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Creating spaces of possibilities: Imperatives for teacher education in neoliberal times

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Abstract. Since its inception, teacher education has been rooted in assumptions of normalcy and technical rationality which persistently homogenize teaching and learning, thereby erasing the qualities that hold transformative potential for education. To resist, it is imperative that teacher educators explicitly, intentionally, and collaboratively create and reimagine new spaces of possibilities with teacher-candidates (TCs). *Objectives:* Explore the impact on teacher educators' and TCs' learning experiences and subsequent approaches to teaching when teacher educators intentionally create accessible, non-normative spaces for TCs that cultivate, rather than suppress, their variability as learners. *Method(s):* Three teacher educators utilized a collective, situated self-study methodology through an ongoing critical collaborative inquiry into their implementation of practices such as: ungrading (Blum, 2020), accessible accommodations, wellbeing activities, and multiple means of accessing content and expressing learning. Impacts were explored through critical analysis of data, including: meeting recordings, journals, syllabi, lessons, communications, course evaluations, program evaluations, and assignment and interview data from four TCs. Data were transcribed, coded, and recursively reviewed. *Results:* TCs connected with and co-constructed learning in ways that increased depth, quality, and originality of coursework and active participation in learning communities. Teacher educators needed to be persistently reflexive and responsive to TCs' feedback and realities. Ableist institutional assumptions limited teacher educators' capacity to fully implement holistic approaches. *Conclusions and Implications:* When teacher educators explicitly challenge educational "norms" while facilitating accessible teaching, TCs can simultaneously experience, imagine, and implement possibilities for doing things differently. Creating spaces that challenge and resist oppressive colonial and neoliberal ideologies and assumptions can create opportunities for this work to flourish.

Keywords: Teaching, Learning, Neoliberal, Open Access.

Introduction

The question of “how to teach the teachers?” has been a primary concern in public education since its institutionalization in North America in the early 19th century. James Carter, perhaps the most influential figure in the establishment of institutions for teacher training at the time, argued that the training of teachers was the most important element in developing an effective school system (Carter, 1851). Since then, an array of educational research has demonstrated how a “good teacher” matters more than any other single factor in a child’s academic and socio-emotional growth in school (Allen et al., 2018; Hattie, 2023), and efforts to teach teachers have been central to educational improvement efforts around the globe (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Fullan, 2016; Vermunt, 2014). But how do we teach teachers effectively? What *is* ‘good’ teaching?

For centuries, this question has been inextricably tied up with questions of economics. Facing criticism for the “economic extravagance” of the new public school project, Mann’s fifth report as the first secretary of the board of education in Massachusetts in 1842 set out to “demonstrate the benefits of education in worker productivity,” becoming the “first American attempt to quantify the value of education” (Persky, 2015, p. 256). This report achieved “world-wide fame for its presentations of the advantages of education,” showing how it “awakened thought, increased the resources of the individual,” and “opened his eyes to the possibility of combinations not seen by the uneducated” (Harris, 1896, p. 141). Neoliberal ideologies of the late 20th and 21st centuries have only reinforced this economic imperative of schooling as workers and students alike became increasingly evaluated primarily through lenses of economic efficiency and market-based measurements of value (Waltz, 2020). Consequently, a ‘good teacher’ is generally understood to be one whose students perform well on standardized, quantified metrics of student ‘success’ that are designed to measure workplace readiness and employability (Done & Murphy, 2018).

This approach to schooling has had two significant impacts on the work of teaching teachers that we address in this study. For one, it has reinforced conceptualizations of teaching and learning that are rooted in assumptions of there being a pervasive ‘normal’ or ‘average’ student, and is inextricably supported by ableism, classism, racism, and the myth of meritocracy (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Lupinacci, 2018; Parekh, 2022; Rose, 2017). Ableism results when certain culturally valued skills are upheld as ‘ideal’—usually those seen as important for economic contributions—while other abilities and behaviours are pathologized (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Dymond, 2025a; Parekh, 2022). Thus, the work of teachers is to teach to the ‘normal’ students and then accommodate the ‘others.’ Many teachers come to believe special educators are responsible for educating students who need to be taught differently (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Busby et al., 2012; Pugach & Warger, 2001).

Secondly, this commitment to standardized and quantifiable metrics of ‘success’ have rooted teacher education and teacher development efforts in conceptualizations of ‘good’ teaching through overly narrow, acontextual and observable technical terms (Jewell, 2017; Harap, 1929; Salton et al., 2022; Schön, 1984; Smith, 2024). This ‘technical rationality’ assumes that ‘good teaching’ consists of a set of identifiable, universal, and prescriptive ‘best practices’ that can be generalized, standardized, and evaluated across school systems (Au, 2011; Rodriguez & Fitzpatrick, 2014; Simmie et al., 2019). Thus, the work of teacher educators has long been understood to be, first and foremost, the propagation of a ‘science of teaching’ and ‘best practices,’ so that teacher candidates can absorb these techniques and employ them in their own classrooms. Taken together with the problem above, the work of teacher educators seems to be, primarily, the teaching of ‘best practices’ to predominantly ‘normal’ teacher candidates, with ‘accommodations’ for periodic ‘exceptionalities.’

The problem is that there is no ‘normal’ student, and there is no single ‘best way’ to teach (Dymond, 2025a, 2025b; Palmer, 2017). This reality has significant implications for how we approach teaching in K-12 classrooms, but also how we approach teacher education itself. We argue that dominant neoliberal ideologies that have reified ‘normalcy’ and ‘technical rationality’ persistently homogenize teaching and learning, thereby erasing the very qualities that hold transformative positive potential for education and schools. To resist, we posit that it is imperative that teacher educators explicitly, intentionally, and collaboratively create and reimagine new spaces of possibilities with teacher candidates (TCs)—spaces that embrace the dynamic multiplicity and variability in the teaching and learning experience. In doing so, we can create space for teachers and learners to engage with each other and the work more authentically, holistically, and, ultimately, meaningfully.

In this paper, we present a study that delves into our exploration of one such approach, rooted in assumptions about teaching and learning that break from historical norms. We start by identifying challenges of dominant neoliberal paradigms in the school system, followed by an articulation of the alternative paradigms we adopted in response. We then share the study’s methodology, including how we put these paradigms into practice. This is followed by our findings, which underscore the transformative power and potential that can come when we open up spaces for our students to bring their full selves into the space, be it digital or in person. Ultimately, cultivating spaces of possibility for a multiplicity of teachers and learning led to greater depth and breadth of engagement than we could have ever anticipated or prescribed. Implications and next steps are offered.

