy to promote collaboration and criticality in their specific contexts. To highlight its applicability, we illustrate

how multimodal collaboration boards were implemented as a curricular structure for one rural online graduate-level teacher education course centered on equitable classroom management.

### **Framing Multimodality in Education**

Multimodality refers to an interdisciplinary recognition that communication and meaning-making take place across multiple modes rather than exclusively through spoken and written language (Kress, 2010). Grounded in social semiotic theory, multimodality “deals with *meaning* in all its appearances, in all social occasions and in all cultural sites” (Kress, 2010, p. 2). Teachers who employ a multimodal approach to teaching reject the hierarchy of meaning-making in which communicative language is dominant and, instead, rely on and encourage their own and their students’ use of diverse modes to interpret and express meaning.

The multiple paths of communication and interpretation offered through a framework of multimodality benefit students as they critically explore content in university courses. Multimodal pedagogical approaches offer diverse avenues for student meaning-making while promoting the development of agency for all, especially marginalized student groups, thereby fostering critical multimodal literacy (Ajayi, 2015; Low, 2017). Other researchers have highlighted how multimodal activities help teachers and learners expand their literacies and their abilities to interact with and respond to a wider variety of texts (Swenson et al., 2005). Educators who implement multimodality can effectively invite students to collaborate and co-create in authentic, purposeful, and reflective ways and to draw upon their diverse identities and perspectives (Miller, 2010). Further, van Leeuwen (2015) suggests educators incorporate multimodal learning “to educate students for critical awareness and appreciation of key cultural and social issues” (p. 588). Thus, a pedagogical approach such as multimodal collaboration boards might be conceptualized both as a means of effectively preparing pre-service teachers

while also mobilizing them with a culturally responsive pedagogical tool they can take into their own future classrooms.

Because we, like many educators throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, felt a sense of isolation from our students and the classroom community, we decided to enrich the activity with some form of social learning, where students would be invited to take part in discussion about each other's multimodal creations. These discussions took the form of digital annotation and were directly embedded in the presentation slides. By layering digital, social annotation onto the multimodal reflection activity, we sought to leverage the affordances of multimodality and dialogue in a way that would cause pre-service teachers to explore their own understandings more intentionally and to nudge them out of their perceptions into a wider variety of possibilities on the topic.

### **How to Use It**

The use of multimodal collaborative online spaces is not new, and educators at all levels have shared similar techniques (Champlain College, 2021; Herbst et al., 2014; Keeler, 2016). Platforms such as VoiceThread, Flip, Hypothesis, and Padlet are commonly used in educational settings because they honor student voices, enabling students to share their thoughts in a variety of ways. Additionally, these types of multimodal collaboration boards can be adapted to any synchronous or asynchronous context. What we present here is a flexible structure ripe for adaptation for teacher educators of various areas and modes of delivery.

### **The Course Context**

This work was situated in a fully online, asynchronous graduate level teacher education course at a rural state university in Texas. Students enrolled in the teacher education program were primarily either undergraduate students working toward teacher certification or current

teachers honing their practice while working toward a graduate degree. I instructed the course during the Summer 2021 semester.

The course curriculum provided ten current and future teachers with space to explore what it means for teachers to engage in equitable and culturally responsive classroom management in the secondary context. In K-12 schools and teacher education programs in the United States, classroom management is often inaccurately conceptualized in terms of reactively managing students' disruptive behavior in the classroom, often by means of punishment or reward systems. This approach to classroom management tends to have disproportionately harsher impacts on culturally and linguistically marginalized students who are often misperceived by teachers as being less capable and more culpable (Iruka et al., 2020). Instead, research and professional organizations in education recommend that classroom management should be understood as a proactive process by which teachers and school administrators create a welcoming and culturally sustaining school space where any issues of discipline are addressed collaboratively and equitably with attention to context, community, and structural issues (Milner et al., 2018).

The graduate course sought to encourage students to critically reexamine their perceptions of classroom management in this new light. The teacher education students were encouraged to envision how they would enact this proactive approach to classroom management in their current or future classrooms. Each week for six weeks, students began their learning by engaging with various resources (e.g., articles, websites, videos) related to one of the components of classroom management described by Garrett (2014): Organizing the physical design, establishing rules and routines, developing relationships, implementing engaging

instruction, and addressing discipline. In Garrett's (2014) model, the first four of these components are proactive measures and comprise the core of classroom management.

Then, after reading or watching the resources, students accessed our weekly multimodal collaboration board and chose two to three empty consecutive slides as their personal workspaces. On these slides they responded through multimodal expression—writing, images, videos, or a synthesis of modes—to open-ended prompts posed by the instructor. The prompts asked students to reflect critically on inequitable classroom management systems they had experienced as students or had seen in classroom observations, while also envisioning their own practices in the future in relation to the harmful impacts of reactive, zero-tolerance disciplinary systems.

