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Reflective digital storyboarding as a transformative assessment practice: A PALAR approach in English for Education

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ABSTRACT

The 21st Century demands innovation in assessment and a move away from traditional practices. These innovations may include new methodologies and technologies that can gauge complex skills and lines of reasoning. The purpose of this study is to explore digital storyboarding as a tool for creative, reflexive, and transformative assessment practices. Digital storyboarding entails a process of meaning-making when students understand what they have learned, what was accomplished, what could be improved, and how the process prepared them for the teaching profession. Accordingly, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory serves as the underlying theory for this study. Additionally, a critical transformative paradigm was used within a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design, with final-year students, in-service teachers, and lecturers as participants. Digital storyboards were the data generation method, which formed part of the students' summative assessment for an English for Education module at a tertiary institution. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. The results demonstrate that students felt the project was a professional learning curve and assisted them in being more prepared for the teaching profession. Being part of a professional learning community also fostered a sense of belonging and having a voice. This research systematically explores and evidences the impact of digital storyboarding as an alternative assessment method. The findings may be instrumental in improving teaching and learning practices. As teacher educators, we endeavoured to cultivate contemplative engagement, show how it may enhance learning in powerful ways, and contribute to the professional development of students.

Keywords: Assessment Practices, Digital Storyboards, Professional Development, Reflection, Transformative Learning Theory

INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this study emerged from an email sent by an in-service English teacher and former student at our institution, in which she expressed feeling inadequately prepared for the demands of the profession. She specifically highlighted difficulties with teaching the grammar component of English and the administrative load that is a part of a teacher's daily work in schools. In a subsequent meeting with the teacher, deeper, reciprocal tensions were revealed, being that teachers feel that lecturers are not sufficiently preparing students for classroom realities, while lecturers feel that schools are not adequately preparing learners for higher education. This mutual frustration mirrors what is described

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as a pedagogical dilemma and reflexive cycle in teacher education, where universities and schools should critically examine their expectations and assumptions to address the theory-practice gap.[1] Accordingly, the in-service teacher's concerns formed the foundation of this study in which lecturers, in-service teachers, and final-year students collaboratively reflected on ways to address the theory-practice gap as experienced by novice teachers.

Based on the background information of the service learning project, there is, additionally, a plethora of research dedicated to the existence of a theory-practice gap in education.[2] Once they enter the profession, novice teachers experience inconsistencies in what they have been taught at university and what they encounter in schools,[3] resulting in a reality shock.[4] This misalignment between expectation and reality leads to a high turnover rate for young teachers who leave within five years of entering the profession.[5] This apparent gap between theory and practice underpinned the aims of the project – *Narrowing the theory-practice gap in secondary teaching* – to ascertain how novice teachers and in-service teachers can collaborate to identify barriers and solutions to said barriers that teachers experience.

Therefore, the research question for this article was: How effective is reflective digital storyboarding as a transformative assessment practice in English for Education?

Firstly, a literature review is provided that focuses on 1) the theory-practice gap in teacher education, 2) critical service learning and collaborative communities, 3) professional learning communities and teacher collaboration, 4) digital storytelling as a reflective assessment, 5) teacher identity, professional growth, and mentorship, and 6) professional identities. Thereafter, critical service learning, digital storytelling, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and reflection are clarified as concepts. A discussion on Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory follows. The methodology – in terms of research paradigm, research design, recruitment, data generation, data analysis, data management, validity, and ethical issues – is elucidated. A presentation on the findings and discussions, which focus on 1) barriers to teaching and 2) solutions, is provided. Lastly, recommendations that stem from this study are suggested.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review entails a discussion on 1) breaching the theory-practice gap in teacher education, 2) critical service learning and collaborative opportunities, 3) Professional Learning Communities and teacher collaboration, 4) digital storytelling as reflective assessment, and 5) teacher identity, professional growth, and mentorship.

