
12-1-2007

Making Meaning of Graduate Students' and Preservice Teachers' E-Mail Communication in a Community of Practice

Janet C. Richards

University of South Florida, Jrichards.coedu@usf.edu

Susan V. Bennett

University of South Florida, siouxsan99@yahoo.com

Kim T. Shea

University of South Florida, sheeaka@verizon.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Richards, J. C., Bennett, S. V., & Shea, K. T. (2007). Making Meaning of Graduate Students' and Preservice Teachers' E-Mail Communication in a Community of Practice. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(4), 639-657. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2007.1617>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

Making Meaning of Graduate Students' and Preservice Teachers' E-Mail Communication in a Community of Practice

Abstract

This inquiry examined graduate students' and preservice teachers' e-mail communication as they made decisions about supporting the instructional needs of children at-risk in a community of practice summer literacy camp. The correspondence gradually evolved from impersonal to interpersonal communication over a ten-week time span, and influenced the preservice teachers' responses. Seven themes were identified in the graduate students' messages that ranged from questioning and complaining to promoting collaboration. The study illuminates the developmental stages of interpersonal relationships and demonstrates the reciprocal nature of interactive dialogue through the medium of e-mail communication. Conclusions are that long-term e-mail exchanges can facilitate quality relationships and provide a venue for educators to share thoughts, seek advice, and discuss teaching achievements and problems.

Keywords

Community of Practice, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), E-mail Exchange Preservice Teachers, and Graduate Students

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Making Meaning of Graduate Students' and Preservice Teachers' E-Mail Communication in a Community of Practice

Janet C. Richards, Susan V. Bennett, and Kim T. Shea
University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida

This inquiry examined graduate students' and preservice teachers' e-mail communication as they made decisions about supporting the instructional needs of children at-risk in a community of practice summer literacy camp. The correspondence gradually evolved from impersonal to interpersonal communication over a ten-week time span, and influenced the preservice teachers' responses. Seven themes were identified in the graduate students' messages that ranged from questioning and complaining to promoting collaboration. The study illuminates the developmental stages of interpersonal relationships and demonstrates the reciprocal nature of interactive dialogue through the medium of e-mail communication. Conclusions are that long-term e-mail exchanges can facilitate quality relationships and provide a venue for educators to share thoughts, seek advice, and discuss teaching achievements and problems. Key Words: Community of Practice, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), E-mail Exchange Preservice Teachers, and Graduate Students

I am feeling slightly frustrated with you. I e-mailed you and said, "What reading strategy do you want to do next week?" You e-mailed me back. "Here's my lesson plan about painting our mural." So, you really didn't understand what I was trying to say. We need to be on the same page. (Graduate student's e-mail to a preservice teacher)

Recent research in teacher preparation indicates education majors' professional development is enhanced when they have opportunities to collaborate in a community of practice (Beck & Kosniak, 2001; Lachance & Confrey, 2003; Richards, 2006). Communities of practice are social units in which members interact and develop relationships over time as they construct knowledge, share expertise, and pursue culturally agreed upon endeavors.

Communication is particularly relevant in a community of practice because reciprocal discourse allows members to transfer technical knowledge and skills associated with a shared enterprise (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991, 1992). However, it is important to note communication in a community of practice is multifaceted, and is not limited to impersonal discussions¹ about how to complete tasks (Rogoff, Goodman-Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001). Rather, in order for a community of

¹ Impersonal communication occurs when dialogue is confined to task accomplishments (Beebe et al., 2005; Walther & D'Addario, 2001).

practice to flourish, members must appreciate and provide support for one another, engage in honest, open dialogue, consider the needs, feelings, and values of others, and attempt “to resolve inevitable conflicts in ways that maintain the relationships” (Rogoff et al., p. 10). This honest, caring, other-oriented, nonjudgmental mode of interaction is termed interpersonal communication (Beebe et al., 2005). Interpersonal communication occurs when individuals engage in, dialogue that is “based upon equality rather than superiority” (Beebe et al., p. 7).

In this qualitative inquiry, we analyzed development over time in graduate students’ and preservice teachers’ interpersonal relationships fostered by their joint e-mail communication. Their correspondence centered on planning and making decisions about offering weekly literacy lessons to children at-risk in a community of practice summer literacy camp. We also chronologically categorized and studied the graduate students’ electronic messages to determine the encompassing themes. Themes reveal key ideas in narrative text. In addition, we investigated the mutually influencing, transactional nature of e-mail communication between the graduate students and the preservice teachers. A communication-as-transaction perspective posits negative communication from senders usually results in negative or minimal feedback from message recipients, while positive communication influences message recipients to offer a positive reaction.

Rationale for Our Inquiry

Two reasons prompted us to conduct the inquiry. Given the centrality of communicative expertise to teaching and learning, effective communication is particularly significant for both experienced and novice teachers (Cooper & Simonds, 2003). Since computer-mediated communication in education is still considered “a new frontier” (Beebe et al., 2005, p. 14), we wanted to explore the potentials of reciprocal e-mail exchanges in a context in which interpersonal communication is paramount. In addition, proposals for the redesign of teacher education call for teacher candidates to work closely with experienced practitioners (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Yet, a review of the literature in education shows few investigations have examined how e-mail transactions between experienced teachers and novices might promote collegial relationships. In fact, little research has examined the evolution of on-line relationships (Walther & D’Addario, 2001).