Challenges of the Dominant Approach

Neoliberal and normative approaches to teaching and teacher education—including pushes to standardize curricula, ‘best’ practices, students, teachers, and students—have obfuscated many dynamic,

multidimensional complexities of individual teachers and students living and working in particular contexts. Teacher education serves to replicate cultural values, including the ubiquitous notions of normativity and who and what are valued (Ahwee et al., 2004; Done & Murphy, 2018; Kincheloe, 2003). Prevailing educational language denotes binary thinking informed by neoliberal concepts of standardization, ranking, and the mythical ‘ideal’: ‘general’ versus ‘special’ education, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ responses, and ‘academic’ or ‘non-academic’ pathways, reflecting the ‘bifurcated system’ (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019) which positions disability in opposition to ability, through the medical model (Dymond, 2025a, 2025b; Parekh, 2022; Symeonidou & Chrysostomou, 2019). Similarly, teacher education contributes to the othering of disabled learners by singling them out as in need of different approaches, teachers, or settings (Dymond, 2025a; Pugach et al., 2021) such as by discussing them in one-off classes or separate topics, rather than weaved throughout the curricula. These epistemic framings make it more challenging to cultivate the flourishing and authentic learning environments we want for our teacher candidates, and that we hope they will be able to create for their students in their classrooms.

Teacher reflexivity is essential to this process (Ahwee et al., 2004; Dymond, 2025a; Kincheloe, 2003). A wealth of research demonstrates that teacher beliefs about students and their perceived capabilities are strong determinants of students’ inclusion or exclusion (Symeonidou & Chrysostomou, 2019) and their school placement and future trajectories, as early as Kindergarten (Parekh, 2022). While standardized tests may be used to determine eligible placements and services, these are inherently subjective (Hammond, 2015; Parekh, 2022; Reid & Valle, 2004). Assessment results serve to reinforce existing values, identify deviations from norms, and segregate and/or remediate difference (Cunningham, 2018; Done & Murphy, 2018; Reid & Valle, 2004; Parekh, 2022). They can justify the removal of students with learning or behavioural needs from the mainstream classroom in formal and informal ways (Fraley & Capp, 2024; Parekh, 2022; Reid & Valle, 2004; Wood et al., 2022). It is noteworthy that teachers often determine who qualifies for these assessments, which can be fraught with bias and contributes to the overrepresentation in special education of racialized and lower socioeconomic status students in special education and an overrepresentation in gifted education of white, higher socioeconomic status students (Parekh, 2022). Interestingly, a study by Parekh and Brown (2010) found very little correlation between students identified as gifted in elementary school compared to achievement at the end of high school.

Teacher perceptions of ability also influence classroom practices. Teachers may have reduced expectations for learners they deem as needing more support. Research shows these students are given less challenging work and subjected to transmission-oriented teaching, rather than engaging or enriched learning experiences utilizing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) or differentiation (Gilliam, 2005; Hammond, 2015; Parekh, 2022;

Pugach & Warger, 2001; Reid & Valle, 2004). While peers go on to develop increasingly complex integration of skills and schema, the cumulative impact of watered down education is a widening of the gap, reinforcing teacher beliefs about students (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Hammond, 2015; Parekh, 2022). Gradually, the problem shifts from being localized within the school environment—what and how teachers teach—to within the student—who is being taught.

Gifted learners are the exception to systemic attempts aimed at weeding out or “fixing” outliers. The impact of bell curve thinking has inculcated the belief that some learners should always excel over others. From a neoliberal standpoint, these learners are viewed as productive and useful and so are valued for their potential future economic benefit to the workforce, as compared to other students (Parekh, 2022). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a standardized test designed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is used to rank students from participating countries. A glaring example of the myth of ability: in response to consistently high PISA results across all Finnish student demographics, politicians in Finland pushed to develop policies focusing on enhancing the educational achievement of the “most gifted” students (Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2009), who were regarded as having underperformed by comparison. Since test scores failed to reflect a small minority of students demonstrating intellectual superiority and domination over peers, teachers were blamed for failing to support the development of high-achieving students, rather than celebrating equitable educational outcomes.

This global push for standardization has increased calls for accountability and evidence-based practices to make teaching and schools more efficient. Yet it also serves to narrow definitions of success. Who decides what works, and for whom? Most “evidence-based” practices are tested in clinical settings and lack generalizability to classrooms, with their many moving parts, changing variables, and complexities (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Reducing teaching to a checklist of ‘best’ practices or creating a standardized lists of acceptable accommodations leads to a one-size-fits all model wherein not all students are adequately supported (Nash-Luckenbach & Friedman, 2024). In attempting to quantify and replicate the procedures that lead to effective teaching, we lose sight of the heart and art of responsiveness to learners as well as teacher expertise and the recognition of unique classroom dynamics. The result of this is the erosion of education rooted in community care and betterment for all.

Other Ways

In this study, we explored another way of approaching teacher education, attempting to liberate ourselves from the reductionism of technical rationality and the economic metrics of neoliberalism. We wanted to create spaces of authenticity and meaning for both our students and ourselves as we sought to embrace and cultivate, rather than mitigate, our

multidimensional plurality. Going beyond assumptions of “good teaching” rooted in universal, acontextual ‘best practices’ for ‘average’ students afforded us the space to explore pedagogical approaches that resonated with us and the teacher candidates we supported. In particular, we wanted to be holistically responsive to the diversity of learning preferences and needs that were in the room with us.

To this end, our collaborative work prioritized questions of accessibility. Together, we have over four decades of experience working on increasing accessibility in K-12 classrooms. Through this work, and independently of each other, we have shifted our mindset from accommodating ‘some’ students within established systems and norms to changing systems and norms to more fully and effectively embrace the inherent variability of *all* students. This paradigmatic shift resonates with shifts in disability studies more generally, from medical models to social and value-neutral models of disability (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Chapman, 2020; Parekh, 2022). Whereas the medical model of disability locates disability within the individual and frames this as an ‘abnormality,’ social and value-neutral models assume humans are variable and look at how the context and individual experience create and facilitate conditions for or barriers to wellbeing (Chapman, 2020).

Two principles in particular have emerged for us that inform our work as K-12 educators and as teacher educators. The first principle is the need to start from an assumption of variability rather than normativity. Every decision we make is grounded in the idea that learner variability is both a reality and a strength. Rather than designing our classroom learning experience and expectations for a mythical ‘normal,’ we instead focus on creating spaces where a multiplicity of learners and their varying experiences, knowledge, and gifts are expected, celebrated, and cultivated. We want students to feel that every students’ whole self is not just accepted and accommodated, but *expected* and *embraced*. We seek ways to create spaces of possibility not only for our students to *be* themselves, but to *express* themselves in ways that are authentic to their ways of learning and acting in the world. We strive to maximize flexibility in the “what,” “how,” and “why” students engage, and to be open to ways of approaching the course content and objectives in ways we would otherwise never consider ourselves.