Breaching the theory-practice gap in teacher education

The realities of classroom practice and what teachers learn in teacher education programmes are regularly at odds.[6] Upon discovering that a large portion of their university education does not adequately prepare them for the demands of the classroom, new teachers frequently expressed being shocked by "the move from pre-service to novice teacher."[7] This imbalance highlights the need for creative, practice-oriented learning experiences and contributes to early-career turnover. The

[1] Heather Nadia Phillips and J Condy, "Pedagogical Dilemma in Teacher Education: Bridging the Theory Practice Gap," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 37, no. 2 (2023): 201–17.

[2] Ville Björck and Kristina Johansson, "Problematising the Theory–Practice Terminology: A Discourse Analysis of Students' Statements on Work-Integrated Learning," *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 43, no. 10 (November 26, 2019): 1363–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1483016.

[3] Bella Gavish and Isaac A. Friedman, "Novice Teachers' Experience of Teaching: A Dynamic Aspect of Burnout," *Social Psychology of Education* 13, no. 2 (June 7, 2010): 141–67, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-009-9108-0.

[4] Carolina S. Botha and Julialet Rens, "Are They Really 'Ready, Willing and Able'? Exploring Reality Shock in Beginner Teachers in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 38, no. 3 (August 31, 2018): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n3a1546.

[5] Jeanne Maree Allen and Suzie Elizabeth Wright, "Integrating Theory and Practice in the Pre-Service Teacher Education Practicum," *Teachers and Teaching* 20, no. 2 (March 4, 2014): 136–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2013.848568.

[6] Sarah K. Clark, "The Plight of the Novice Teacher," *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 85, no. 5 (August 11, 2012): 197–200, https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2012.689783; F.A.J. Korthagen, "The Relationship Between Theory and Practice in Teacher Education," in *International Encyclopedia of Education* (Elsevier, 2010), 669–75, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-044894-7.00638-2.

[7] Clark, "The Plight of the Novice Teacher."

development of practical situational wisdom (i.e., phronesis) has historically been neglected in favour of abstract, "formal" theoretical knowledge (i.e., episteme) in teacher education.[8] To put it another way, programmes must assist students in developing the practical judgement required in the classroom and in applying theory in context. As a result, the literature advocates for pedagogical approaches that more fully include practice, like long-term school collaborations or curriculum designs, that link coursework to real-world teaching opportunities.

Critical Service Learning and collaborative communities

Critical Service Learning, which combines community engagement with in-depth reflection on power, culture, and social justice, is one strategy for closing the theory-practice gap.[9] Service-learning in teacher education strives for reciprocity (i.e., benefit to both parties), respect for community knowledge, academic content that is relevant to real-world issues, and critical reflection on learning.[10] By specifically focusing on social change, critical service-learning goes beyond these ideas. It encourages student teachers to examine systemic injustices and work with communities to address actual educational issues. A Critical Service-Learning pedagogy is one that "links service-learning and social justice education by engaging students in meaningful service in the community and integrating that experience with thoughtful introduction, analysis, and discussion of issues important to understanding social justice." In reality, critical service-learning programmes frequently create school partnerships (or PLCs) where pre-service teachers collaborate with in-service teachers and schools. By combining community knowledge with academic learning, these collaborative communities seek to improve teaching practices and promote teacher development based on real-world situations.[11]

Professional Learning Communities and teacher collaboration

Communities of Practice (CoPs) or PLCs, which are groups of teachers (and frequently teacher educators) that participate in ongoing, collaborative inquiry into practice, are closely associated with service-learning.[12] A CoP is "sustained over time" and consists of members cooperating to achieve shared objectives, having regular conversations, and working together to solve difficulties. Teachers who take part in these communities co-construct knowledge and continuously enhance their profession through collective reflection. Effective PLCs entail continual communication and problem-solving between teachers who have similar interests, which promotes deeper professional development.[13] Establishing PLCs with both pre-service and in-service teachers can aid in bridging theory and practice in teacher education. While mentors improvise their own understanding via teaching and reflection, novice teachers benefit from the knowledge of their mentors. According to research on teacher cooperation, long-term, encouraging PLCs can increase teachers' agency and voice, enabling them to work together to overcome obstacles in the classroom and avoid isolation.