### **An Illustrative Example (Week 2)**

In the second week of the fully asynchronous online course, students examined the role of building two-way, shared relationships (Garrett, 2014) with students, families, and communities in fostering responsive classroom management. To prepare for their multimodal work, students read pertinent articles about building relationships with families (Cutler, 2014) and the community (Loria, 2018) and teachers' perceptions of parents as curricular experts (Negri-Pool, 2014). Students also watched the film *Precious Knowledge* (Palos, 2011) which illustrates the mutually dependent link between students, families, the community, the school, and the curriculum. The resources together demonstrate different perspectives towards building strong and equitable partnerships outside of the school.

**Figure 1.**

*Welcome slide (Slide 1)*



After engagement with the weekly readings and videos, students could begin their multimodal expression. On our online course page, students followed a link to a Google Slides document housing the multimodal collaboration board where they were welcomed by a thematic title, a representative photo, and two brief deadlines on the first slide (Figure 1). The second slide shared a few course announcements. Next, the third slide (Figure 2) listed three open-ended prompts students could respond to through multimodal expression. In this second week, students were asked to produce meaning in three ways: (a) design a creative component, (b) reflect on the meaning of a screenshot and quote from the film, and then (c) consider avenues for action in their future classrooms.



**Figure 2.**

*Open-ended multimodal prompts posed by the instructor (Slide 2)*

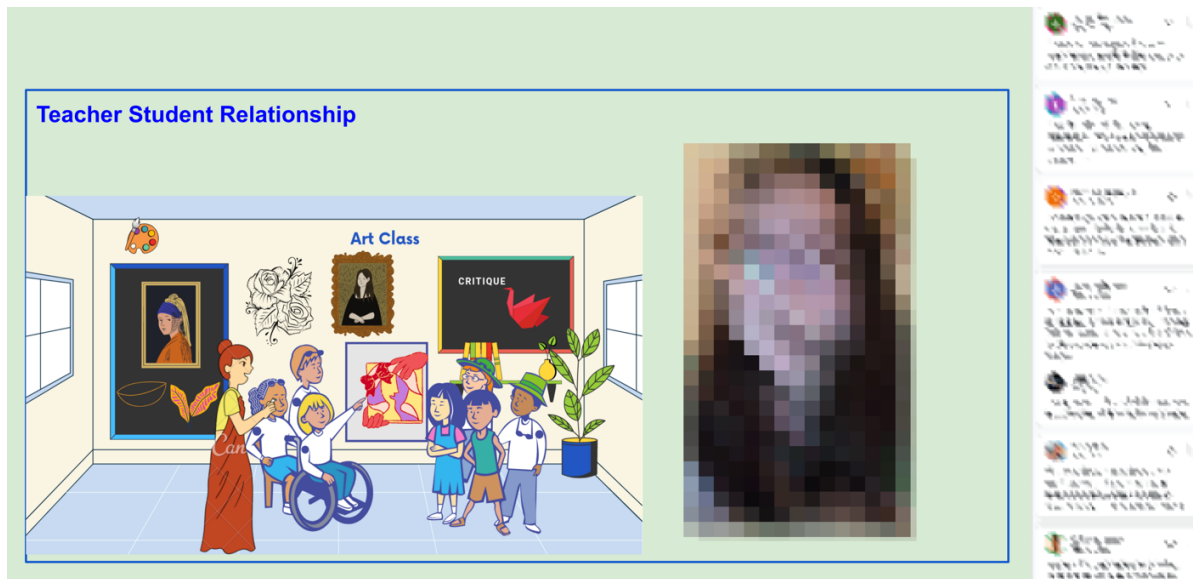
What should you include in your set of slides this week?

- **Slide #1** - Creative component. Include a creative component here (artwork, poem, music, short story, etc., that YOU created) which depicts or illuminates what relationships look like with students, families, or the community. Anything goes here—be creative. Include your creative component on this slide. When it is complete, record a short video of yourself explaining what it means (or your process, its significance, etc). For recording a video, I suggest using Zoom and clicking “Record to the cloud.” You can access the link to the cloud recording via your Zoom page.
- **Slide #2** - Throughout the resources this week, you heard from and read about a number of educators who deeply value building relationships with their students, families, and the community. What characteristics (beliefs, personalities, actions, etc.) did these educators share in common? Include both a quote from one of the resources and a screenshot from the film *Precious Knowledge* which illustrate these commonalities. Then reflect—in which ways do YOU embody (or not embody) these characteristics?
- **Slide #3** - This is the time for action. On this slide, write three concrete things you can do in your future classroom to forge meaningful relationships: One for students, one for families, and one for community. Be specific to your subject area and grade level.

