

# Emphasizing the professional in PDS

Professional in  
PDS

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article describes an effort to ease the tension between boundary spanning roles for interns participating in a yearlong Professional Development School (PDS) program. In order to do this, the structure of a Social Studies Methods course was revised to mimic a professional learning community (PLC) and assignments were not evaluated for grades.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A conceptual paper that relies on self-reflection as well as student reaction, work samples and survey data.

**Findings** – The findings demonstrate both practices contribute to a collegial and less stressful environment for interns, while not affecting the quality of work submitted.

**Originality/value** – This paper highlights two of the nine NAPDS essentials, Professional Learning and Leading (3) and Boundary Spanning (8), and describes the ways both are incorporated and addressed in a PDS situated methods course. Describing course revisions, including the implementation of an ungrading practice, provides examples for potential replication.

**Keywords** Assessment, Boundary spanning, Professional learning communities

**Paper type** Practitioner paper

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Boundary spanners in Professional Development Schools (PDS) and school–university partnerships are educators who work to strengthen connections between university-based teacher preparation programs and clinical sites within school districts (Burns & Baker, 2016; Many, Fisher, Ogletree, & Taylor, 2012; Zeichner, 2010). In my roles as faculty liaison and methods course instructor at two PDS sites, I am one such boundary spanner. My experience in and with both school districts and my college of education influence my approach to preparing new teachers as I attempt to strike a balance between theory and practice, idealism and reality. This is a noted source of tension at PDS sites (Snow-Gerono, Yendol-Silva & Nolan, 2002) and one that I consider regularly throughout each semester. I contend that the undergraduates with whom I work at both PDS sites are also boundary spanners in that they experience tensions between their roles as PDS intern and college student. While they are attempting to balance their academic course load and the practice in their classrooms, the internal tensions manifest as anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed by the duality of classroom responsibilities with their elementary-aged students and assignments in their methods courses.

In what follows I will describe and reflect upon my first semester implementing “ungrading” (Blum, 2020b, p. 2) in an effort to bridge PDS interns’ competing identities while at the same time mimic the professional learning and leading that teachers enact on the job as members of professional learning communities (PLCs) and/or grade-level teams. I will include a description of the course and ungrading practice, students’ reactions and feedback,

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provided through self-assessments, survey responses and course work and finally my own reflections. I will conclude by discussing changes I will make during the upcoming fall semester.

### **The professional development school context**

The College of Education where I teach, in a Midwestern state, has a vast network of school–university partnerships, including six PDS sites for undergraduate elementary education majors, who elect to complete a yearlong internship/student teaching experience. Early in their junior year, teacher candidates consider options for student teaching, which include the yearlong PDS program, traditional 16-week student teaching and two options for teaching abroad in England or Spain. Those students who opt for the yearlong PDS must apply to the program and indicate which of the six PDS sites they prefer for placement. Their placement request is based on many factors, one often being the opportunity to move home and incur fewer expenses during their senior year.

During the first semester of the PDS yearlong experience, the undergraduate teacher candidates are referred to as interns, the term I will use throughout this paper, and spend three full days each week in their assigned classrooms, working alongside their cooperating teacher, but not yet taking on full teaching responsibilities. The interns spend Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in the classroom and on Thursday and Friday attend their elementary education methods courses, on site in the district in a school or administrative office building. The methods courses include science, language arts and social studies. The interns also meet regularly for a seminar, led by the PDS Site Coordinator, who supports the clinical experience and conducts classroom observations. The second semester of the PDS year begins in January and the interns, who have transitioned into student teachers, complete their 16-week student teaching assignment in the same classroom where they spent the fall semester.

Each fall semester, I teach the Social Studies Methods course at two PDS sites. The partner districts where I teach and serve as the faculty liaison are the two biggest school districts in the state, serving large and diverse student populations, many of whom are emergent bilinguals and from low-income families. These two urban PDS sites historically attract smaller numbers of our elementary education teacher candidates than the local (to the university) and suburban PDS sites.