Participants, Structure, and Philosophy of the Summer Literacy Camp

This research reports on dimensions of the second consecutive summer we offered a literacy camp that met one evening a week for ten weeks in a small, low income Charter School located on the campus of a large southeastern university. As part of course requirements, 77 education majors participated as tutors in the camp; 14 graduate students in a practicum in reading course and 63 preservice teachers in an advanced undergraduate reading methods course. The graduate students (13 female and one male) whose ages ranged from 30 to 45 were all experienced teachers matriculating in their last course towards a master’s degree. The preservice teachers (61 female and two males) whose ages ranged from 20 to 45 were either in their third or fourth year of a four-year teacher education program. They were participating in their second and final required

reading methods course. All of the education majors were proficient in using e-mail as a form of communication.

Janet, the first author of this paper, taught the graduate practicum course and served as supervisor of the camp. Kim (third author of this paper) along with another doctoral student taught the preservice teachers, and Susan (second author of this paper) served as a graduate assistant to the program. Although the classes had separate instructors, during the first hour of the camp (5-6 p.m.) the graduate students and preservice teachers met as an inclusive community to attend lectures, observe demonstration lessons, and participate in seminar discussions led by Janet, the camp supervisor.

Seventy children signed up for the second camp initiative, and while attendance varied from week to week, at least 51 children were present during camp sessions from 6-8 p.m. in the evening. The majority attended the on-campus Charter School, but some came from near-by schools, and a few children lived outside of the school district. Most of the children had difficulties reading and writing, and their parents were eager for them to receive free literacy instruction.

Fourteen teams, comprised of a graduate student and four or five preservice teachers, each worked with a group of five children (the same children throughout the ten-week camp). We arranged the groups of children according to grade level (Pre K - 8th grade), and the graduate students and preservice teachers chose the grade level they wished to teach. Since there were more tutors than children, each child in the camp received considerable individual attention.

The Community of Practice Model for the Summer Literacy Camp

Although questions remain about what constitutes a community of practice in education and exactly how communities of practice promote positive learning outcomes (Schlager & Fusco, 2003), communities of practice provide an innovative framework to examine teacher development (Richards, 2006). In a community of practice, members build relationships through sustained mutual engagements that enable them to share information, negotiate meaning, and learn from and about one another. Learning is not limited to novices. Rather, “a community of practice is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone” (Wenger, 2006, p. 3). As Wenger explains, “Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources, experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short a shared practice” (p. 1).

Following community of practice frameworks, the graduate students initially coordinated lessons and taught their small groups of children with minimal input and help from the preservice teachers. Wenger (2006) notes that newcomers to a community of practice (such as the preservice teachers in this inquiry who were inexperienced in teaching), are situated and situate themselves at the edge or periphery of the community until they have constructed identities and knowledge in relationship to the community. In keeping with Wenger’s notion of learning as a process of social participation, as the camp progressed and the preservice teachers became more knowledgeable about tutoring small

group of students, the graduate students encouraged them to become active participants in the camp community by gradually accepting responsibility for developing and teaching lessons.

Rationale for E-mail Communication between Graduate Students and Preservice Teachers

Developing relationships through mediation and working together to solve problems takes time and sustained interactions among members in a community of practice (Wenger, 2006). However, during weekly camp sessions the graduate students and preservice teachers needed to focus most of their attention on their small groups of children and had little time to collaboratively plan lessons. Therefore, we concluded the establishment of e-mail correspondence was a priority in order to help solve their communication time limitations. E-mail allows individuals to send and receive messages quickly and at their convenience.

There are challenges associated with e-mail communication, such as lack of nonverbal cues that may cause misunderstanding. Additionally, some individuals may lack computer skills, or dislike e-mail as a form of communication. However, we recognized e-mail has the potential to provide a framework for sustained dialogue, and thus foster quality interpersonal relationships. Electronic mail interactions extend the definition of interpersonal communication and can offer emotional and professional support for community of practice groups (Merseth, 1991; Schlagel, Trathen, & Blanton, 1996; Whipp & Schweizer, 2000). E-mail is a medium that allows participants in a community to discuss common experiences, share ideas, offer advice, seek suggestions, confer about problems, and talk about resources (Bodzin, 2005; Walther, 1992, 1993; Walther & Burgoon, 1992; Walther & Tidwell, 1996).

We also noted with the development of the Internet a number of teacher education programs have incorporated e-mail communication into their course activities (e.g., Liaw, 2003; Richards, 2004; Seale & Cann, 2000). In fact, "e-mail is the most commonly used form of computer-mediated communication" (Walther & D'Addario, 2001, p. 324). We, too, wanted to embrace the possibilities of this technological reality. Therefore, as part of their course requirements, we directed the graduate students to communicate by e-mail at least weekly with the preservice teachers in their group in order to plan and coordinate literacy lessons (we gave no other directions). In addition, we asked the graduate students to forward their e-mail messages and the preservice teachers' responses each week to Janet, the camp supervisor. Because we recorded data using pseudonyms for participants' names and the graduate students, and preservice teachers were free to write what they wished, our Institutional Review Board (IRB) did not require us to obtain their informed consent.