The second is the power of adopting a collaborative, non-assuming approach to designing and implementing pedagogical practices with the specific students in our classes. In interrogating our own beliefs about student learning, we came to realize that tests and grades tell us remarkably little about a learner’s learning and serve better to compare, rank, and critique students (Blum, 2020; Parekh, 2022). Shifts to increase dialogue and to engage students in metacognition give greater insight into what they have learned, how much they feel they have learned, and other internal and often invisible processes (Blum, 2020; Dymond, 2025b). Similarly, our breadth of teaching experiences highlighted that access to educational

support is gatekept via the requirement for formal, medicalized identifications. We have taught many learners at all levels of education who have been unable to access vital assessments due to cost, length of waitlists, unavailability of professionals, cultural stigma, and/or lack of understanding of diagnostic presentation across demographics (Beaton et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2024; Lewis, 2017; People for Education, 2024; Ringer, 2019). This compelled us to assume learner insights are invaluable to identifying barriers and support needs, regardless of label or lack thereof. In embracing the complexity of teaching and learning, we can also embrace the individuality of each student. This requires teacher awareness of the necessity of relational safety to learning (Hammond, 2015; Dymond, 2025b; Shanker, 2020), prioritizing wellbeing over the course agenda, and a willingness to learn from students and reflexively examine one's pedagogical decisions. We now understand this as interactions between teachers-as-learners and learners-as-teachers.

Spaces of Possibility

From a teacher education perspective, these shifts allowed TCs to both experience and witness the modelling of affirming and accessible pedagogical approaches for all learners. They enabled us to de-silo how we taught about learner variability, which traditionally mirrors the segregation woven into special education (Dymond, 2025a; Parekh, 2022; Pugach et al., 2021). For example, in teacher education, learning about autistic children often takes place as a one-time class or lecture, as would be the case for other neurodivergent student needs. New teachers have difficulty conceptualizing how to teach the diversity of needs in their future classrooms, which may potentially lead to viewing learners who need something different as the responsibility of special educators, as the literature suggests (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Busby et al., 2012). Similarly it is common for neurodivergent students to be placed in special education settings, removed from the whole (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Parekh, 2020). Pugach and colleagues (2021) also wrote about the erasure of disability in teacher education. Reflecting on these issues sparked the question, when do teacher candidates learn about teaching everyone together? (Dymond, 2025a). In each of our classrooms, we engaged TCs in dialogue about supporting disabled and/or neurodivergent learners as part of the whole class, rather than reinforcing the segregated ways they are taught, placed, and streamed in the system.

Overall, these two principles focused us on creating and cultivating spaces of possibility for our varied students to walk into and which contributed to their engaging with and ultimately shaping their own ways of teaching in their unique classroom contexts. Our engagement in a self-study was our attempt to critically examine this approach, and discern its strength, limitations, and our next pedagogical steps. Below, we outline

what we did in concrete terms, followed by how we used self-study methodology to study the impacts, and culminating in our findings.

Methods

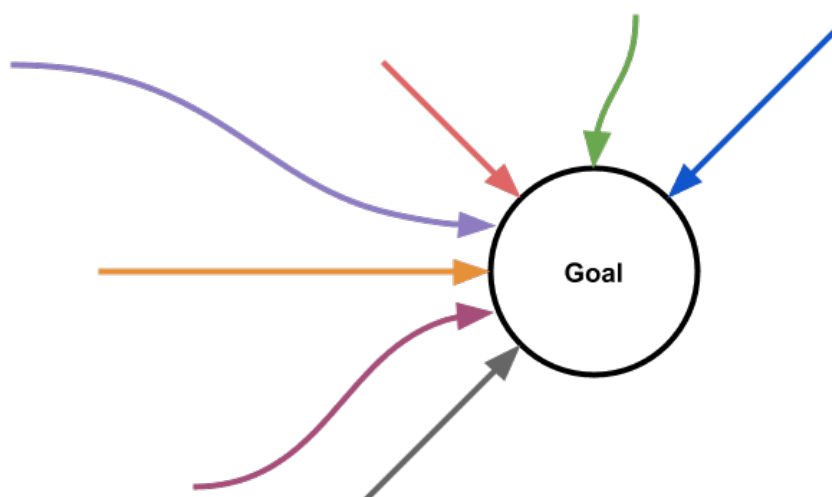
Enactment

This self-study covers our work in our teacher education courses from the fall of 2022 to the spring of 2025. Although we were, and continue to be, at different stages on our journeys towards creating and facilitating more accessible spaces for learners throughout the study, we remained committed to interrogating and iterating on our practices throughout. The two guiding principles articulated above became more coherent and synthesized over the course of our study. As we honed in on their naming, their impacts on our pedagogical developments—both small and large—became increasingly clear. Examples of the specific practices we tried are presented in thematic groups below.

Maximal Flexibility

Perhaps the most important structural shift was a commitment to maximizing pedagogical flexibility. This was primarily driven by the first principle, an embrace of learner variability. We wanted to, whenever possible, create spaces and opportunities for more ways of learning and being, and we wanted those spaces to be responsive to the specific learning needs of our TCs. A simple image illustrating our conceptualization of this flexibility is shown below.

Figure 1. Multiple pathways, same goal (Note 1)



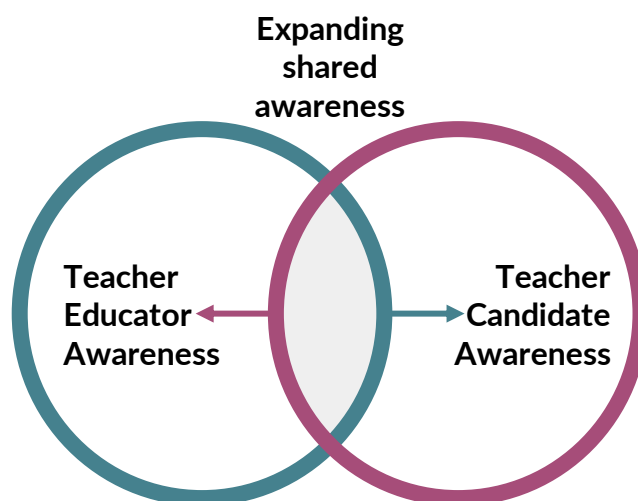
Rather than prescribing a particular path, we sought ways to create space for any number of approaches to be embraced, so long as they all reached the essential course objectives. What this looked like:

- Openness to student creativity in terms of approaches to assignments
- Accommodating requests for deadline extensions and other needs that were within institutional limitations (e.g., grade deadlines), for all students
- Multiple means of representation for pre-reading (e.g., PDF and audio versions of readings)
- Routine, embedded choice for common learning activities (e.g., option for written or voice memos for class reflections)
- Dual coding of slide decks (all information presented with words and with a meaningful visual representation)
- Adjustments of course design and assessment to teacher candidate interests and goals
- Curating and sharing accessibility tools for all TCs
- Adjusting physical learning environments to address various sensory needs

Responsiveness to Students

Another key change was committing to authentic and timely responsiveness to students. This was primarily driven by the second principle, a commitment to a collaborative orientation. This commitment to responsiveness manifested both in terms of their work submitted as well as their feedback to us on our pedagogical approach to the class. This led to a convergence of awareness, where we and TCs increased our awareness of others' perspective, work, and our shared experience in the class.