### **Social studies methods**

The Social Studies Methods course content is grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy and learning to teach for social justice. Recognizing our own miseducation as history and social studies students, we also undertake re-education, focused on examining historical events from multiple perspectives and utilizing resources such as *The 1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones, Elliott, Hughes, & Silverstein, 2019), *Rethinking Columbus* (Bigelow & Petersen, 1998) and others. Given that social studies teaching has not been prioritized in elementary schools, the theoretical underpinnings of the course may conflict with the practical social studies instruction that the interns are observing in their clinical classrooms (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2022). To bridge that potential divide, I teach strategies and methods that are integrated with language arts approaches and practices. The required textbook, by Agarwal-Rangnath (2022), illustrates this approach and provides concrete examples from classroom teachers.

Without fail, during fall semester the interns struggle with their dual identities. As noted, Monday through Wednesday, the PDS interns are in their elementary school classrooms, and on Thursdays and Fridays they attend their methods courses. The interns describe the fall semester boundary spanning experience as stressful and overwhelming. Mindful of this, I

attempt to make the social studies course content and requirements relevant, practical and applicable to their teaching, while at the same time challenge them to grapple with the theory that supports their instructional decisions and encourage them to think beyond the standardized curriculum.

The interns come to the class with varied experience and skill in designing curriculum and planning lessons, thus my purpose is to support them in developing the habit of mind and skills to plan engaging social studies lessons and a final curriculum unit for the grade level in which they are teaching. Throughout the semester, I express repeatedly the value of the process of lesson and curriculum design over the final products or assignments. In reflecting on the goals and outcomes for the course while planning for the fall 2022 semester, I decided to make the process of learning to teach social studies, rather than the grades, the focus. Additionally, I wanted my assessment practice in the course to align with my constructivist and experiential approach to teaching (Chen & Bonner, 2017). I decided to implement an ungrading practice in concert with routine and structured collaboration amongst interns that mimics the grade-level teams and PLCs they experience in their clinical placements.

### Ungrading

In keeping with my intent to ease the tension between the interns' competing identities and treat them as professionals (as opposed to college students) and to better align my assessment practice with my teaching approach, I determined that eliminating points and grades from course assignments made sense. As professionals, I wanted the interns to experience the inherent rewards of collaborating on curriculum design and implementation and not be distracted by the points they would earn on assignments. I also wanted to model critical thinking about assessment and evaluation and the limitations of traditional assessment. While I do not suggest that the interns enter their clinical placement and first job as a teacher and attempt to disrupt the evaluation and grading practices, I do want them to approach it thoughtfully. Implementing an ungrading practice that included self-assessment opportunities, individual conferences and formative assessment activities throughout the semester would model the evaluation process that they would experience as teachers (Newton, Williams & Feeney, 2020) and perhaps encourage them to implement such practices in their own classroom.

There is plentiful research on the negative impact of grading on students at all levels (Kohn, 2011) and several recent studies and reflections on eliminating grades in college courses (Blum, 2020a, b; Greenberg, Sohn, & Moret, 2022; Hall & Meinking, 2022; McConnel, 2022). According to Kohn (2011), the negative impacts of grading include diminished interest in the task being graded, a lack of intellectual risk taking, and more limited thinking about the content being learned. I can attest to observing all three effects in the PDS interns and also experiencing the same as their instructor. For example, in the past, I assigned lesson plans but dreaded evaluating and assigning point values to them. My written feedback was often limited and while I offered to meet with students if they wanted to discuss my suggestions further, only rarely did they take me up on that, perhaps because research also shows that feedback paired with a grade is ineffective (William, 2018). According to Chiaravalli (2020), "...the grade becomes a false currency that, over time, seems to override students' intrinsic desire for mastery and personal sense of purpose" (p. 83).

Ungrading, also known as going gradeless or de-grading, is an approach to assessment that modifies, "...the traditional role of instructors regarding the judgment of student performance on assignments..." (Greenberg *et al.*, 2022). The ungrading practice also represents an effort at establishing intrinsic motivation for the work in the class while reducing the anxiety students feel (Hall & Meinking, 2022). Both ideals of the ungrading practice were important to me, in particular alleviating the stress and anxiety that interns express as they span the boundary between college student and teacher.