The Inquiry

Literatures Informing the Inquiry

Our inquiry was informed by the intersections of several related perspectives. Since our study focused on dialogic interactions, we adhered to ideas from interpersonal

communication, which examine conversational transactions made between partners and among groups. According to Beebe et al. (2005), true interpersonal communication requires a collaborative, interactive climate in which individuals feel understood, safe, and accepted. Current views stress the complex, transactional nature of interpersonal communication in which the content and tone of messages influence what message receivers understand and how message receivers respond.

This study highlights electronic communication. Therefore, we followed contemporary views of computer-mediated communication that explain the interactive nature of technologically mediated environments and expand the definition of interpersonal communication (Markham, 2005). In turn, evolving computer-mediated communication conceptions have broadened researchers' lenses and provide "a unique phenomenon for study" (Markham, p. 794).

A community of practice provided the context for this inquiry. Thus, we grounded our inquiry in social learning theory that considers social participation integral to the acquisition of knowledge and understanding (Wenger, 2006). Participation refers to the "encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to those communities" (Wenger, p. 4).

We also were guided by social information processing frameworks that are based upon principles of social cognition and interpersonal relationship development (Walther, 1996). This model assumes those who engage in on-going computer-mediated discourse strive to develop interpersonal relationships similar to individuals who participate in face-to-face sustained interactions. Social informational processing perspectives acknowledge individuals who engage in computer-assisted communication may need more time to develop relationships because there is less processing information to help them interpret a message, such as a communicator's posture, facial expressions, voice quality, eye contact, and gestures. However, research indicates positive quality relationships do develop over time (Walther, 1992; Walther & Burgoon, 1992; Walther & D'Addario, 2001).

In addition, we viewed our inquiry as a holistic context-specific case study that focused on a group of individuals in a unique delimited circumstance. A "case is a bounded system, bounded by time and place" (Creswell, 1998, p. 37). We wanted to gain insight into a specific topic; specifically, the development of graduate students' and preservice teachers' interpersonal relationships facilitated through the use of e-mail communication. Accordingly, we examined the literature about instrumental case studies. Instrumental case studies take place over a relatively short time frame and pursue specific scholarly questions about a phenomenon within a case (Stake, 2005).

Limitations of the Inquiry

We acknowledge several limitations of the inquiry before we present the questions that guided our inquiry, our data analysis methods, examples of the graduate students' and preservice teachers' e-mail communication, and our interpretations of the research. As researchers we were influenced by our personal backgrounds and professional histories. What data we deemed noteworthy, and our understanding of the data, were filtered through our attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews. In addition, there is a strong possibility that our dual roles of researchers and also camp supervisor (Janet),

instructor (Kim), and research assistant (Susan) in the summer literacy camp slanted our perceptions. For example, as a research assistant, Susan had more opportunities than Janet or Kim to interact informally with the graduate students and the preservice teachers because her duties included visiting with them individually during camp sessions to tally student attendance. During these interactions, Susan also answered questions from the graduate students and preservice teachers that they might not pose to Janet and Kim, who were instructors and awarded grades. In addition, because Susan was a research assistant, and not an instructor, in all probability the graduate students and preservice teachers, shared information with her they did not share with Janet and Kim because disclosures to Susan posed no risks. Knowing the graduate students and preservice teachers in slightly different and individualized ways from Janet and Kim had the capacity to shape some of Susan's interpretations of the data. For example, Susan thought some of the impersonal messages written early in the project were the result of the graduate students' anxieties rather than their lack of empathy or experience corresponding with preservice teachers, and this could very well be true. Hermeneutic premises explain that others might bring different experiences, different mindsets, and ultimately a different lens that allows them to view the data differently, employ different data analysis methods, and come to different understandings than ours (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

We are also aware that computer-mediated discourse provides a distinct line of inquiry that has "the potential to shift the ways in which qualitative researchers collect, make sense of, and represent data" (Markham, 2005, p. 794). Researchers of on-line discourse must attempt to construct others' intentions, actions, attitudes, decisions, and perceptions solely through written language that is separated from the writer. It is difficult to capture the precise meanings of reciprocal discourse when "the writer and reader are in different places" (Bavelas, Kenwood, & Phillips, 2003, p. 1127; also see Bochner, 2002). Saussurian semiotic principles² when applied to narrative analysis explain the potential elusiveness of meaning, as it resides in communication that is disconnected from communicators' actions, voice tone, and gestures (Silverman, 2000). However, although we were somewhat challenged to understand and represent the graduate students' and preservice teachers' thinking exclusively through print outs of their electronically generated messages, we also met with them weekly. These interactions helped us connect authors of the e-mail messages with their correspondence.

Furthermore, we must acknowledge although we confined our inquiry to the content of the graduate students' and preservice teachers' e-mail communications, in reality they had opportunities to engage in informal face-to-face discussions and telephone conversations we did not observe or document. There is a strong possibility such interactions may have supplemented and predisposed their computer-assisted dialogue. Therefore, we cannot assume their e-mail correspondence was solely responsible for the development of their relationships over time.

