

# ENGLISH LEADERSHIP QUARTERLY

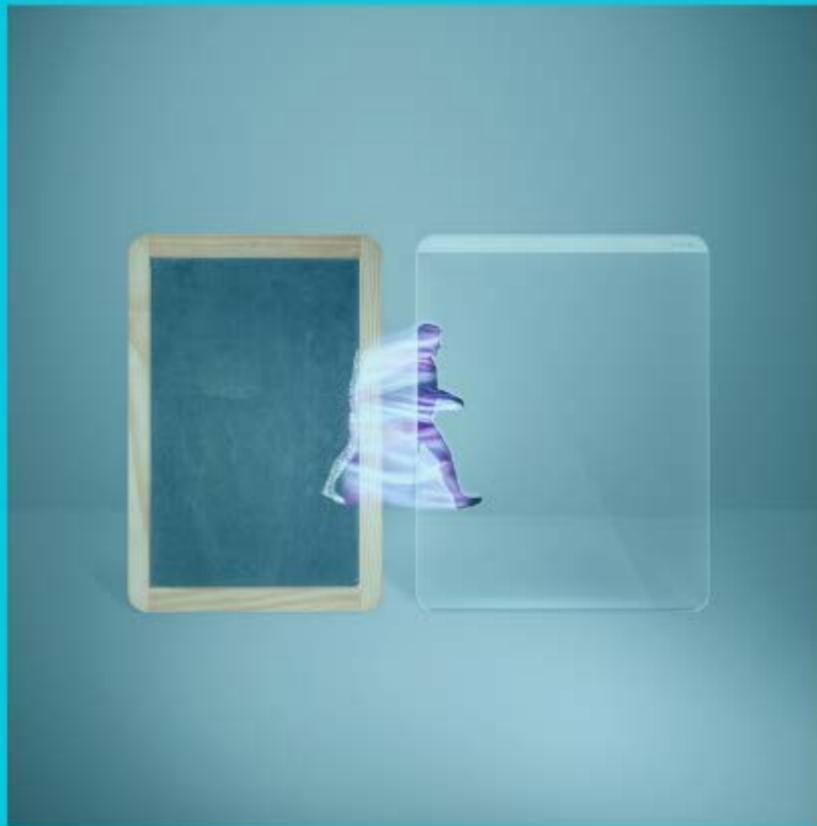


Leadership for Excellence

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This issue reflects on the ways in which the association between communication skills taught in the classroom and those required by the workplace is changing. What challenges and opportunities face instruction in these communication skills in the classroom? How does a teacher, department, or school reexamine communication skills to meet the demands of today's learners and the world in which they will live? What approaches and practices can help support this approach? What is the role of the teacher in this environment? What are some short- and long-term effects of this shift on the student? On the teacher? On education?

From the editor:

*It has long been observed that the only certainty in life is change; today's students face a level of change that grows exponentially with each passing day. The ability to communicate effectively in a variety of modes and for a multitude of purposes should be a vital aspect of the long-term planning of educational systems. Consequently, planning and developing the skills needed to navigate these new demands has brought a new emphasis on the "soft skills" required by an ever-evolving and continually redefined workplace, skills that are an inherent component of a strong language arts program. Exploring the possibilities of this perspective is the focus of the February 2020 Edition.*

## Communication Skills That Unite the Classroom and the Workplace



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# The Journey to Teacher: Facilitating Communication Skills in Preservice Teachers to Build Trust, Learn about Students, and Create Literacy Lessons

Elizabeth A. Morphis, *SUNY College at Old Westbury*, joined NCTE in 2016 [@dr\\_morphis](#)

*For some, the workplace of tomorrow is today's classroom. Students who are pursuing a career in education also have a clear need to develop their communication skills in the face of looming opportunities for success. Building clear and focused communication skills with students, the customers of this workplace, is the focus of Morphis's discussion in the following article.*

THIS PAST DECADE has seen an increase in the amount of practice teacher-education programs offer preservice teachers who are earning degrees and certifications in education (Goodwin, Roegman, & Reagan, 2016; Zeichner, 2016). Many schools of education are adding clinically rich classes into programs in order to bring preservice teachers into the field prior to student teaching. The inclusion of clinically rich classes means that preservice teachers are observing, interacting, and working in classrooms with

inservice teachers and students earlier in their teacher-education programs. Rather than focusing coursework primarily on educational theory, clinically rich classes teach preservice teachers **a repertoire of teaching skills and practices** that they can implement when working with K–12

## WHAT DO BEGINNING TEACHERS NEED?

**Essential Skills for New Teachers, ASCD**

**Supporting New Teachers: Core Beliefs, Knowledge, and Skills for First Year Teachers, New York City Department of Education**

**What should new teachers know before they set foot in a classroom? The Hechinger Report**

students (Zeichner, 2016). Clinically rich courses enable preservice teachers to learn about schools, classrooms, and communities, while also providing direct instruction on teaching a particular content area.