Figure 2. Converging awareness (Note 2)



What this looked like:

- Soliciting feedback on the class and the course at the end of every class; responding to this feedback at the beginning of the following class

- Authentic (and explicit) incorporation of student feedback into course design
- Ungrading (Blum, 2020) and qualitative written and oral feedback on submitted work
- Collaborating with students to address challenges and issues, and develop shared understanding of complex issues
- Changing physical and digital learning environments based on TC needs and preferences

Intentional Routines to Create Safety and Agency

We also committed to consistent routines that prioritized TC belonging, community, and wellbeing. This was motivated by the sense that these kinds of routines were vital for creating safe spaces essential to navigating vulnerabilities of variability and supporting authentic collaboration. These were incorporated into every class period. What this looked like:

- Opening rituals that involved check-ins, story sharing, or opportunities for TCs to lead activities (e.g., bread making, yoga)
- Professional learning communities within the course that met together each week to construct knowledge and understanding together
- Flipped classroom model to engage with a second text built into class time
- Daily feedback forms and reflections on learning
- Reduced emphasis on grades (qualitative feedback)
- Input into course topics, content, and activities

Explicit Modelling of Pedagogical Thinking and Practice

Finally, we committed to being explicit and metacognitive with our thinking and intentionality with each decision in each class. In this way, we endeavoured to consistently operate on two levels simultaneously. On one level, we facilitated learning about the topic of the class, while on the other, we facilitated learning about our learning. The intent was, again, to enact both principles. First, we reasoned that being explicit and vulnerable ourselves would hopefully give more permission for honesty in our students, and might make it easier for them to enact the effective elements in their own practice come time. Second, we hoped being explicit and open would give opportunities for students to engage with specific decisions in concrete, non-personal ways. What this looked like:

- Explicitly naming when we did something in order to increase options for engagement, action & expression, and representation (UDL)
- Explaining changes and their source, especially when inspired by questions or ideas from TCs
- Encouraging TCs to reflect on the experience of seeing / feeling / imagining new, other, or better ways
- Modeling the use of different options, e.g., using both written and oral feedback with students
- Encouraging TCs to experience options available to them first before making a choice, and to reflect on the experience and choice process as both a learner and a teacher

- Naming of the power of sharing and vulnerability, and reiterating a commitment to a purposeful and safe space
- Explicitly reflecting on class experience, and our own experiences as teacher educators, as teachers, and as learners
- Providing clarity and rationales with structures, routines, and deadlines

While each of us did not enact all of these approaches, most were common. Our self-study helped us to share and develop these practices with one another, and to identify the qualities that seemed to be most effective. Our methodology for investigating this impact, and our findings, follow below.

Methodology

This self-study consisted of two teacher educators (authors) and one program administrator and teacher educator acting as a critical friend. The self-study draws on teacher education and professional learning literature, framing learning to teach as the ongoing construction of knowledge and understanding by educators over their careers (Korthagen, 2010; Russell, 1997; Sanford et al., 2015; Taylor & Diamond, 2020). Campbell and others (2016) delineate the need for educators to engage in evidence-informed learning that is focused on learners and authentic problems of practice, is 'job-embedded', collaborative, personalized and directed by the educator. Vanderlinde et al. (2021) and Quirke et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of faculty-led learning. The self-study is also rooted in the literature that posits that TCs learn about meaningful practice by experiencing it in the program and in the field – as well as from explicit discussion of pedagogy and instructional decisions (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hammerness, 2006; Loughran, et al., 2016). Loughran et al. (2016) underscore the need to be explicit about the 'what' and 'why' of teaching practice, and Fovet (2021) issues a strong call to 'practice what we preach' in accessible education in particular.

We engaged in a critical collaborative inquiry group (Butler & Bullock, 2022), sharing practices, observations, experiences and learnings from different locations in our teacher education program. Initially, we journaled experiences of planning and enacting UDL and socio-emotional learning principles. We met weekly to discuss journal notes, lesson plans, assessments, and TC feedback and recorded these meetings. To augment student voice, which is a key element of UDL, we received institutional ethical approval through the research ethics board. Following course completion, we invited TCs to participate in interviews and/or consent to share their assignments and online discussion threads. Course evaluations and student program evaluation survey data were also examined (Arafeh, 2015).

Throughout our critical collective self-study we shared our data and observations and recursively and collaboratively reviewed to establish and triangulate identified themes (Samaras, 2012). We made notes on our own data sources and then read and discussed the data from the other teacher educators continuing to deepen understanding through dialogue (Samaras & Freese, 2009). In spring 2024 we adopted a draft of the re-envisioned UDL 3.0 framework (CAST, 2024) as a guide for further discussion and analysis. The data were transcribed into text form and Dedoose was used to manage and organize the data and to assist in uncovering emerging themes across the multiple data sources (Creswell, 2014). Coding was used to identify patterns and the strength of the themes identified (Creswell, 2014). Data from TC interviews

and program evaluation were coded independently and then shared to further synthesize the analytical work. The strength of themes across the multiple data sources were determined through recursive, comparative analysis (Creswell, 2014; Saldaña, 2009).

Data Sources

The following data sources informed this study:

- Artifacts: Teacher educators' course outlines, lesson plans assignment instructions, and communications to class.
- Teacher educators' audio and/or written journals following classes.
- Ongoing written and verbal responses from TCs regarding pedagogical choices.
- Transcribed dialogue and notes from weekly self-study meetings.
- Anonymous survey data from 304 program evaluations pertaining to accessibility within the program.
- Course evaluation data.
- Completed course assignments from four TCs.
- Interview transcripts from four TCs.

Initially, the self-study only drew on data related to the course "Special Education and Mental Health," as it was directly related to our interest in accessibility and we each taught one section. However, as the study continued over multiple years, it grew to include the courses "Research 1" and "Accessible Education & Classroom Neurodiversity". Additionally, the data draws on classes taught both in person and online.

Results

Our focus on embracing learning variability and working collaboratively with our TCs had a number of significant impacts. These included, among other things, more meaningful learning opportunities for TCs, increased depth and quality of submitted work, and the illumination of new possibilities for TCs in their own teaching. We found that smaller pedagogical changes or decisions would snowball into ever increasingly profound impacts, in a kind of virtuous cycle. This cycle is visualized in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Snowball cycle (Note 3)

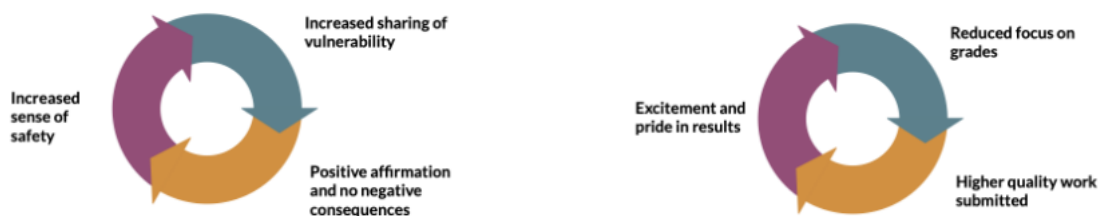


For example, first, an intentional pedagogical decision would play out, which would lead to a change in TC actions and reactions. This, in turn, would shift the cultural dynamics and expectations, changing how both we and TCs thought and felt in the space. This would inspire further exploration and innovation.