Finally, since the graduate students were requested to send all of the communication to Janet, it is not difficult to imagine they may have monitored their discourse because she was the supervisor of the camp and the instructor of the graduate students.

² Ferdinand Saussure (1857 – 1913), a Geneva-born Swiss linguist is widely considered the father of 20th century linguistics (Gordon, 1996).

Questions Guiding our Inquiry

The following three questions helped guide our inquiry.

1. In what ways does the content of the graduate students' e-mail messages portray growth over time in their interpersonal relationships?
2. What themes are evident in the graduate students' e-mail messages?
3. In what ways does the content of the graduate students' e-mail communication influence the preservice teachers' responses?

Data Analysis

Recognizing that researchers who investigate processes of interpersonal communication must consider temporal characteristics, one of our goals for the inquiry was to study development over time in the graduate students' interpersonal e-mail communication skills. Therefore, when the semester ended, as a precursor to data analysis, we chronologically collated the 425 e-mail messages authored by the graduate students. We noted the majority of graduate students wrote at least three e-mail messages per week, and since current communication as transaction theories explain human communication as mutually interactive, we connected the graduate students' discourse with 212 responses written by the preservice teachers.

We employed global constant comparative analysis techniques to analyze and systematically characterize the e-mail correspondence over the ten-week time span of the camp. The aim of global constant comparative methods in qualitative research is to: (a) obtain an overview of the range of key ideas noted in text; (b) code the ideas, and (c) categorize the ideas (Flick, 2002). These initiatives entail systematically comparing words, phrases, sentences, and longer discourse in an effort to develop conceptualizations about possible patterns, themes, and relationships in narrative data (Thorne, 2000).

We analyzed the data in three iterations. In phases one and two, we read and reread the graduate students' chronologically ordered messages and highlighted phrases, sentences, and longer discourse that appeared relevant to our study. Although we did not confine ourselves to using Beebe et al.'s (2005) human communication categories, we found that the data fell into two broad themes that we labeled: (a) impersonal communication (e.g., "What do you intend to do?") and (b) interpersonal communication (e.g., "If I can help you in any way, let me know"). Thus, our findings supported Beebe et al.'s communication classifications as either impersonal (i.e., asking for or supplying information; responding to people's roles rather than as individuals), or interpersonal (i.e., seeking honest relationships; focusing on others; acknowledging people as unique and worthy individuals).

During weeks one through four of the camp, most of the graduate students' messages resonated with impersonal dialogue (N = 92 out of 106 messages). Beginning in week five, although some of the graduate students' e-mail correspondence continued to contain language we designated as impersonal (e.g., "Hi, Do not forget to write in the dialogue journals. Joan."), we noted a distinct shift from impersonal to interpersonal content (N = 262 out of 319 messages).

We then revisited the graduate students' correspondence and identified three overarching themes in their impersonal e-mail messages that we labeled: (a) giving instructions and information; (b) questioning and asking for information; and (c) complaining. We identified four encompassing themes in their interpersonal e-mail messages that we titled: (d) apologizing; (e) offering advice and suggestions; (f) giving compliments and praise; and (g) promoting collaboration.

In the third review of the data we examined the preservice teachers' responses to the graduate students' messages since "the message of one person influences the message of another" (Beebe et al., 2005, p. 14). The preservice teachers responded to only 23 of the graduate students' 92 messages we categorized as impersonal communication. The majority of their responses (N = 189 out of 212 messages) occurred during weeks five through ten of the camp in response to the graduate students' messages we classified as interpersonal communication. It is interesting to note the length of the preservice teachers' e-mail responses and their expressions of feelings, emotions, and self-disclosure increased proportionally to the length, and expressions of feelings, emotions, and self-disclosure of the graduate students' messages. However, this phenomenon might be explained by another consideration. Specifically, over time the graduate students and preservice teachers may have become more comfortable with the community of practice camp model and with one another, and their communication reflected their relaxed perspectives. We make examples of these data visible in the following section.

Examples of Graduate Students' Interpersonal E-Mail Messages during Weeks One through Four Connected to the Preservice Teachers' Responses

Giving Instructions and Information

Understandably, the graduate students' initial correspondence to the preservice teachers focused on group organization. Their messages were succinct, purposeful, task-oriented, and straightforward, reflecting their immediate management concerns. The preservice teachers responded to very few of these messages.

Graduate Student (Jo Ann):

Good Morning. Here is what I want you all to do next week.

Pre-reading /Jessica

During reading/ Tony and Sadie

Post reading/ Joan

Visual art activity/ Ramona

Your Mentor, Jo Ann

Preservice Teachers:

No response

Graduate Student (Sarah):

Hello and PLEASE NOTE Everyone: I need someone to bring snacks for next week and when it is your time to take part in a lesson, forward your lesson plans to me ahead of time.

Mary- Don't forget –it is your job to create Camp Notes for next week.
Sarah

Preservice Teachers:
No response

Questioning and Asking for Information

During the first few weeks of camp, the graduate student mentors also questioned the preservice teachers. They wrote terse inquiries, and made no effort to establish supportive relationships. Rather, they were self-focused and concerned about accomplishing tasks. The preservice teachers did not respond to many of these messages.