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Newton *et al.* (2020) identify approaches to ungrading that include a goal approach, a conferencing approach, and a reflection approach. In working with the PDS interns, I focused on the conferencing and reflection approaches and incorporated both during the semester. Additionally, improving my feedback to interns during class and in individual conferences modeled skills that will improve their own teaching and their students' learning (Newton *et al.*, 2020).

It is important to keep in mind that eliminating grades on assignments also has the potential to create uncertainty for students who are used to receiving feedback, in the form of points or letter grades, on assignments. Students who have less experience with self-assessment and use grades as guideposts may struggle in an ungraded course (Talbert, 2022). Talbert (2022) further warns that this has the potential to widen the equity gaps that ungrading also seeks to eliminate. With several first-generation college students in my course sections, I was attentive to this possibility and checked-in frequently with all students to see if they had questions or concerns regarding our ungrading process.

### **Rethinking and revising social studies methods**

During my own elementary teaching experience, collaboration with my colleagues was integral to the enjoyment of the work and my growth as a teacher. Through my current involvement in PDS partnerships, I witness the value placed on teacher collaboration but recognize the limited opportunity for teachers to do so. Both PDS partner districts incorporate teacher collaboration, and one refers to this work as PLCs, a term that is new to PDS interns. Reflecting on this, I decided to create a PLC structure in my Social Studies Methods course, which would foster professional leading and learning for the interns, while at the same time mimic their clinical experience.

Although the term professional learning community (PLC) may be overused and misapplied in some contexts (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008), I used the term to describe our class structure in order to be consistent with the language of one of our partner districts, where administrators and teachers characterized their working groups as PLCs. As a class, we may not adhere to all of the defining characteristics of a PLC, but we did meet the minimum requirements in that the interns were rising professionals, they were expanding their knowledge (with my input) on social studies content and curriculum design, and finally, we were a community that met every other week to pursue and form knowledge together (Heggen, Raaen, & Thorsen, 2018).

With this in mind, I designed three distinct opportunities for the interns to assume leadership roles during our course meetings. The three roles were circle keeper, lesson plan designer and literature discussion leader. In addition to the required leadership roles, I decided to have the interns collaborate in grade-level teams to design a social studies and language arts integrated curriculum unit. This has been the culminating assignment in the course for several years and I wanted to maintain it as such. I also determined that the formative assessment plan for the course would include the use of exit slips, in-class quick writes, a KWLQ, and other course artifacts, to be stored in individual, shared electronic folders or portfolios. At the end of the semester, I planned to have interns complete a series of questions prompting them to reflect on the content of their portfolios and their individual contributions to the course (Blum, 2020a). This document would serve as the basis for our end-of-year conference, during which we would discuss their work in the course, any outstanding questions they had and conclude by determining their final grade.

It was my intention that the collaborative structure, coupled with the ungrading practice might cultivate interns' intrinsic motivation for the work they undertake in the course. By disconnecting the work of social studies curriculum design, content education and writing lesson plans from point values and letter grades, I encouraged teacher candidates to experience

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collaborative learning with their teaching peers. Thus, my course might become a space where their identities of teacher and intern intersect more comfortably and productively.

### **Implementing the plan**

By the time I met with each section of the newly revised Social Studies Methods course for the first time, all of the interns had been in their classroom placements for at least one week and had participated in grade- and school-level meetings with their mentor teachers. This created important context for them when I introduced the plan for the course. I began by explaining that in my years of experience working at our PDS sites, I had come to trust that as PDS interns, they were committed to the hard work it would take to become effective teachers and that I wanted them to begin to feel like professionals this semester. This explained, in part, why I had decided to eliminate graded assignments in the course. While it was evident from the syllabus that there were projects and assignments in the course, including required PLC leadership roles, none of those items had assigned point value. I also explained that out of necessity they would be assigned a final grade, one in which they would provide input.