Impact 1: Teacher Candidate Learning Cycles

We observed many examples of this cycle in terms of the teacher candidate experience of, and engagement in, learning activities in the course. Two examples are illustrated in Figures 5 below:

Figure 4. Snowballing cycles of impact on learning (Note 4)



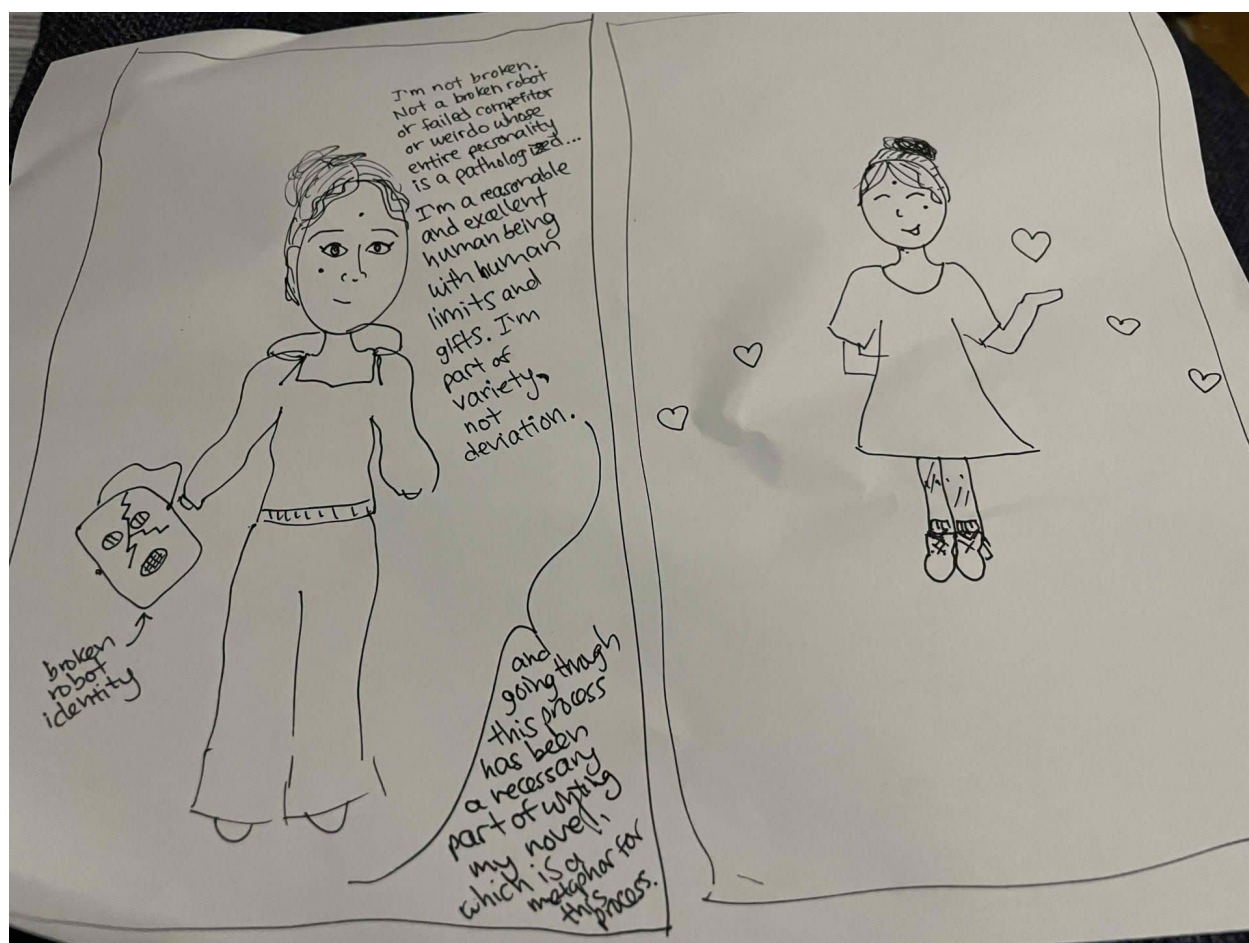
These snowball cycles of impact created multiple situations where TCs were able to feel seen and heard, and engage in the class in ways that were deeper than they were accustomed to. For example, one interviewee shared the following, demonstrating the power of affirming variability:

We had someone come in to talk about giftedness. And I found myself being really open like, I think you know, a lack of awareness of the social rules of when and how much to share can mean that I'm sometimes an over sharer ... I ended up being very open about a lot of that stuff. And I had sort of ... come out to them already before

these classes but now it's like, oh, now there's actually some understanding. Now there's actually some support.

Another shared how powerful this affirmation was, saying, "I'm not broken. Not a broken robot or failed competitor or weirdo whose entire life is pathologized ... I'm a reasonable and excellent human being with human limits and gifts. I'm part of variety, not deviation..."

Figure 5. A multimodal TC reflection on course gains and future self as an educator (Note 5)



It is important to note that these and other parallel cycles had a compounding positive impact on the TCs' overall sense of wellbeing. One

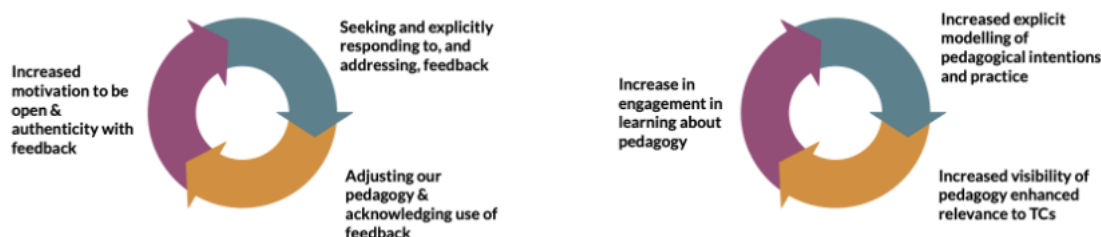
interviewee noted, “I felt cared for in check-ins throughout the class and the mindfulness breaks and the learning-resources that were suggested at the end of class. I felt my voice would be heard and listened to when I had thoughts to share.”

Participants also shared that the qualitative emphasis enhanced rigor, as it enabled them to focus on learning rather than on grades. One shared that: “I learned loads, participated more than I usually do, and overall this course caused me the least stress despite having roughly the same, or even a slightly higher, workload as other courses.”

