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Fall 9-22-2015

### Kathryn Howard CD Spring 2014

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#### Recommended Citation

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**DATE SUBMITTED:** September 22, 2015

**Title of Grant Award:** Course Development Grant ( Spring 2014 )

**Project Goal:**

The goal of this project was to refine the ‘tutoring’ requirement in an online course on teaching second language reading. Engaging directly in instructing English Language Learners is a crucial step for teachers-in-training to consolidate and apply theoretical knowledge about teaching reading that is gained in course readings, lectures and discussions. Project goals included: designing a set of procedures for remote students to identify a tutorial site and tutee; creating a series of brief, well-structured, online tutorial training modules for each course topic across a range of levels; and designing dialogue journal and professional learning community components to the course so that my students (teachers-in-training) receive timely and immediate feedback/ coaching on their instructional techniques.

**When Implemented:** Spring 2015

**Brief Description of the Project:**

This project was designed to develop a refined tutorial experience in my online course on teaching second language reading, in order to better serve students who cannot take advantage of structured literacy tutoring opportunities on our campus because they live at a distance. This experience will include procedures for identifying their tutee, a dialogue journal with the instructor and professional learning community (PLC) over the course of their tutoring sessions, and online learning modules that provide structured guidance for their work with tutees, adapted to their tutee’s level.

**How the Project was Implemented:**

Online sections of the course EESL 544, *Reading Methods in TESOL* were taught in Spring 2014 and Spring 2015. Spring 2014 students were placed in professional learning communities of 4-5 students who shared a similar target teaching level for the purposes of weekly discussions of how readings and materials related to their experience teaching, tutoring or learning second language reading. In Spring 2015, the tutorial-related assignments were moved to a whole-class blog format on blackboard so that students could respond to each other. Another change was that the tutorial component was more tightly structured within each course module, with specific tasks, activities or assessments that tutors were expected to complete during or soon following that module. Finally, the instructor created a curated webpage and a Pinterest page with supportive materials, tips, and resources for the tutorial.

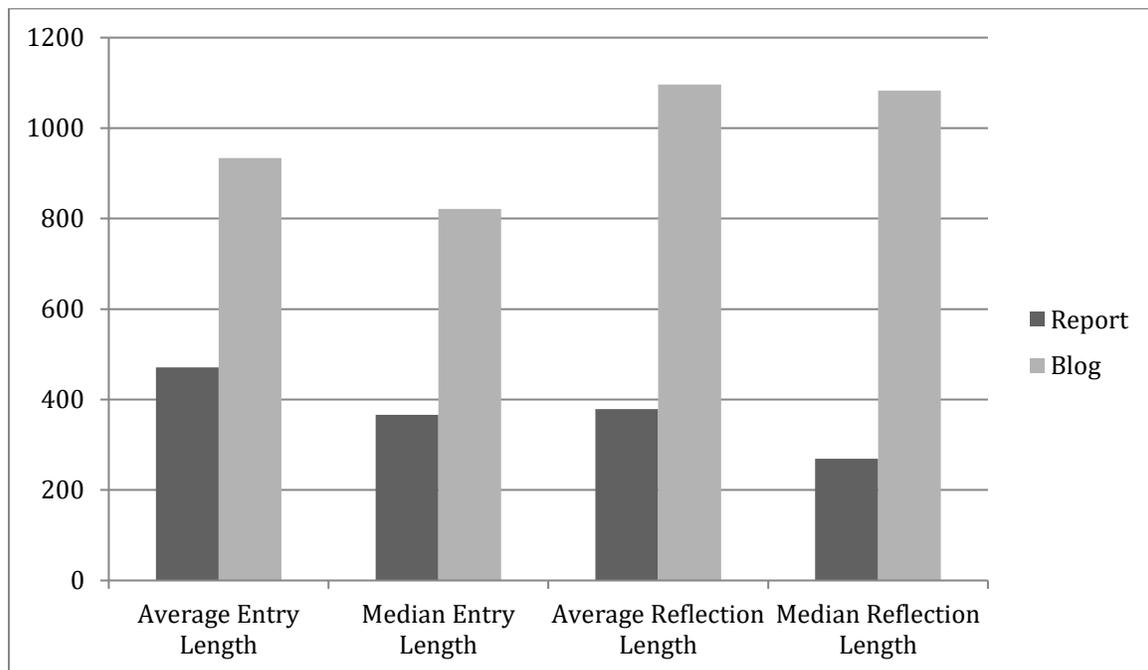
Research questions for the study were refined, and included: 1. How did the distinct tools and interactions for reflecting on practice provide opportunities for student tutors to challenge their conceptions about culturally and linguistically diverse learners? 2. How did these distinct tutorial experiences provide specific opportunities for tutors to deepen their knowledge of the specific strengths and needs of second language learners? 3. How and to what extent does the interaction with peers in these distinct tutorial experiences lead to modifications in tutors’ conceptions of learning, teaching, and the teaching context? 4. What are the distinct learning affordances provided by each of the course tools (mediational means) related to the tutorial (discussion board, blog, reports)? 5. What was the nature of the social networks in which students participated in the two courses?