Digital Storytelling as a reflective assessment

Digital storytelling has become a cutting-edge assessment and learning tool that encourages introspection and higher-order thinking. Students must actively translate traditional stories to digital form and critically construct the content because digital storytelling combines story with multimedia elements (e.g., voice, photos, and video).[14] According to research, writing a digital story naturally encourages reflection because the student must express their ideas, justifications, and emotions as the

[8] Korthagen, "The Relationship Between Theory and Practice in Teacher Education."

[9] Anneli Bowie and Fatima Cassim, "Linking Classroom and Community: A Theoretical Alignment of Service Learning and a Human-Centered Design Methodology in Contemporary Communication Design Education," *Education as Change* 20, no. 1 (2016), https://doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2016/556.

[10] Bowie and Cassim, "Linking Classroom and Community: A Theoretical Alignment of Service Learning and a Human-Centered Design Methodology in Contemporary Communication Design Education."

[11] Bowie and Cassim, "Linking Classroom and Community: A Theoretical Alignment of Service Learning and a Human-Centered Design Methodology in Contemporary Communication Design Education."

[12] Ann MacPhail et al., "Leading by Example: Teacher Educators' Professional Learning Through Communities of Practice," *Quest* 66, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 39–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2013.826139.

[13] MacPhail et al., "Leading by Example: Teacher Educators' Professional Learning Through Communities of Practice."

[14] D. B. Kent, "Digital Storytelling Implementation in an ECASA Program," *STEM Journal* 12, no. 1 (2011): 77–96.

narrator.[15] For example, "the process of creating digital stories both promotes and displays reflection," enabling students to integrate their artefacts and experiences into a reflective narrative.[16] By emphasising the planning and "meaning making" phases, digital storyboarding expands on this approach.[17] Pre-service students examine what they have learned and how to convey it as they write and illustrate their stories. Digital media is significant because it stimulates a variety of cognitive processes. For example, students actively choose and link verbal and visual informational pieces,[18] combining verbal and visual information to promote deeper understanding.[19] By allowing students to draw from their creativity and life experiences, this multimodal approach can improve learning. According to literature, digital storyboarding is an effective method of reflective practice and formative assessment because it gives students a "creative way to get […] involved actively in language skills through the process of reading, plotting, writing, revising and narrating through their stories."[20] Students create, produce, and present their digital stories, which fosters critical thinking in addition to acting as a learning artefact. Since students constantly analyse and reinterpret their experiences to create a cohesive narrative, digital storyboarding's emphasis on process over outcome aligns with transformative learning objectives.

Teacher identity, professional growth, and mentorship

Research on teacher development highlights the significance of ongoing professional growth, mentoring, and identity construction. Due in part to the sudden change from student to teacher, novice teachers are identified as a "well-known risk group" that is vulnerable to high levels of stress and attrition.[21] According to studies, new teachers frequently feel unprepared and anxious about classroom management when they first start their careers, which reflects the theory-practice gap.[22] Researchers support systematic mentoring and induction programmes as a means of overcoming these obstacles. However, these are often generic in nature and not geared towards a specific subject. In our research, we focused exclusively on issues in the English language classroom. Comprehensive mentorship and professional development assistance for new teachers was associated with increased self-efficacy and decreased attrition.[23]Mentor programmes assist in closing the gap between academic learning and real-world teaching by giving newcomers constructive criticism, emotional support, and useful guidance. Furthermore, by reaffirming that they have a voice and a role in the educational community, participation in mentorship groups or collaborative PLCs can support a teacher's developing professional identity. All things considered, the research on teacher preparation emphasises that professional development depends on reflective cooperation, whether it be through mentoring, service learning initiatives, or PLCs.