Much to my surprise, the interns did not have many questions about this announcement, although on the course evaluation one claimed that “. . .not knowing what the deal was with the grades,” was problematic. Another course evaluation reflected my explanation and said, “She established her high expectations on day one.” The mixed reactions to my initial announcement of the ungrading policy could indicate that not everybody was listening closely, but it could also be due to a lack of clarity on my part. As noted, this was the first time I had implemented ungrading and while I believed it to be a good approach for my course, I was not sure how students would react. To my surprise, they did not react much at all; no questions emerged throughout the semester.

### **Course meetings**

The interns and I established a routine that we followed during each class meeting that allowed me to step away from the front of the room and share facilitation and leadership responsibilities with them. On their advice, I created a shared document that included our course outline, topics covered, assigned readings and a column for interns to add their own names to leadership roles and links to their lesson plans when it was their turn to share their work. As the semester went on, interns signed up for their roles with little to no prompting from me. I had been concerned that I would have to nudge some interns into the roles, but there was no hesitancy and never any empty slots on class day.

#### *The talking circle*

Acting as the circle keeper, I modeled our first talking circle at the start of our first class meeting. I narrated the circle protocol and background at each step. Following the circle, I provided the interns with resources that describe the foundations of restorative practices and approaches to planning and implementing talking or peace circles. After this initial circle, interns signed up to lead the circle at least once during the semester, individually or in pairs.

Subsequent class sessions started with the talking circle, led by one or two interns. The talking circles allowed us to reconnect and get warmed up at the beginning of class. Because our class met every other week, this check in helped us all, especially me, get caught up with what had been happening in their classrooms and lives. Requiring the interns to lead the talking circle at least once, encouraged them to approach the activity as a teacher and to plan and implement the activity from that perspective. Having had the opportunity to plan and lead a circle, my hope is that it becomes a practice in their own classrooms. At the end of the

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course, one intern did indicate that she planned to implement circles in her own classroom, even though she was not able to in her clinical placement.

#### *Literature circles/discussions*

Similar to my approach to the talking circle, I hoped that leading and participating in literature circles would result in the interns implementing the practice in their own classrooms. However, we soon abandoned the formal literature circle structure, which included assigning jobs to each group member, and instead had a whole-group discussion on the readings, facilitated by one or two discussion leaders who had prepared questions in advance. One intern noted, "I felt like I was a teacher having discussions with other teachers," which was the point. I participated in the discussions and followed the lead of the interns, but also clarified and highlighted content from the readings that they did not include in their discussion plan.

#### *Lesson plan workshop*

The lesson plan workshop was based loosely on the implementation of writers' workshop in elementary school classrooms, specifically the peer revisions phase. I asked interns to sign up for dates when they would like to share their lesson plans with the group. During the lesson plan workshop, we first read the lesson plan silently to ourselves and made comments on a shared document. Following this independent review and written comment period, we opened up the discussion to the whole group in order to ask questions, clarify our comments and discuss the lesson plan as a PLC. Each class period we discussed one or two lesson plans. I participated in the lesson plan workshops and provided my feedback along with the interns. This often led to teachable moments when I could clarify aspects of planning within the context of an actual lesson plan.

Similar to the implementation of the literature circles, the lesson plan workshops evolved into a less structured process than initially intended. During the fall semester, interns are required to teach up to four lessons in their clinical classroom and my intent was that each intern could "workshop" their lesson plan prior to teaching. Due to the scheduling of those lessons, that did not work out, but there was never a shortage of lesson plans to be shared and discussed during class.