Impact 2: Teaching Cycles

This snowball impact cycle was evident in our growth as educators as well.

Figure 6. Snowballing cycles of impact on teaching (Note 6)



We noticed that eliciting student feedback,utilizing it, and speaking to it in future classes gave way to increased student feedback and enthusiasm to participate in class or in dialogue with us. This made our decision-making process explicit for TCs and demonstrated the power of their voice on our pedagogy. One researcher journal entry expressed that:

Generally, I'm seeing more and more vulnerability and openness. The consistent focus on community building and social-emotional learning attention is paying off in ways that are directly related to learning. For example, I'm able to check in with students on things that are really impacting them which helps them to be there. I was able to talk to the [---] student for a long time after class about her experiences, and she said it was very meaningful to have that space and time and to be heard. I was also able to, in that moment, emphasize how important it is, and how valuable it will be, for her to be a teacher in the classroom. That felt good to be able to do.

We were also able to cultivate rapport and safety with TCs so that they could share insecurities, fears, and wonderings about their own teaching experiences or future practices. By removing quantification of every reflection or assignment, learners reflected more deeply and freely, enabling us to see their evolution and to respond individually or within the whole-class setting to their concerns:

She had in her notes the words, resist, resist, resist. I asked her, what is that? She wrote back and she said, that is the resist the colonial mindset and the colonial structures, etc. It was really interesting because she articulated a similar paradox to the special education world, especially the critical disability lines on special education, which is this conflict of needing to work within the system in order to do anything in a way, to move, to have movement, but then simultaneously needing to resist the fundamental organization and structure of the whole thing. I think special education really underlines that. What was cool was that for her, she said the UDL, she sees that as a sort of anti-colonialism lens that she can use and is going to use to resist colonial structures.

Another factor encouraging this transparency was our emphasis on relational safety and individualized approaches such as personal voice notes. As one TC described,

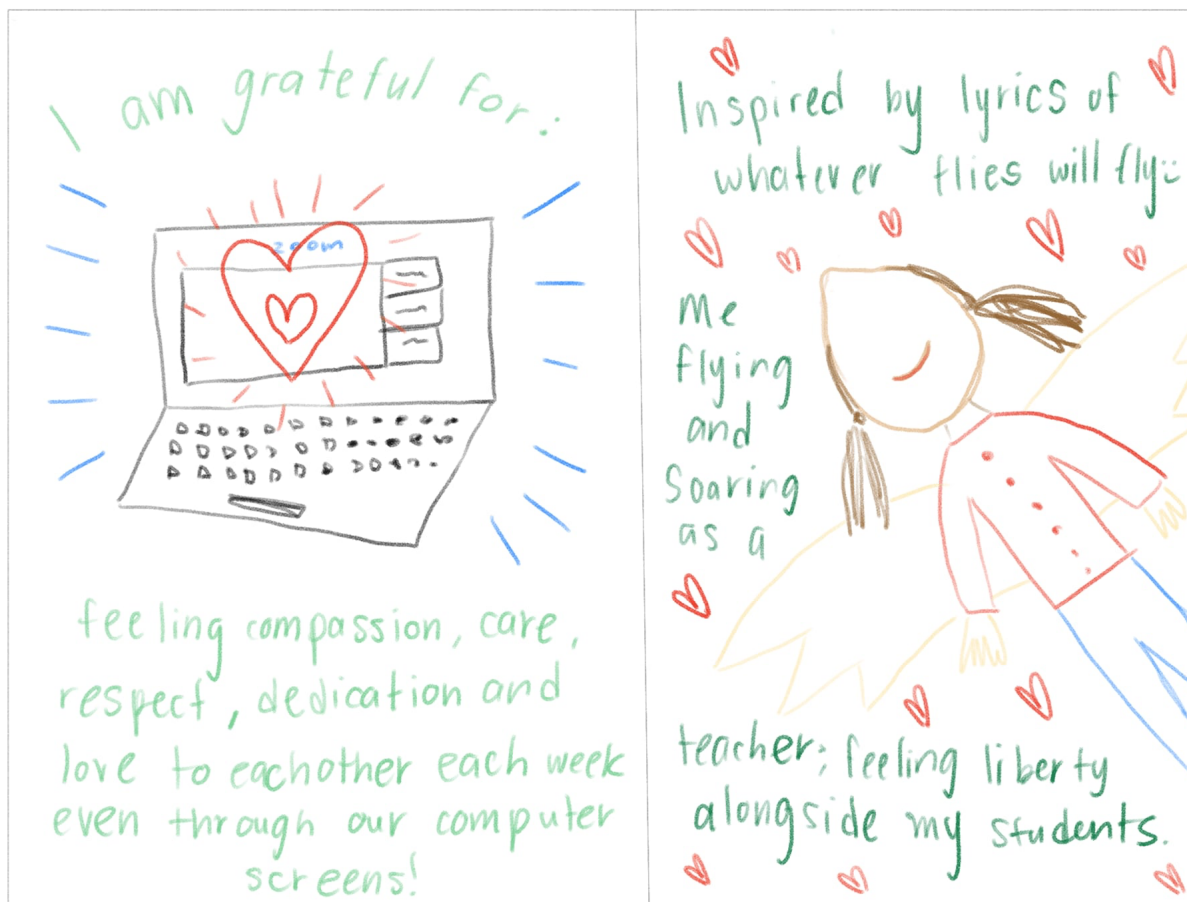
It's huge positive reinforcement to get a voice note back about your assignment. Where the person is somber when you're talking about something difficult, cheerful and encouraging when you're, like, learning, and especially if there's an online course or they don't have the time to spend one on one time in class with each student. Like what a powerful way to really feel important and like your time matters and like your learning matters and you're really being seen and understood, especially in the age of, like, chat GPT where students can be sending stuff off into the ether and teachers can choose to, you know, like, copy paste remarks. If someone is taking the time to give specific feedback and and answer your questions and say, 'I don't know' and kind of wonder with you verbally, like, it made me feel a greater sense of, like, trust, respect, value, and connection to professors in a way that's really powerful.

TCs spoke to the cumulative impact of our approach on the sense of community support in the final class in a reflective assessment:

I am grateful for: feeling compassion, care, respect, dedication and love to each other each week even through our computer screens! Inspired by lyrics of whatever flies will fly 😊 Me flying and soaring as a teacher: feeling liberty alongside my students.

TCs also came to develop their identities as teachers through the witnessing and experiencing of more accessible pedagogy.