Professional identities

[15] Ali Hamilton et al., "Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Fostering Reflection," *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 31, no. 1 (April 30, 2019): 59–73, https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v31i1.443.
[16] Hamilton et al., "Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Fostering Reflection."
[17] R Rish, "Exploring Multimodal Composing Processes with Pre-Service Teachers," *Preparing Teachers to Teach Writing Using Technology*, 2013, 1–16.
[18] Michael Blocher, "Digital Storytelling and Reflective Assessment," in *Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference* (Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 2008), 892–901.
[19] Kent, "Digital Storytelling Implementation in an ECASA Program."
[20] Shahala Nassim, "Digital Storytelling: An Active Learning Tool for Improving Students' Language Skills," *PUPIL: International Journal of Teaching, Education and Learning* 2, no. 1 (July 3, 2018): 14–27, https://doi.org/10.20319/pijtel.2018.21.1427; Hamilton et al., "Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Fostering Reflection."
[21] Clark, "The Plight of the Novice Teacher"; Jennifer LoCasale-Crouch et al., "The Role of the Mentor in Supporting New Teachers: Associations with Self-Efficacy, Reflection, and Quality," *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 20, no. 3 (August 2012): 303–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2012.701959.
[22] Clark, "The Plight of the Novice Teacher"; LoCasale-Crouch et al., "The Role of the Mentor in Supporting New Teachers: Associations with Self-Efficacy, Reflection, and Quality."
[23] LoCasale-Crouch et al., "The Role of the Mentor in Supporting New Teachers: Associations with Self-Efficacy, Reflection, and Quality."

Research on teacher knowledge previously focused mostly on professional aspects like content and pedagogy, but now there is a large focus on professional identities. Teachers need to know themselves before they can understand their learners.[24] The effect of teachers knowing themselves to know their learners is expressed in the words of Palmer: "Face to face with my students, only one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this 'I' who teaches – without which I have no sense of the 'thou' who learns."[25] One's identity is inextricably linked to one's professional identity, and teachers invest their whole beings in their work. The self, therefore, cannot easily be separated from the profession.[26] This has implications for teacher education curricula and pre-service teachers may greatly benefit from being guided towards critical reflection of their own educational histories, philosophies, and perspectives, and how these may differ from those of others.[27] This notion of the interrelatedness of personal and professional identity is echoed, maintaining that "the articulation of one's identity is a first step towards theorising professional practice through the explicit linking of 'what I do' with 'why I am here', and in this we find a rationale for exploring teacher professional identity in the first place."[28] This research, and specifically using storyboarding to reflect on aspects related to the teaching of English, provided an opportunity to construct a narrative in a concrete, visual way, giving shape to pre-service teachers' evolving professional persona. The very personalised nature of storyboarding compels students to take ownership of their own learning, and the whole reflective nature of the process makes professional identity development more directed. Ultimately, students develop a sense of self-awareness, and through their reflections, ponder on the kind of professionals they aspire to become or not become.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

(Critical) Service Learning

According to Dewey, "Sound educational experience involves, above all, continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned."[29] This implies that knowledge and skills should intersect with experience for learning to be truly meaningful. Teaching is complex and dynamic, and should thus not only focus on the transfer of theory but should also support the development of practical knowledge through engaging with the realities of practice.[30] Service learning provides an opportunity for the dynamic intersection between knowledge, skills, and experience. Service learning can be understood as an approach that connects theory to practice by providing pre-service teachers with the opportunity to participate in an organised service activity.[31]

Moreover, Critical Service Learning serves as the foundation for this project's theoretical framework. The four core tenets of service learning are reciprocity (i.e., the benefit to both parties), critical reflection on the learning process, respect for the community's lifestyle, circumstances, abilities, knowledge, and skills, and the applicability of academic merit in community actions.[32] Beyond just encouraging student involvement, this project sought to improve teaching methods, bring about good change, and empower instructors to make beneficial changes to the teacher education programme. In many tertiary institutions across fields that serve the public sector, including education,