Currently, I am a childhood and literacy education professor, and I teach a clinically rich literacy methodology course to undergraduate students who are working toward earning their Childhood Education certification (grades 1–6) in New York State.

The course is focused on teaching preservice teachers how to teach reading and writing to elementary students. Each week, the preservice teachers and I meet at a local elementary school, and each preservice teacher is assigned to work with a classroom teacher for the semester. The classroom teacher then pairs the preservice teacher with an elementary student in the class, and the two will work together for the semester.

This particular clinically rich class is one of the first courses at the college where preservice teachers are working in the field and responsible for planning and implementing instruction. This means that the preservice teachers are designing lessons to support the child partner they are assigned to work with for the semester. The preservice teachers are responsible for planning lessons that incorporate the reading and writing practices that are taught in the course as well as connect to the child's background and interests. The preservice teachers enter this course with many different emotions—they are excited to be in the school and interact and work with elementary teachers and students, but they are also scared and nervous about being responsible for a child's literacy instruction. **Prior to entering the classroom**, many of the preservice teachers I have worked with are particularly concerned that they will not know how to teach a skill, strategy,

or the content area. However, once the preservice teachers begin working with their child partners, the questions they ask me shift from content-area questions to questions focused on communicating with the students. Therefore, a

## PRESERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

**Preservice Feedback and Practice Boost Teacher Effectiveness, EdWeek**

**The Influence of Field Teaching Practice on Pre-service Teachers' Professional Identity: A Mixed Methods Study, Frontiers in Psychology**

necessary component of working with and teaching preservice teachers is supporting them as they learn to communicate with elementary children. This article discusses strategies I have used when working with novice teachers, specifically preservice teachers, to develop communication skills in order to build trust

with students, learn about students' backgrounds and interests, and implement what they learn about the students in their literacy lessons.

## Communicating with Students: Teaching Preservice Teachers to Speak and Listen

My role as the instructor of a clinically rich literacy methods course is to teach preservice teachers about reading and writing strategies and skills that they can implement in the classroom. However, a piece of my work that is often overlooked is teaching and supporting the preservice teachers in learning how to communicate with students in order to build trusting relationships, which requires actively speaking and listening to children. As a teacher-educator, I situate my work with preservice teachers within a sociocultural framework, which is based upon the premise that social interactions are essential for learning and literacy and learning are social activities that are co-constructed (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016). Building on the social nature of learning is the idea of forming trusting relationships with students so that they can try new tasks and challenges in the classroom. It is rather difficult for children to learn if they do not trust the classroom teacher (Routman, 2018), and I address this with my preservice teachers before they begin working with the child partner.

Communication is essential in order to establish trust with a student. I highlight the following elements with the preservice teachers, so that they can incorporate them into their lessons and conversations with the child partner:

- Learning about the child partner's interests both in school and outside of school (Dyson, 1993; Routman, 2018)
- Learning about the child partner's funds of knowledge and cultural practices, which include the child's home language (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016)
- Sharing stories about yourself with the child partner so that the child knows about you and your background and interests (Routman, 2018)
- Learning about and then building upon the child's strengths as a reader and writer, but also as an individual. It is important to learn about and focus on what the child can do as opposed to what the child cannot do (Routman, 2018)

In order to learn about the child—their background, interests, and cultural practices—it is necessary for the preservice teacher to talk and listen to them. Listening to students is essential so that teachers can have a better understanding of their thinking, values, and viewpoints. In order to truly listen to children, teachers must give

their full energy and attention to the child when they are speaking (rather than attempt to multitask while the child is speaking). By actively speaking and listening to the children in our classrooms, teachers are learning about who the students in their classrooms truly are and then can plan effective and engaging lessons that connect to their students' funds of knowledge and interests.

## Curricular Activities that Support Communication and Literacy

In order to facilitate communication between the preservice teachers and the child partners, I introduce three strategies: the Me Bag, the Important Poem, and the Graffiti Board. These practices align with a sociocultural framework because they encourage social interactions between the preservice teacher and child partner while also promoting reading and writing that connects with the child partner's background and interests.