Figure 7. Another multimodal TC reflection on course gains and future self as an educator (Note 7)



Impact 3: Manifestation of Unexpected Possibilities

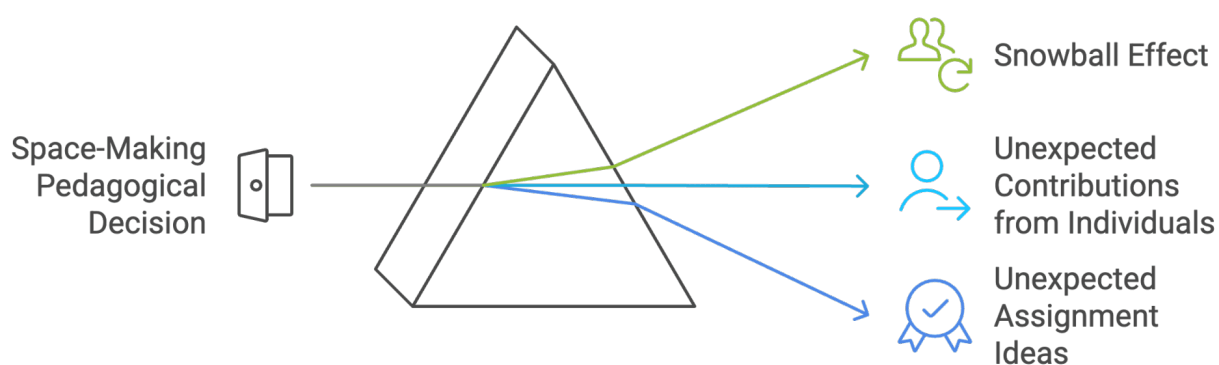
Many of our care-driven pedagogical decisions opened up spaces for possibilities that were beyond our initial capacity to imagine. When given the space to bring their unique selves into the community and the work, TCs often made things happen that we could never have anticipated. TCs developed greater agency throughout the course, approaching instructors to suggest ideas they could contribute to class:

Hey! I hope the first week back is going well for you. I was just looking over the slides for tomorrow, and I had an idea of something I would like to contribute if you are okay with it. I was thinking about what I was going to bring with me to class to just support attention issues/anxiety/whatever that might come up for me, and then I thought that I would actually love to offer that to everyone. My partner and I have purchased a bunch of fidget toys for our future classes, so I was thinking that maybe I could bring in some of those and maybe also some colouring sheets, some funsize treats, and

anything else cool that I think of. It would be like a little self-care toolbox that people can use during the class, which I think might be extra useful given the time of year. Let me know what you think!

TCs shared resources and supported one another in various ways. In one course, TCs were welcome to run opening check-ins, and often they did. After a politically polarizing event, an Indigenous TC asked to lead the class in a Cree ritual of humanity and connection.

Figure 8. A prism of possibilities (Note 8)



In another course, TCs were taught and encouraged to try out various accessibility tools. Many TCs learned new expression preferences, processing aids, and executive functioning supports they could use: “I really benefit from the option to make a mind map to visually connect my ideas together. I have found that expressing my learning in a visual way actually consolidates my learning a lot for me.” The freedom to choose their lines of inquiry and formats of assignments inspired thoughtful selections and personal sharing:

I was surprised and impressed by my ability to think out loud on the spot, guided by the structure of the document I was working with. It gives me confidence in my ability to think out loud, which I've been aware of but unsure of how to use. It also showed me that preparing a structure ahead of time can help me do a better job and stay on track when thinking out loud... It was also a great opportunity to share a project I'm really proud of where I combined my passions for video games and theatre.

Metacognition was encouraged on an ongoing basis and TCs shared new insights into their learning:

I've really appreciated how the freedom to explore in this way, including in weekly self-reflections, has not only given me the joy of multiple means of expression, it has also made my thinking more

flexible and creative even when I stick to modes that are more familiar.

They also came to think about the deeper implications of their choice of assignment format in regards to their learning:

If I talk it'll take much longer for the professor to go through what I'm saying, but ... my thoughts might be more free and fast than they would be otherwise and they'll dart back and go forth and it'll maybe be kind of hard to follow but you'll get the idea and it'll be more genuine in a different way. And then writing really helps me compose my thoughts, get them succinct, say what I truly feel and really have time to craft something. That, like, has maybe deeper impact [as it] is more straightforward. All the thoughts are in the right order so you can follow them better ... So, I learned having that freedom and how I expressed my learning gave me a lot more. It helped me learn about myself from sort of a metacognitive place.

Impact 4: Expansion of Teacher Candidate Pedagogical Imagination and Capacity

Our commitment to practicing what we were preaching in our classes, specifically in terms of wellbeing, accessibility, and UDL, had a significant impact on TCs' own practice. By being consistently and explicitly clear about the reasoning behind our pedagogical decisions, and their connections to accessibility theory and to our own practices in K-12 settings, TCs were able to see how inclusive ideas might be enacted. Crucially, this explicit reflexivity illustrated the malleability and individual and context driven nature of pedagogical decision-making, directly challenging assumptions of 'best practices' and universal techniques. This provided space for TCs to imagine ways of teaching that were authentic and specific to themselves as teachers and humans.

In one course, TCs contributed to a collective group framework if they wished, creating a record of evolving thinking and understanding of neuronormative practices, biases, as well as neurodiversity-affirming and accessible pedagogy. It included lists of ideas for practice like "Have students read their work to you so you can hear what they've written rather than getting distracted by how they've written it (messy, spelling errors, etc.)". They posed questions for educators to consider, such as "What assumptions do I attach to various disabilities? How do I challenge these assumptions in my practice?" It became a rich document TCs valued for their own use and some expressed their intention to share it beyond the course with colleagues. Similarly, TCs found that assignments were relevant to future practice: "This actually helped me become a better teacher. I did my unit plan for three students, one hard of hearing, and now in my practicum I have a student who is hard of hearing."

One researcher noted that a TC was asked to present on UDL to school staff shortly after graduating:

Two things were striking - one, she felt up to it, and two, she believes in it. She said again yesterday how powerful it was to feel it modelled, that it gave her a sense of what could be. Beyond underscoring again how essential it is that our practices be modelled.

This is especially important given the sparsity of such models in TCs' previous learning experiences.

Many TCs spoke to increasing awareness of neuronormativity and ableism in education and shared about their radical departure from these practices. They felt emboldened to explain their pedagogy by experiencing a different approach:

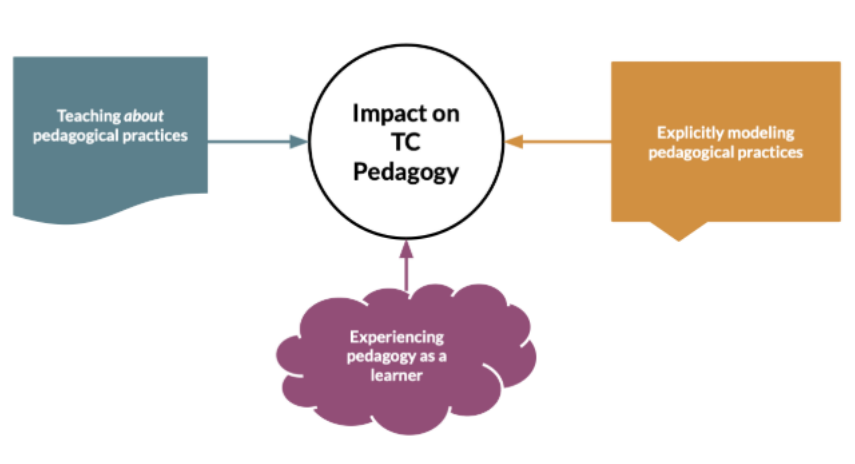
I think it's important to experience this at a graduate level so that we can appreciate how multiple means of expression is simply another way to achieve the same high level of communicating thinking, maintaining high expectations while offering diverse yet equally valid routes to achieve them. I anticipate having a much easier time correcting misconceptions about 'superior vs inferior modes of communication' with this experience in my back pocket.