Graduate Student:
Hello Everyone in My Group, I do not need to see your lesson plans. What is everyone doing next week?

Preservice Teachers:
No response.

Graduate Student (Connie):
Nancy, Next week what are your objectives? What will the students learn?
Connie

Preservice Teacher (Nancy):
Hi Connie, The children will learn a reading comprehension strategy.

Complaining

Early in the program, many of the graduate students appeared overwhelmed by their responsibilities as coordinators of their small groups. Some even scolded, criticized, and evaluated the preservice teachers' behavior without considering how their messages might impinge on the preservice teachers' confidence levels. The preservice teachers responded to very few of these messages.

Graduate Student (Janeal):
Hi Lloyd. I need to have a conversation with you because you are having difficulties. Your problem is you interrupt other preservice teachers when they teach. Also, are you confused? Unprepared? Can you accept responsibilities? Janeal

Preservice Teacher (Lloyd):
No response.

Graduate Student (Annilyn):

Dear Preservice Teachers, You need to communicate more by e-mail. I need to tell you all that you must communicate to me! You also need to learn strategies and how to be flexible. Nancy, Joyce, Susan and Kathy, this is all overwhelming helping you in this camp--informative but overwhelming. It is not easy being a graduate student in charge of a group.
Annilyn

Preservice Teachers:

No response.

Examples of Graduate Students' Interpersonal E-Mail Messages during Weeks Five through Ten Connected to the Preservice Teachers' Responses

Apologizing

The majority of the graduate students' e-mail messages increasingly shifted to interpersonal communication around the fifth week of camp. The following messages of apology portray their sincere feelings. They disclose information about themselves and promote an "honest sharing of self with others" (Beebe et al., 2005, p. 7). Note that the preservice teachers responded to these interpersonal messages with language that confirms and supports the graduate students.

Graduate Student (Josie):

Hello Everyone, I just want to apologize for not e-mailing you sooner. I was ill and I thought of all of you. Thanks and I'm sorry about Monday night. I was too anxious as a mentor. Sorry. Josie

Preservice Teachers (J, L, E, B):

Please don't worry about us, Josie. We knew you were not feeling well and we understand. Take care. J, L, E, and B.

Graduate Student (Anna):

You were right preservice teachers. Please forgive me. I didn't explain the reading comprehension strategy fully and it was my fault that the kids got confused. Best, Anna

Preservice Teachers (The Group):

Hey Anna—we are here at Joan's apartment reading your message. You did fine. Just repeat the lesson like you tell us to do. Don't worry. Thanks for sharing. See you Monday. The Group

Offering Advice and Suggestions

During weeks five through ten the graduate students gradually began to offer advice in genuinely supportive ways, and they continued to increasingly display empathy and sensitivity to the preservice teachers' feelings. In turn, the preservice teachers began to write confirming responses that acknowledged the graduate students' competence.

Graduate Student (Faith):

Hi Group, Just a few words of friendly advice. Bring glue, markers, etc., next week – Put newspaper down on the large table for art activities so you don't have to scrub paint and markers from the table. Does this sound OK to you? Faith

Preservice Teacher (Beth):

Hello Faith, Next week, we thought we could bring in strawberry cupcakes and pink strawberry frosting to create pigs. We will use half a marshmallow for the nose and little round candies for the eyes. We'll cut ears out of foam. How does this sound to you? Is this all right? We value your opinion. Thank for the advice about packing and cleaning up with the kids- not after they leave. You have such good ideas. Beth

Graduate Student (Jen):

May I offer some suggestions to you guys? Remember to start closing down the lesson at least 5-8 minutes before camp is over for the night. You can have the kids help you pack up and clean up. You are staying late and doing all of the chores yourselves. Kids love to help and they need to learn to accept responsibility and share chores. I had to learn this when I started out as a teacher. Jen

Preservice Teacher (Mary Alice):

Hi Jen, Thank you for the suggestion about getting the kids ready to go home. I thought the entire night was successful until you pointed this out. Our students were actively involved and interested. The Readers Theatre was a great idea you had and it tied in with the puppets the kids made. Your positive attitude and enthusiasm were always available to us. Thank you for encouraging us. I never thought I'd make it but with you I did. I know the others in our group feel the same way and we want to take you to lunch before you go back to teaching in the fall. You suggested food and music for our teaching sessions and they were a hit. Can I call on you when I have my own classroom? I will need your guidance. I didn't actually realize that teachers plan together until we worked in this camp. Mary Alice

Giving Compliments and Praise

Beginning with week seven of the camp, the graduate students progressively wrote significant amounts of praise indicating they were clearly impressed by the preservice teachers' professional development. In response, the preservice teachers complimented the graduate students on their professional expertise. These messages are indicative of positive, nurturing, caring relationships that Martin Buber (1958) terms an I-Thou relationship.³ "Nurturing communication involves emotional closeness" (Galvin & Wilkinson, 2006, p. 9).