### Me Bag

The objective of the Me Bag is to collect personal artifacts that are meaningful or that represent ourselves and put them in a bag or a box to share with others. The Me Bag facilitates communication between the person presenting the objects and those who are observing the presentation. For our purposes, it enables the preservice teacher to introduce herself to her child partner and share about her interests and family and cultural backgrounds using preplanned artifacts. Then, in order to learn about the child partner and have them share about themselves, the preservice teacher asks the child partner to draw or write items that represent and have significant meaning to them. The child partner can cut out words and images and place them into a Me Bag to then share with the preservice teacher. The Me Bag is an activity that demonstrates to the preservice teachers how literacy is social and how talking is a way to make meaning and learn about a topic or subject (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016). The Me Bag also enables both the preservice teacher and the child partner to get a sense of who the other is as a person and begin to recognize similarities (and even differences) between each other.

When I am sharing this activity with the preservice teachers, I show them what it means to **actively listen** to the child partner when they speak about their family and interests using the artifacts. For example, I show the teachers how to physically turn and face the child while they are speaking in order to give the child full attention and really hear what is being shared (Routman, 2018). Actively listening to the child partner begins to build and establish a trusting relationship.

The response from the preservice teachers who have planned and implemented a Me Bag with their child partners has been overwhelmingly positive. One preservice teacher, Amelia, who was partnered with a first grader explained, “I did not know how I was going to connect with my child partner at the beginning.” Through the Me Bag lesson, Amelia and her child partner noticed that they both enjoyed similar foods:

The first day I brought things in that I really liked and I talked about my family, my dog, my interests—just so that she could get to know me. Then, I asked her if she wanted to share anything about her family, and if she has any favorite animals or pets, and her favorite color. We really connected over our favorite foods! We both love pizza and spent time talking about our favorite pizza places. That was the connection for us. And, that’s how I began to build trust with her. It was interesting, during the Me Bag lesson, I spent time just getting to know her and letting her get to know me, and it helped us form connections just by talking to each other.

The Me Bag put the child partner’s interests and the importance of talk at the center of the lesson.

After implementing the Me Bag with a single child partner, the preservice teachers express interest in expanding the Me Bag to the whole class. I explain that meaningful conversations can occur when teaching more than one child by using conferences. After students create their Me Bags, the teacher can hold a conference with each student or a “one-to-one talk” (Anderson, 2000, p. 6), where the students share the artifacts in the Me Bag, thus allowing the teacher to learn about each child through a more individual forum.

## Important Poem

Making connections between reading, writing, and talk is an essential component of teaching literacy to elementary students.



FIGURE 1. A ME BAG AND A FEW OF ITS CONTENTS: TWO FAVORITE ANIMALS, A FAVORITE COLOR, AND A GLOBE TO SHOW WHERE EXTENDED FAMILY LIVES.

One activity I introduce to the preservice teachers that connects reading to writing is the Important Poem, which is based on Margaret Wise Brown’s *The Important Book* (1949). *The Important Book* is a collection of poems that share a similar structure, with the first and last lines of each poem being almost verbatim. For example, when writing about a spoon, Brown (1949) begins the poem with, “The important thing about a spoon is that you eat with it” (p. 1). She ends the poem with the line, “But the important thing about a spoon is that you eat with it” (p. 2). Before working with the child partner, I invite the preservice teachers to write their own Important Poem. They select a topic that they are interested in writing about and, using the structure of the poems from *The Important Book*, they write a poem about the topic they selected. After writing their Important Poem, the preservice teachers share their poems with me as well as with their peers, so they have learned about their peers and I have learned about each of them. This writing activity demonstrates how to connect writing work to reading, and it is an example of how students can generate their own writing topics. In addition, it teaches preservice teachers how talk can be included into the writing classroom and is part of the writing process.

When working with the child partner, the preservice teachers use the poem that they wrote in our session as a mentor text and also as a method of sharing about a topic or area of interest. The Important Poem has served as starting point for the preservice teachers to talk about themselves with the child partner and then learn about a topic that interests the child partner. A preservice teacher, Olivia, was working with a third grader and appreciated this lesson because

it allowed my child partner to make a list of everything that he likes and before he picked his writing topic, he shared stories with me about his other interests that were on the list. For example, he told me a story about a time he played video games with his older brother and beat him! This was clearly an important moment for my child partner. And, I learned a little about his relationship with his brother. I don’t know if I would have learned about it to the same extent if it had not been for the Important Poem activity.

In a similar manner as the Me Bag, the Important Poem is an activity that supported the preservice teacher as they were learning about their child partner while also learning about the child as a writer.