Some TCs shared they were disseminating newfound knowledge beyond the course, with friends, family, and colleagues, demonstrating increased confidence to make pedagogical choices to support students they volunteered or worked with:

I was able to brainstorm with the conductor of the choir some ideas for how we can support students! I brought up having them see our routine visually, to develop their self-regulation and also provide structure that they can adjust to. I also brought up setting up a bit more of a learning community through choral goals that the students can come up with!

TCs expressed greater commitment to self-care and recognition that their worth was not their work. They also expressed an understanding of student self-care needs and

the importance of fostering an environment where students are encouraged to explore, ask questions, and engage deeply with the material, rather than just following rules or completing tasks to meet expectations. In my practicums there was so much pressure to race through the curriculum because "we are so behind". Now I understand that we were sacrificing authentic learning in order to tick boxes.

Figure 9. Impact on TC pedagogy (Note 9)

Implications

This study builds on promising results of earlier research into accessibility in teacher education by the researchers (Broad et al., 2024) and explores the impact of our ongoing learning on our practices, on our and teacher candidates' (TCs) beliefs and approaches to teaching and learning. It illuminates the potential for explicit modeling of UDL and care-driven processes in different classroom contexts and making visible instructor pedagogical decision-making through 'talking out loud'. It offers multiple pathways for supporting learner variability and resisting neoliberal and ableist norms in education and to plant seeds for change within teacher education. Finally, it created space for TCs to imagine themselves as teachers according to their own terms, providing an alternative to the prevailing neoliberal and colonial assertion that there is ultimately only one standardized 'best way' to teach (Rodriguez & Magill, 2016; Shahjahan, 2011).

Tensions

While overwhelmingly positive, some impacts and implications of our approaches proved challenging. We came to understand these not so much as limitations, but as tensions.

Instructional Tensions

- An accommodations for all premise necessitated dialogue between instructors and TCs, and willingness on the part of TCs to self-advocate, which might unintentionally exclude some learners

- Assessment required a balance of clarity, deadlines, structured choice as well as flexibility and rigor
- University grading expectations undermined a full commitment to qualitative assessment and descriptive feedback, as a final grade (quantitative) was still required
- Time demands of consistent, timely feedback
- Commitment to implementing UDL can feel overwhelming for instructors

Programmatic Tensions

- Ongoing research and professional development in this area could be better supported by institutional, departmental, or program support of collegial professional learning; it is not job-embedded for contracted sessional lecturers
- Different mindsets and assumptions about learners, expectations, and responsibilities as teacher educators across the institution are to be expected as teachers are not ‘standard’

Next Steps

Personally

- Lincoln to work on creating an accessible Research 1 class, going beyond his previous course focused on Special Education and Mental Health. The key question will be flexibility in a context of greater rigidity, as the Research 1 course has set assessments shared across 14 sections of a course
- Kara to work on continuing to share and support learning through writing and speaking, and evolving her courses on accessible, neurodiversity-affirming education in 2 departments
- Kathy to work on increasing intentionality and accessibility in her course with graduate students from multiple programs with the mentorship of Kara and Lincoln

Collectively

- Continuing to collect data from students in our varied courses
- Continuing frequent check-ins and progress tracking in our courses and together
- Continuing research into ableism, disablism, and intersections of disability, neurodivergence, race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status
- Continuing to write and present together on our findings

Programmatically

- Continuing to question policies and practices and work with colleagues to increase knowledge and responsiveness at program and institutional levels

- Ongoing data collection on our progress through student, faculty and program surveys
- Building opportunities for faculty collaboration and learning so we can continue this work together.

This study is a relevant and authentic example of embracing the challenge and complexity of serving all TCs while simultaneously preparing them to serve each of their students. This work highlights the agency of teacher educators within neoliberal systems to counteract normativity and ableism through deliberate, iterative reflexivity and an intentional pursuit of feedback and responsiveness, and the growth cycle that is possible in TCs and teacher educators alike when this process is collaborative. We also advocate for programmatic data collection of TC perspectives to inform research-informed, coherent programs that build self-efficacy and capacity of TCs. This study is ongoing and contributes to conversations on anti-oppressive and accessible teacher education, which is much needed in the current educational climate. It provides an example of how creating spaces for our individual and collective multidimensional variability to flourish can have transformative impacts on teachers and students alike.

Note 1: This figure depicts the idea that different students (represented by different colours) can take different pathways to the same goal. They might they come from different directions, take different amounts of time (length of the line), and/or different levels of directness (straight or curved).

Note 2: This figure illustrates the expanding shared awareness of both the teacher educator and teacher candidates through practices that focused on enacting a collaborative orientation.

Note 3: This figure illustrates the cycle of increasing impact of a relatively small pedagogical shift.

Note 4: This figure depicts two example snowball impact cycles. The first illustrates the power of creating spaces for vulnerability, and the second the reduced impact on grades.

Note 5: This image depicts a multimodal assessment of learning and self-efficacy gained throughout the course. The first frame depicts a woman holding a cracked mask, reflecting greater self-acceptance and authenticity. The second frame depicts a smiling woman with a welcoming gesture surrounded by hearts.

Note 6: This figure depicts two example snowball impact cycles. The first illustrates the power of creating spaces for vulnerability, and the second the reduced impact on grades.

Note 7: This image depicts a multimodal assessment of learning and self-efficacy gained throughout the course. The first frame depicts a computer with a zoom screen from which emanates a heart encircling another heart. The second frame depicts a smiling person flying, surrounded by hearts.

Note 8: A prism with a single label on the left that says "Space-making pedagogical decision" with a line going into the prism. The prism then breaks this one line into three going out the right side. One labelled

"snowball effect," one labelled "unexpected contributions from individuals," and one labelled "unexpected assignment ideas".

Note 9: Three buckets below, and all with arrows leading up to, a label "Impact on Teacher Practice." The first bucket is "Teaching Pedagogical Theory," the second is "Experiencing as a Learner," and the third is "Modelling Pedagogical Theory".

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this publication, Kara Dymond, Lincoln Smith, and Kathryn Broad, declare there are no competing interests.

Informed Consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000 (5). Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study. Additional informed consent was obtained from all research subjects for which identifying information is included in this manuscript.

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