Graduate Student (Leah):

Hello Dear preservice teachers, You are doing a great job interacting with the students. They listen to you. They admire you as teachers. I know it can be stressful when your professor observed you, but you were fantastic-great-awesome! Excellent job guiding Mary with her story illustrations and you kept her focused. She loved the attention you give her. The children's artwork was beautiful thanks to you. I liked all of your ideas. What a great group. Congratulations! You are bright, and cooperative and you have great teaching potential. As my professor always says, "Seek solutions rather than complain about problems," and that's just what you do now. Leah

Preservice Teachers (True Admirers):

Leah, we decided to get together and create a poem for you because you are a fabulous leader of our group.
Leah, Leah
You're the one
Who has made our teaching fun
You taught us how to think things through
Leah, Leah
We admire you! From Your True Admirers!

Graduate Student (Amber):

Hey Group - WOW! You did a great job last night! I thought it was wonderful to observe my preservice teachers presenting their lessons to the children. It was terrific. Can I help you with your case studies? We could try to meet if you can find the time. I appreciate all that you do. Thank you all for working so hard. Thanks for the book idea on the fairy tales. I'll e-mail you some other book titles. Please let me know what you think. Amber

Preservice Teachers (Whole Group):

³ Martin Buber, a noted Jewish philosopher (1878--1965), established a typology to describe two types of human relationships. An "I-It" relationship is characterized by objectification and control. An "I Thou" relationship fosters closeness at a deep level between and among people (Martin Buber Homepage, 2008).

Hi Amber. Thanks for the encouragement. You are a great mentor. You always made teaching look so easy. You explained everything to us and you are a caring person. I think we have our case studies in order, but would you please check them? We'll bring them next week. I have to tell you we were intimidated by you in the beginning, but we soon learned you are super! We could not keep the kids' attention at first, but we all learned how to better our group management thanks to you. This is from the whole group.

Promoting Collaboration

In their final e-mail messages written during weeks eight through ten the graduate students clearly consider the preservice teachers as partners in a joint initiative. Their empathic correspondence influenced the preservice teachers' responses. The mutual communication resounds with connections and trust, a sense of common purpose, depth of interactions, and an honest sharing of self. In addition, the messages indicate the graduate students and preservice teachers came to depend upon one another and had formed strong feelings of group identity.

Graduate Student (Mary):

Hi Everyone, Our group has formed up nicely. We e-mail after each tutoring session and we plan collaboratively regardless of who is in charge for the overall session. I always want you to critique my teaching. I want your opinions about what went well and what did not. We are together in this endeavor. Next week we could all write together about whatever animal the kids choose. We also need to choose some books. When we do things together-we do a great job of teaching. I finally got the Sponge Bob snacks for the kids. Can one of you bring the drinks? I'll bring the chart paper. Notice I am putting more and more responsibility on you preservice teachers and giving you fewer directions. You can do it. You have turned into teachers. Mary

Preservice Teacher (Elise):

You are the best, Mary. Yes, it was rough at the beginning of camp. We had a lot to learn. We had never done this before and I guess you hadn't either. And, we are now together like one group. But, the first few times of camp sessions we were not together at all. We were into our own selves. Some of us did the right thing and prepared lessons. Other just did nothing. Probably they did not know what to do. But now, we are all working together, thanks to you.

As for books to choose, I learned not to depend only upon my own ideas. The International Reading Association publishes Teachers' and Children's choices to help teachers and parents choose excellent books so let me look at what they suggest and link that to our theme. I'll get back you

tomorrow after I do some book research. And, please keep in touch with us. Elise.

Graduate Student (Lacy):

Hi Everyone, I am really proud of what we accomplished. When we started we were confused. I had no idea how to go about planning lessons with you, but now everything is falling into place. I am grateful to all of you. I gained a lot from observing you preservice teachers as you taught lessons. I want to check with you to see how you all are doing.

What books do you want to choose? Who has a fish game? Does anyone have a computer to bring? We need to have each child on a computer. I value your suggestions. I loved our collaborative group. I will miss you. Good luck to all of you. We have formed a close bond so please keep in touch and let me know if I can help you in any way. When we started out it was rough and now it is like we have known one another forever. Great job on your lessons and on your spirit of togetherness. Smiles! Lacy

Preservice Teacher (Suzy):

Thanks "L" for the compliment. We sure have formed a nice group. That helps us to do our best. And you are the one who mentored us. I hope I can do as well as you do when I teach in my own classroom. Suzy

Preservice Teacher (Dan):

Hi Lacy, I'll bring a fish game. I'll get to camp early so you can check it. I have to say I have gotten so many cool ideas just from talking to other teachers and walking around observing them. And, you don't have to pick up the snack. It's our turn. By the way-thanks for all that you have done for us. I don't think we'd have made it without you as our coordinator. I can bring a computer also. Dan

Preservice Teacher (Molly):

I'll bring my computer. Is there anything else I can do? One thing I have to say is that I don't want this camp to end. Molly

Interpretations and Implications of the Research for Teacher Education and Teacher In-Service Programs

This inquiry fills a void in research that has overlooked e-mail correspondence as an option for development of interpersonal relationships (e.g., see Chenault, 1998; Lea & Spears, 1995). While "it is increasingly common for people to use the Internet as one among many channels for communication" (Walther & Parks, 2002, p. 556), how technology affects relationships is not well understood (Walther & Parks). For example, although some scholars suggest computer-mediated dialogue may be ineffective in the development of interpersonal exchanges (e.g., see Walther, 1996), the results of this study indicate e-mail interactions can support quality relationships and offer social support (Walther & Parks). As social information processing theory explains, it is

possible for quality relationships to evolve through computer-mediated communication, however the evolution of such relationships may take more time than in face-to-face relationship development (Walther & D'Addario, 2001; Walther & Burgoon, 1992).