Study Design. Post-course surveys were distributed, primarily examining students' evaluation of the course materials, tools, reporting assignment, website, peer and instructor feedback as support for their tutorial sessions. The results of these surveys, however, were primarily useful for further refinement of the website, tools, and resources provided to students, rather than being a reliable source of data regarding course effectiveness due to small response numbers. Instead, a rich and detailed case study was conducted on each course. Such research calls for detailed information to be collected on a well defined, bounded phenomenon, with multiple sources to provide complex understandings of the case under investigation (Duff, 2008; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Data collection, included a range of student products and interactions submitted as part of course requirements, along with post-course surveys, allowing for triangulation of findings from multiple (Maxwell, 2005). Students who enrolled in both sections of the course were invited to voluntarily participate in this study, completing a post-course survey, and giving permission to be included as data for the study. This resulted in 12-13 participants from each course section. Student products and course submissions for each course were anonymized and gathered into an NVivo (a qualitative analysis tool) workspace for coding and analysis. A grounded content analysis identified broad categories of instances in which tutors raise issues pertaining to cultural and linguistic diversity, instances in which tutors mentioned new understandings of second language learners, and instances in which tutors mentioned changes to their educational practice. Coding, reading through the data, and analytic memos about students' relationships, interactions, dialogues and reflections were created. Initial codes were in turn recursively refined to highlight finer-tuned phenomena. Discourse analysis of candidates' course products focused on modifications of understanding that were indicated in these materials.

**Results of the Project:**

First, students' blog entries were, in general, more lengthy and detailed, with higher quality reflection on the tutorial experience in comparison with individual reports submitted to the instructor prior to redesigning the course.

Table 1. *Length (in number of words) of session entries and reflections: report versus blog formats*



Secondly, given the opportunity to interact with students in other teaching levels and contexts, students primarily interacted outside of their own level and context rather than with other teachers from their own level. The majority of student responses were addressed to students outside their target teaching level (87/125 or 70%). For example, this chart maps out the responses of Middle School level candidates:

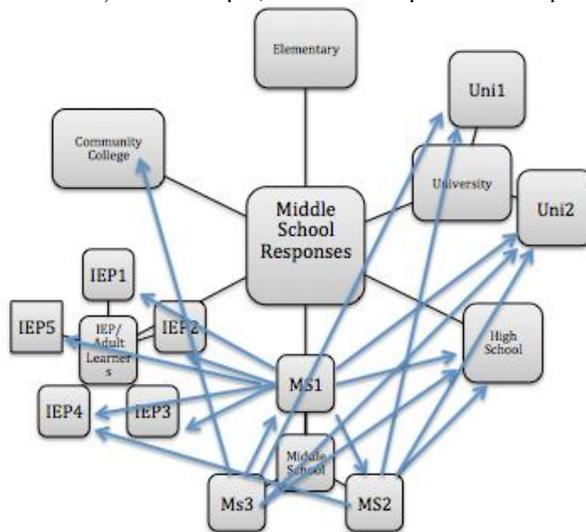


Figure 1: Middle School Tutors' Responses to Blogs

Thirdly, candidates underwent a process of modification of their prior understandings and practices through a) engagement with their learner, b) instructional practice, and c) engagement with their peers in the blogs. For example, one candidate reflected on lessons learned from engaging with the learner: “With regards to English learners, I learned that their proficiency with the second language will more than likely have an impact on how well they perform in their classes in school. For example, my tutee was reading at around a 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level, but he was expected to complete work in his classes that required him to read at a 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. He couldn't do it, so the result was that he failed all of his classes this year. ... Teachers, like my neighboring Language Arts teacher who had my tutee as his student are not necessarily prepared to deal with beginning English learners. Sadly, this teacher misunderstood my tutee's inability to perform in class as lack of interest and defiance.”

However, modifications that were prompted by interaction with peers rarely resulted from critical responses or suggestions received in reply to their own blogs. Rather, candidates modified their understandings by reading and taking a ‘theoretical attitude’ toward their peers’ blogs. For example, one candidate posted this response to a peer:

Elementary level candidate to High School level candidate: “I really like how you structure your plan for the session and the ‘I do, we do, you do’ model that you follow. I will try to use this with my tutee so she too can see examples of creating sentences.”

## Conclusions

The research on teacher professional development argues that educators must not only learn new skills and competencies, but also shift their previous understandings of learners, teaching and learning, and the learning contexts in which instruction occurs- what we term ‘modifications’ following Duranti (2010). Such modifications arise out of reflection on and evaluation of the phenomenal world, that is, adopting a ‘theoretical attitude’ about experience by pulling back to examine, question, critique, and evaluate it. By engaging in concrete experiences of practice, with a specific learner in a particular context, consisting of opportunities to experiment with new forms of practice, field experience provide rich fodder for reflection on practice. By supplementing this experience with opportunities to engage with peer networks, this course also recognized colleagues as crucial resources of knowledge for their peers. This interaction provided a space in which teaching practice could be discussed with the ‘theoretical attitude’ needed for transformation and change.

## **Additional Comments**

This study has been written up as a research article and submitted for peer review to a special issue of *CATESOL Journal* on the topic of fieldwork in the field of TESOL. Creating and curating resources for the website proved more challenging than I had expected. There are certain types of resources that did not seem to be available: Most of the resources on tutoring found online are very general and basic. Furthermore, my original plan to simply curate web resources was thwarted by my dissatisfaction with the design of current e-curation tools, which led to the development of my own website (still under construction- <http://eesl544.weebly.com/> ). However, there are gaps in the resources I had hoped to provide and I will need to create some original content to reach my goals for this site. Some of the resources provided in my course modules can be moved to this site as well. My future plan is to continue refining the website and getting feedback (and ideas!) from students on what would be helpful to include.

## **References**

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