[24] S. Romylos, "Knowledge and Identities: The Relation between Professional Identities and PCK (Pedagogical Content Knowledge)" (North-West University, 2018).
[25] Parker J Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017).
[26] Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*.
[27] Romylos, "Knowledge and Identities: The Relation between Professional Identities and PCK (Pedagogical Content Knowledge)."
[28] Nicole Mockler, "Beyond 'What Works': Understanding Teacher Identity as a Practical and Political Tool," *Teachers and Teaching* 17, no. 5 (October 28, 2011): 517–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2011.602059.
[29] John Dewey, "Experience and Education," in *The Educational Forum*, vol. 50 (Taylor & Francis, 1986), 241–52.
[30] Korthagen, "The Relationship Between Theory and Practice in Teacher Education."
[31] K. Resch and I. Schrittesser, "Using the Service-Learning Approach to Bridge the Gap between Theory and Practice in Teacher Education," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 27, no. 10 (August 24, 2023): 1118–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1882053.
[32] D. W. Butin, *Service-Learning in Theory and Practice: The Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

service learning is a part of the academic credit-bearing modules.[33] This service-learning project was integrated into the English for Education modules for fourth-year students at a tertiary institution.

Digital Storytelling

To create a short film, digital storytelling involves combining narrative components with digital content. The use of advanced multimedia technology by students provides significant chances for teamwork, introspection, and accuracy in the digital conversion of conventional narratives.[34] Narrative texts, computer-generated images, audio recordings, music, and video clips can all be included in digital storytelling.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

To promote professional development, PLCs are groups of people with similar learning or professional interests who work together for a long time to analyse and solve problems.[35] As part of this service-learning project, PLCs were made up of lecturers, pre-service students, and in-service teachers who collaborated to close the gap between theory and practice in secondary school English instruction.

Reflection

The term "reflective practitioner" was first coined by Schön. He made the distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, respectively referring to thinking on one's feet while teaching and reviewing one's actions after the lesson; the one being immediate and the other retrospective.[36] In this research, students' reflections often resembled the three stages, namely addressing uncomfortable feelings (i.e., challenges in the teaching of English), critical analysis (i.e., coming up with solutions), and the development of new perspectives (i.e., seeing the profession in a different light).[37] Reflection results in empowerment that is further enhanced when practitioners are committed to and take responsibility for practice.[38] Reflection plays a significant role in teacher improvement and managing the demands of the teaching profession.[39] Critical reflection can be understood as "critical thinking applied to personal experience," and when teachers engage in critical reflection, they can bridge the gap between theory and practice as they reflect on what they have learned and implement changes.[40]

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Constructivist presumptions underpin Transformative Learning Theory, which holds that meaning exists inwardly in people rather than externally.[41] Mezirow defines transformative learning as "Learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mind states) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change."[42] These frames of reference are superior to others

[33] A. Petri, "Service-Learning from Perspectives of Community Organizations," *EJournal of Public Affairs - Missouri State University.* 4, no. 1 (2015).
[34] Nassim, "Digital Storytelling: An Active Learning Tool for Improving Students' Language Skills."
[35] MacPhail et al., "Leading by Example: Teacher Educators' Professional Learning Through Communities of Practice"; M. Parker, K. Patton, and D. Tannehill, "Mapping the Landscape of Practice as Professional Development in Irish Physical Education," *Irish Educational Studies* 31, no. 3 (2012): 311–27.
[36] Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Routledge, 2017).
[37] Sue Atkins and Kathy Murphy, "Reflection: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 18, no. 8 (August 28, 1993): 1188–92, https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1993.18081188.x.
[38] Christopher Johns, "Reflection as Empowerment?," *Nursing Inquiry* 6, no. 4 (December 4, 1999): 241–49, https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1800.1999.00038.x.
[39] Chelsea Cole, Elizabeth Hinchcliff, and Rylee Carling, "Reflection as Teachers: Our Critical Developments," *Frontiers in Education* 7 (November 2, 2022), https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1037280.
[40] Cole, Hinchcliff, and Carling, "Reflection as Teachers: Our Critical Developments."
[41] Patricia Cranton, "Transformative Learning: A Narrative," in *Learning, Design, and Technology* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-17727-4_37-1.
[42] J. Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice. ," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 158, no. 1 (2018): 5–15.

because they are more likely to produce ideas and attitudes that can be verified or supported, which effectively direct behaviour.