#### *Curriculum design*

In conjunction with, and in addition to, the leadership roles and related activities described above, the interns also participated in collaborative curriculum design. The talking circle, literature discussion and lesson plan workshops all included the whole class. While designing a social studies and language arts integrated curriculum unit, the interns worked in smaller groups, based on the grade levels of their clinical classrooms. The integrated social studies and language arts curriculum is a long-standing assignment in the course, one that interns work on from day one. The requirements for the assignment include a curriculum map, two fully planned lessons per intern, a summative assessment activity, and a sequence for teaching the individual lesson plans. In the past, each component had been worth points, contributing to a total and grade for each student. After completing the same assignment, but ungraded, one student commented, "I like that we were able to help each other as colleagues and be in a space where we treat each other like we would treat our colleagues in a professional space." Several components of the class may have contributed to this sentiment, but I observed it most clearly during their grade-level curriculum design meetings. While I circulated and asked and answered questions, the intellectual work fell on the interns and by the end of the semester, they sounded more like teachers than students.

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Their work on the curriculum units resulted in integrated social studies and language arts units covering topics of interest and state social studies standards. The topics for the units, determined by the interns included Asian American and Pacific Islander History, Indigenous Chicago, Latine Heritage and Climate Justice. The quality of the ungraded units was equal to the work completed in previous years. The fact that interns did not earn points and a final grade on the topic did not negatively impact the process of designing the units nor the final product.

### *Self-assessment*

While the course assignments were ungraded, I did have to submit final letter grades to the university. Final grading was also a collaborative effort, this time between me and each intern. During finals week, we set up individual conferences, which we held via zoom. Prior to the conference, interns completed a self-assessment survey (see [Appendix](#)). This survey was reflective in nature, and prior to completing it, interns were asked to review their course materials and completed work stored in their electronic folder. I modeled this document on [Blum's \(2020a\)](#) end-of-semester reflection, making revisions specific to my course. The conferences with each intern lasted 10–15 minutes and I concluded the conversation asking them the grade they felt they had earned. I agreed with each student's self-assessment, except in one case in which a student suggested a B because she had not done as much self-study as she had intended. In my opinion, she had earned an A, and so that is the grade I submitted.

In addition to contributing to their final grade, the survey at the end of the course provided insight into the practices I had implemented in the revised course. Comments such as “I wasn't a social studies person before, but I am now, loved the unit, connecting the past to the present” and “I liked the curriculum project, purpose behind it, everybody's ideas were acknowledged” reinforce the collaborative structure as well as the inclusion of the curriculum unit project in the coursework.

### **Discussion: revising the revised course**

From my perspective, the collaborative structure of the course, modeled on the PLCs and grade level teams the interns were participating in at their clinical placement schools, combined with an ungrading practice was effective and I will continue to implement both, with some minor changes, in upcoming semesters. Other than one intern expressing confusion about the grading process, or lack thereof, the interns overwhelmingly appreciated the course structure and ungrading. One said, “I do love that it is not graded,” and another said, “She gave us agency in the classroom.”

The first change I make will be on the syllabus, where I will clarify the evaluation process, including the self-evaluation. When reviewing the syllabus in class, I will describe the rationale for ungrading and ask the students to read the foreword by Alfie Kohn, in the book, *Ungrading* by [Blum \(2020a, b\)](#). That chapter will serve as a foundation regarding ungrading as implemented in the course, and about assessment and evaluation in general, and how as new teachers they might navigate evaluating and grading their own students. I will also conduct a midterm check-in with students, asking them to reflect, in writing, on the course and their learning, and any questions they have.

The interns responded positively to the lesson plan workshops but, in the future, I will provide guidelines that will better structure the feedback. One intern recommended that I ask future interns to look at the lesson plans “with the eyes of a substitute teacher,” thinking that this perspective would help clarify what information and steps might be lacking. I agree with that and also want to support interns as they develop the habits of mind of planning thorough lessons that have a purpose tied to student outcomes and assessment activities as well as clear

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instructional procedures and steps. I felt that the feedback I provided on lesson plans was more thorough than in semesters past, when I was evaluating and assigning points to the plans. Additionally, everybody heard my feedback as it occurred while we were workshopping the lesson plans together.

This upcoming semester, interns will again be responsible for leading literature discussion groups, but I want to provide more structure by modeling practices they might implement when they do this, beyond preparing questions. While literature circles was my original model for this, as I noted we did not stick to this practice, in part because the interns opted to have the whole class discuss together rather than two smaller groups. This semester, as we read the assigned textbook, and in my direct instruction, I will focus on teaching and modeling additional instructional options for conducting whole class discussions that interns can choose to implement when planning their own discussions, both in class and in their clinical classrooms.