The research also indicates "e-mail messages convey information about the nature of relationships among the correspondents" (Beebe et al., 2005, p. 350). The chronologically ordered correspondence of the graduate students and preservice teachers illuminates a distinct trend from impersonal self-focused messages during the first few weeks of camp to interpersonal nurturing, "other-oriented" communication in later weeks of the project. These messages correlate with the development of quality relationships among the graduate students and preservice teachers. Over time, many "relationships move from impersonal to increasingly personal as closeness develops" (Galvin & Wilkinson, 2006, p. 8).

Another explanation for the gradual changes in the graduate students' and preservice teachers' correspondence resides in community of practice structures. In a community of practice learning is not limited to novices. Rather, "a community of practice is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone" (Wenger, 2006, p. 3). As the graduate students increased their knowledge about teaching literacy to children at-risk and became skillful managing small groups of children in a supportive community context, in all likelihood they concurrently developed socially constructed understanding of their supervisory roles and became comfortable with their responsibilities. In addition, as the camp progressed, they became familiar with the preservice teachers through weekly face-to-face contact. Therefore, they found it easier to collaborate with the preservice teachers in a shared endeavor. Accordingly, the graduate students' e-mail communication shifted from formal, top down, cautious, impersonal messages in which they did not reveal information about themselves to relationship building informal communication in which they shared their feelings and experiences. In turn, the interpersonal "I-Thou" (Buber, 1958) dimensions of the graduate students' messages enabled the preservice teachers to feel accepted and understood. As a result, they were willing to reveal their concerns and problems and authentic selves to the graduate students. "Disclosures commonly occur when the other is perceived to be trustworthy" (Tidwell & Walther, 2000, p. 324). Current interpersonal communication views stress the complex, transactional nature of communication and note how spoken or written communication mutually affects message receivers' reactions, perceptions, and feelings. The content and tone of messages influence what message receivers understand and how message receivers respond. If individuals view communicators as supportive, in all probability, they will respond in a similar and increasingly open manner.

Implications of the research apply to both teacher education and teacher in-service programs. The inquiry demonstrates e-mail communication can extend the definition of a community of practice by providing additional opportunities for graduate students and preservice teachers to interact and develop close relationships. Therefore, teacher educators might consider adding an e-mail component to their course activities in which teacher candidates have opportunities to communicate electronically with experienced teachers in geographically distant contexts to discuss teaching concerns, share ideas, and offer support in a risk-free atmosphere. In addition, teacher in-service programs might wish to pair up teachers in diverse teaching environments as e-mail partners, or initiate a

virtual online community of practice in which classroom teachers have access to enhanced professional development opportunities beyond their local districts.

The study also demonstrates the mutually influencing, transactional nature of interactive dialogue. With this in mind, teacher educators and teacher in-service providers might wish to help future and experienced teachers develop awareness of the reciprocity of communication, and model ways to overcome barriers to effective communication with students from diverse cultures, backgrounds, values, and perspectives. As Beebe et al. (2005) note, “It is impossible to be other-oriented without being willing to acknowledge diversity” (p. xvii).

Finally, as teacher educators and teacher in-service coordinators recognize, considerable learning occurs in a social context as a result of shared experiences, problem-solving opportunities, collaboration, and negotiation. E-mail communication has the potential to expand preservice and experienced teachers’ opportunities to work with peers and experts in an electronic community of practice network, and thus extend their educational perspectives and practices.