## Graffiti Board

Graffiti boards are often a popular strategy with both the preservice teachers and the child partners. A graffiti board allows students to record their ideas about a topic, idea, or question on a large piece of paper or on a whiteboard. It is also a strategy that supports students

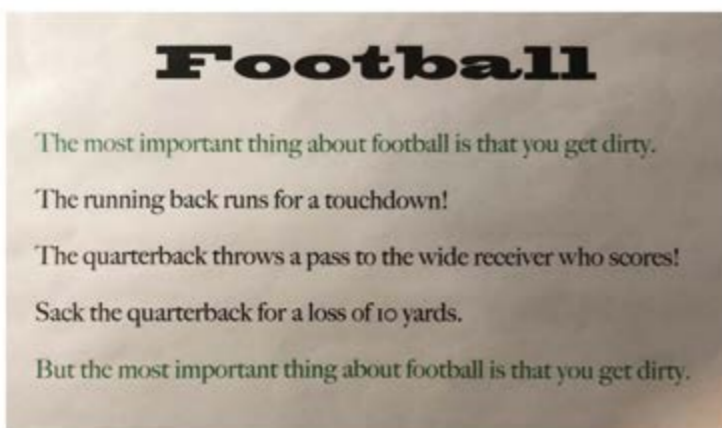


FIGURE 2. AN IMPORTANT POEM ABOUT A FAVORITE SPORT, FOOTBALL.

who are more reluctant to speak. When I introduce this strategy to the preservice teachers, I show them how the graffiti board can be a space for students to share about their families, backgrounds, interests, and important life moments. It can then be a starting point for conversations with the child as well as a way to brainstorm topics for future writing pieces.

When implementing the graffiti board, the preservice teachers begin by writing the child partner's name in the middle of the chart paper and then, using a variety of writing utensils (pencils, pens, colored pencils, markers, glitter markers), invite the child partner to draw or write about important people, places, or things in their lives. When I share this strategy with the preservice teachers, I write my cat's name on my graffiti board followed by moments with him that were memorable that I share with the preservice teachers. For example, I typically share a story of when my cat knocked down a small container of red paint that went all over the bathroom walls and floor, thus making a huge mess that took days to clean up. This story shows the preservice teachers how the graffiti board can be used as a tool to communicate and share stories with the child partner that can later be used in a narrative writing unit.

Reflecting on the semester, Allison, a preservice teacher who was working with a second grade student shared that

using the graffiti board was a great way to begin the time with her [child partner]. She liked not having to write on lined paper and loved being able to use permanent markers. Once her graffiti board was complete, I brought [my graffiti board] out and we talked about our stories from our lives. We talked a lot about animals, particularly dogs because we both have a dog. I think we shared more stories about our dogs that day. It was a great starting point and it did not feel forced. I think I was able to accomplish a lot with [her] because I took the time to get to know her as a person. The graffiti board helped with that.

Graffiti boards can also be used to document students' thinking about books and curricular topics and then facilitate a conversation around the topic. After which, the content included in the graffiti board can be used to develop writing topics or facilitate other lessons.



FIGURE 3. A STUDENT'S GRAFFITI BOARD WITH IMAGES AND TEXT THAT ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF HIM.

## Learning to Build Choice into Teaching

Once the preservice teachers have learned about their child partners through one or a few of the strategies presented above, I encourage them to bring their child partner's interests and background into the lessons they plan each week. The preservice teachers consistently reflect on how to include choice in lessons to keep the child partners engaged and interested in the content of lessons. In the middle of one semester, preservice teacher Amelia explained that

talking to and learning about my child partner at the beginning has been very helpful for planning lessons. I know many of her interests so I can give her a few choices in the books I use for lessons. She feels like she is taking the lead and is more interested when she selects the books. I didn't realize how important it is to communicate with and learn about the child and then use that information when planning my teaching.

After learning about her child partner, another preservice teacher developed a strategy when working together:

At the end of every lesson, I told [my child partner] that we would discuss the work for next week. I gave her choices based on what I learned about her from the Me Bag and Graffiti Board lessons. I learned very quickly that I had to follow-through based on the decisions my child partner made . . . it took time, but it worked out so well. Building that level of trust by communicating with my child partner allowed me to teach more effectively.

## Conclusion

In the current era of increased accountability and standards for students and teachers, the emphasis of teacher-education programs is on content and curriculum. However, in order to support teachers as they modify curricula to meet the needs of

the students in their classrooms, it is essential that these teacher-education programs also include strategies that **focus on**

### TEACHER AND STUDENT COMMUNICATION

The Art of Effectively Communicating with Students (and Staff!), *Edutopia*