Students’ responses on this week’s board comprised diverse modes. Students included and created original artwork, photos, screenshots, video, audio, poetry, quotes, and even comic strips to produce and convey meaning. Figure 3 depicts what one student created for her response to the Slide 1 prompt (the creative component). She designed a visual representation of equitable classroom management in her own future art classroom, shown on the left side of the figure. To further describe her creative component, she recorded and embedded a video (blurred in figure) in which she explained her creative choices and how they embody the characteristics of classroom management explored in the week’s readings.

**Figure 3.**

*One student's multimodal response to the first prompt with dialogic annotation*



Each week, students had five days to engage with resources and create their multimodal slides. Students then began their dialogic annotation by posting at least four comments or replies to peers' slides or comments over the course of a few days. I also took part in commenting on and replying to students' boards and ongoing dialogue between themselves and their peers. Our comments often involved further inquiry about their peers' multimodal expressions, description of how their peers' expressions resonated with their own beliefs about classroom management, and words of encouragement regarding their peers' creativity or perceptions toward course themes. Students were assessed by both their timely engagement in creating their multimodal slide content and their dialogic communication with peers. To complement these asynchronous conversations on the multimodal collaboration boards, we organized optional weekly Zoom meetings to discuss and reflect on course themes.

## **Creating the Space: A Guide**

Multimodal collaboration boards can be created in Google Slides (part of Google Drive), Microsoft Office365, or other collaborative online platforms. To start, create a slideshow using one of these collaborative services. Here is an example of how to structure the slides:

- Slide 1: A welcome and title with a relevant image. Consider adding information regarding deadlines here.
- Slide 2: Announcements or further information.
- Slide 3: Guiding questions, prompts, instructions, expectations.
- Slides 4-6: This is the first set of collaboration board slides for the first group. Design a blank template that will appropriately scaffold the type of expression you expect from students. This can vary for each slide. Use a background color to denote the first group.
- Slides 7-9: A copy of Slides 4-6 but with a different background color to denote a different group.
- [Etc., based on class size]

Students do not need a Google Drive or Office 365 account to access and edit the collaborative board; they only need a link. To provide access to students, copy the shareable link to the collaborative board onto your course page or into your Zoom chat. The shareable link must be created so that “anyone with the link” is an “editor,” otherwise students will only be able to view the slides. You might also consider using a URL shortening service (e.g., bitly.com, tinyURL.com) so that students can easily type the link into their browser.

## **Feedback and Recommendations**

Students responded positively to working within the multimodal collaboration boards during and after this six-week asynchronous course. Engagement was consistently high, and all

students participated in multimodal expression and dialogic annotation on a weekly basis.

Students' multimodal creations indicated that they had engaged meaningfully with the weekly resources and had reflected appropriately before expressing themselves on their boards.

Similarly, their continued asynchronous conversations to the right of the boards were indicative of community building even during a course in which live contact with their peers and instructor was not required. One student remarked in the anonymous end-of-course evaluations:

The manner in which [the instructor] used collaboration among students and himself to see the different ways classroom management can be seen and used was outstanding. I would use this approach myself with my students.

The pedagogical approach also had an impact on me. The boards provided a predictable yet dynamic and flexible scaffold for the important themes we explored each week, making it a particularly fun course to facilitate. Further, the pre-service teachers' multimodal creations and our shared dialogue about them encouraged many of them to attend the optional Zoom meetings each week, which promoted an informal space for continuing asynchronous conversations in a virtual, yet face-to-face setting. While these outcomes are anecdotal, they were genuinely meaningful for the students and me. The impacts of the multimodal boards assisted in transforming what could have been an impersonal, module-based online course into a small community of teachers. This was a surprisingly refreshing and radical feeling after countless months of learning modules, profile pictures, and emails with students.

Reflecting on this approach, I feel that one of the reasons it was successful was due to the balance between autonomy and structure it provided. While students were given loose requirements for what they should include on each slide, they had autonomy over the content of those slides and their dialogue with peers. Creative and reflective expression took the place of

prescription and control. In addition, students were expected to relate that content to their background experiences, while also critically reflecting on their deeply held assumptions about what management is and the effects such a management system might have on their future students.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The constraints and stress students have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic have created barriers for teacher educators in designing spaces for online learning that are still meaningful, personally relevant, social, and collaborative. Even with most classrooms back in face-to-face instruction, teacher educators often seek simple, practical ways to encourage critical reflection and dialogue around essential topics such as equitable classroom management. Multimodal collaboration boards provided us and our pre-service teachers not only with an opportunity to engage with a space that embodies these qualities, but also a teaching tool they can take into their own practice in K-12 settings. The pedagogical structure is flexible and can be adapted to diverse purposes in teacher education courses. This approach is one way to provide the autonomy, relevance, community, and care that our students and teacher educators deserve.

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