References

- Bavelas, J., Kenwood, C., & Phillips, B. (2003). Discourse analysis. In M. Knapp & J. Daly (Eds.), *The handbook of interpersonal communication* (3rd ed., pp. 102-129). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Beck, C., & Kosniak, C. (2001). From cohort to community in a preservice teacher education program. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(8), 925-948.
- Beebe, S., Beebe, S., & Redmond, M. (2005). *Interpersonal communication: Relating to others* (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Bochner, A. (2002). The moral of stories. In M. Knapp & J. Daly (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (3rd ed., pp. 73-101). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bodzin, A. (2005). Implementing web-based scientific inquiry in preservice teacher science methods courses. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* [online Serial], 5(1). Retrieved April 15, 2007, from <http://www.citejournal.org/vol5/iss1/general/articell1.cfm>
- Buber, M. (1958). *I and thou* (2nd ed., R. Smith, Trans.). New York: Scribners. (Original work published 1923)
- Chenault, B. (1998, May). Developing personal and emotional relationships via computer-mediated communication. *CMC Magazine: Developing Personal and Emotional Relationships*. Retrieved April 18, 2007, from <http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1998/may/chenault.html>
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Zeichner, K. (Eds.). (2005). *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA Panel on research and teacher education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cooper, P., & Simonds, C. (2003). *Communication for the classroom teacher*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Allyn and Bacon.
- Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among the five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Flick, U. (2002). *An introduction to qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Galvin, K., & Wilkinson, C. (2006). *The communication process: Impersonal and interpersonal*. Cary, NC: Roxbury.
- Gordon, T. (1996). *Saussure for beginners*. New York: Writers & Readers.
- Lachance, A., & Confrey J. (2003). Interconnecting content and community: A qualitative study of secondary mathematics teachers. *Journal of Mathematics Teachers of Education*, 6(2), 107-137.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Communities of practice*. Retrieved April 11, 2007, from http://www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of-preactice.html
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1992). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lea, M., & Spears, R. (1995). Love at first byte? Building personal relationships over computer networks. In J. Wood & S. Duck (Eds.), *Under-studied relationships: Off the beaten track* (pp. 197-233). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Liaw, M. (2003, March). Cross-cultural e-mail correspondence for reflective EFL teacher education. *TESL-EJ*, 6(4). Retrieved April 11, 2007, from <http://-tesl-ej.org/ej24a2.html>
- Martin Buber Homepage. Retrieved February 22, 2008 from <http://buber.de/en>
- Markham, A. (2005). The methods, politics, and ethics of representation in online ethnography. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 793-820). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merseth, K. (1991). Supporting beginning teachers with computer networks. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 42, 140-147.
- Richards, J. (2004, Fall). Learning to use laptop computers in a cohort: Factors shaping preservice teachers' experiences. *The Reading Professor*, 27(1), 112-141.
- Richards, J. (2006). Preservice teachers' professional development in a community of practice summer literacy camp for children at risk: A sociocultural perspective. *The Qualitative Report*, 11(4), 771-794. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR11-4/richards.pdf>
- Rogoff, B., Goodman-Turkanis, C., & Bartlett, L. (2001). *Learning together: Children and adults in a school community*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schlagal, B., Trathen, W., & Blanton, W. (1996). Structuring telecommunications to create instructional conversations about student teaching, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 4(2), 175-183.
- Schlager, M., & Fusco, J. (2003). Teacher professional development, technology and community of practice: Are we putting the cart before the horse? *The Information Society*, 19, 203-220.
- Seale, J., & Cann, A. (2000). Reflection on-line or off-line: The role of learning technologies in encouraging students to reflect. *Computers & Education*, 24, 309-320.
- Silverman, D. (2000). Analyzing talk and text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 821-834). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stake, R. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 443- 466). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Thorne, S. (2000). Data analysis in qualitative research. *Evidence-Based Nursing Online*, 3, 68-70. Retrieved April 19, 2007, from <http://ebn.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/3/3/68>
- Tidwell, L., & Walther, J. (2000). Computer-mediated communication effects on disclosure, impressions, and interpersonal evaluations: Getting to know one another a bit at a time. *Human Communication Research*, 28, 212-228.
- Walther, J. (1992). Interpersonal effects in computer-mediated interaction: A relational perspective. *Communication Research*, 19, 52-90.
- Walther, J. (1993). Impression development in computer-mediated interaction. *Western Journal of Communication*, 57, 381-398.
- Walther, J. (1996). Computer mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*, 23(1), 3-43.
- Walther, J., & Burgoon, J. (1992). Relational communication in computer-mediated interaction. *Human Communication Research*, 19, 50-88.
- Walther, J., & D'Addario, K. (2001). The impacts of emoticons on message interpretation in computer-mediated communication. *Social Science Computer Review*, 19(3), 323-345.
- Walther, J., & Parks, M. (2002). Cues filtered out, cues filtered in. In M. Knapp & J. Daly (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (3rd ed., pp. 529-563). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Walther, J., & Tidwell, L. (1996). When is mediated communication not interpersonal? In K. Galvin & P. Cooper (Eds.), *Making connections: Readings in relational communication* (pp. 300-307). Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Wenger, E. (2006). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Whipp, J., & Schweizer, H. (2000). Meeting psychological needs in web-based courses for teachers. *Journal of Computing in Teacher Education*, 17(1), 26-31.
-

Author Note

Janet Richards is a professor in the Department of Childhood Education at the University of South Florida. Her current research centers on Communities of Practice and Communities of Interest models in teacher education, using post modern data collection and analysis paradigms, such as socio-cultural theory and crystallization. She teaches graduate qualitative research and literacy courses. She may be reached at JRichards.coedu.usf.edu

Susan Bennett is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Childhood Education at the University of South Florida. Her research interests include culturally responsive teaching and multiple literacies. She teaches literacy and creative arts courses. Her e-mail address is siouxsan99@yahoo.com.

Kim Thomas Shea is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Childhood Education at the University of South Florida. Her specialization is Reading/Language Arts instruction. Kim's research interests include after school literacy programs for

struggling readers and the use of culturally responsive teaching in elementary classrooms. Her e-mail address is sheeaka@verizon.net.

Copyright 2007: Janet Richards, Susan Bennett, Kim Thomas Shea, and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Richards, J., Bennett, S., & Shea, K. (2007). Making meaning of graduate students' and preservice teachers' e-mail communication in a community of practice. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(4), 639-657. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR12-4/richards.pdf>