### *Final thoughts*

The yearlong PDS experience is unique in that undergraduate students are transitioning into their professional roles as teachers. Referring to them as interns signifies the importance of this transition and the boundaries they are spanning. My Social Studies Methods course, situated within the PDS sites, with smaller class size than traditional on-campus sections, afforded me the opportunity to relinquish traditional evaluation practices, and let go of grades. Assignments became collaborative projects and class time became PLC meeting time. While professors implement ungrading practices in traditional college courses in all fields, including with large numbers of students (Blum, 2020a, b; Gibbs, 2020; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020; Stommel, 2020), I feel it is particularly well-suited to the PDS model of teacher preparation.

The ungrading practice combined with the collaborative PLC structure allowed PDS interns the satisfaction of practicing what they have been prepared to do as teachers, in a safe, collegial environment, with no grades attached. They participated in the hard discussions educators have, negotiating and prioritizing curricular and instructional decisions with their peers. They also got to share stories and experiences from their classrooms with their peers as part of these intellectual discussions. Ungrading and the PLC structure allowed me to explain my own instructional decision-making and model classroom practices that PDS interns may not necessarily observe in their clinical placements. This helped ease the tension between theory and practice because the PDS interns were experiencing alternative assessment, collaborative group work, and curriculum design first hand. As a result, we had a common context from which to consider the application of such practices in an elementary classroom, not just in the abstract.

From my perspective, and based on interns' comments, the revised course structure and ungrading policy did narrow the gap between their competing identities of student and teacher and ease the boundary spanning. However, the practices did not eliminate all of the stress PDS interns felt while they were negotiating those identities, often while living at home and dealing with family issues. This was especially true for those interns who had responsibilities and care-giving roles at home. Throughout the academic year, the interns learned to balance outside stressors and the demands of teaching, much like professional educators. I believe that treating the interns as emerging professionals contributed to an appreciation for teacher collaboration and a respect for the hard work of teaching. As they enter the profession, I hope that their school settings foster the same.

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### Further reading

National Association for Professional Development Schools. (2021). What it means to be a professional development school: The nine Essentials. *Policy Statement*.

### Appendix

#### Self-assessment survey

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#### TCH 258 PDS

##### *End of semester reflections*

During this semester you began the transition from college student to teacher. Next semester, student teaching will be the next step in that process. But before we look too far ahead, I want to look back on this semester and in particular, your development as a teacher who implements culturally relevant social studies lesson plans.

As we discussed and learned first-hand, Social Studies as a content-area is not prioritized in schools. However, social studies can and should be integrated with Literacy instruction to cover issues of importance to students and their communities.

Prior to completing this self-assessment, gather all of your materials from this course.

- (1) The Syllabus
- (2) The Text book
- (3) Your Lesson Plans (individual and from the curriculum unit)
- (4) The Curriculum unit
- (5) Exit Slips
- (6) Quick Writes
- (7) Lit Circle questions (from when you led)
- (8) Talking Circle questions (from when you led)
- (9) Anything else you can find

Take some time and review your work, and answer the following.

#### I. KWL

- a. Complete the “What we Learned Column” on our class KWL

Make a copy of your own before you complete.

[insert link here]

#### II. General Reflections (Write short answers below)

- a. What else (beyond the KWL) do you know now that you didn't know in August?
- b. What work was challenging? What was fun? What was useful? What didn't seem useful?
- c. Did you learn anything unexpected?
- d. Did you change your mind about anything?
- e. Did you expect to learn something that you didn't learn?

#### III. Essential Questions (write short answers below)

- a. Why teach Social Studies?
- b. What does it mean to teach for social justice?

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- c. What is culturally relevant teaching?
- IV. Thinking Ahead (write answer below)
- a. What are your goals for teaching Social Studies during Student Teaching?

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