One of the core ideas of transformational adult education is reflection. In this regard, the fourth-year students of the service-learning project were subjected to the DEAL model and the three-stage reflection model put out by Toole and Toole with appropriate consideration.[43] While the DEAL model calls for students to "describe the experience(s) objectively; Analyze (those authors to refer to Examine) the experience(s) in terms of the categories of service-learning outcomes; Articulate (express) the Learning that results", Toole and Toole's model encourages students to ask questions like "What? (analysis), So what? (Critical thinking), And now what? (Decision making").[44]

Correspondingly, the research question for this study was: How effective is reflective digital storyboarding as a transformative assessment practice in English for Education? Novice teachers critically reflected on the experiences of the project through the creation of digital storyboards. Digital storyboards are an innovative means of assessment that combines narrative and digital elements to reflect on knowledge and experiences. Students also received reflection questions, put forth by in-service teachers and lecturers at different points in their models, to aid in their reflection process. The theoretical framework is also relevant to this study because in-service teachers and pre-service students, together with lecturers, worked collaboratively to examine their presumptions, experiences, and beliefs regarding English instruction in the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase – Grades 10–12. With the ultimate goal of promoting long-lasting change, they worked as PLCs to come to an agreement, imagine different viewpoints through discussion, and methodically plan and implement their ideas.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

A critical, transformative, participatory paradigm entails "a concept of community engagement for social change, a notion in which engagement requires academics to conduct research with, rather than on people, and to perceive them as participants, rather than mere informants, subjects and/or recipients of knowledge."[45] Such research is necessary if we are aiming to "effect change and transformation in our schools, universities, communities, and other places of learning and development."[46] Since participants in this initiative came together as a PLC to reflect critically on their practices to start a positive transformation, it aligns with the goals of a critical, transformative, participatory paradigm.

Research Design

This project used Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), which was first presented by Zuber-Skerrit – see Figure 1. PALAR acknowledges the important contributions of all project stakeholders and is based on democratic principles.[47] To ensure adherence to the core design principles, which are summed up in the seven Cs and three Rs (i.e., symmetrical communication, collaboration, commitment to the vision, coaching to develop skills/knowledge to ensure participation on equal terms and competence to conduct the research, constant critical reflection, and compromise, operationalised through the forming of good working relationships, self and group reflection, and recognition of the input of all), the action learning emphasis necessitates that the principal research

[43] Sarah L Ash, Patti H Clayton, and Maxine P Atkinson, "Integrating Reflection and Assessment to Capture and Improve Student Learning.," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 11, no. 2 (2005): 49–60; J. Toole and P. Toole, "Reflection as a Tool for Turning Service Experiences into Learning Experiences," in *Enriching the Curriculum through Service-Learning*, ed. C Kinsley and K. MacPherson (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995), 99–114.

[44] Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson, "Integrating Reflection and Assessment to Capture and Improve Student Learning."; Toole and Toole, "Reflection as a Tool for Turning Service Experiences into Learning Experiences"; Council on Higher Education (CHE), *Service Learning in the Curriculum: A Resource for Higher Education Institutions* (JET Education Services, 2006), https://www.che.ac.za/file/5376/download?token=MSBK-vXN.

[45] Lesley Wood and Ortrun Zuber-Skerrit, "PALAR as a Methodology for Community Engagement by Faculties of Education," *South African Journal of Education* 33, no. 4 (2013): 1–15.

[46] Lesley Wood, "The Principles, Possibilities and Politics of Community-Based Educational Research," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (Oxford University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.948.

[47] O. Zuber-Skerritt, *Action Leadership: Towards a Participatory Paradigm* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011).

group consistently engage in critical reflection regarding their interpersonal relationships as well as the progress of the research.

An essential component of the project's implementation is the concurrent integration of relationships and research. In the project's PLC, in-service teachers and pre-service students worked together to develop a shared vision, plan ways to work together to realise that vision, find relevant questions for practical research, evaluate the effectiveness of the actions taken, and then consider the lessons learned. Throughout the initiative's development, lecturers further gathered data from both teachers and students by participating in comparable procedures within their own PLCs.

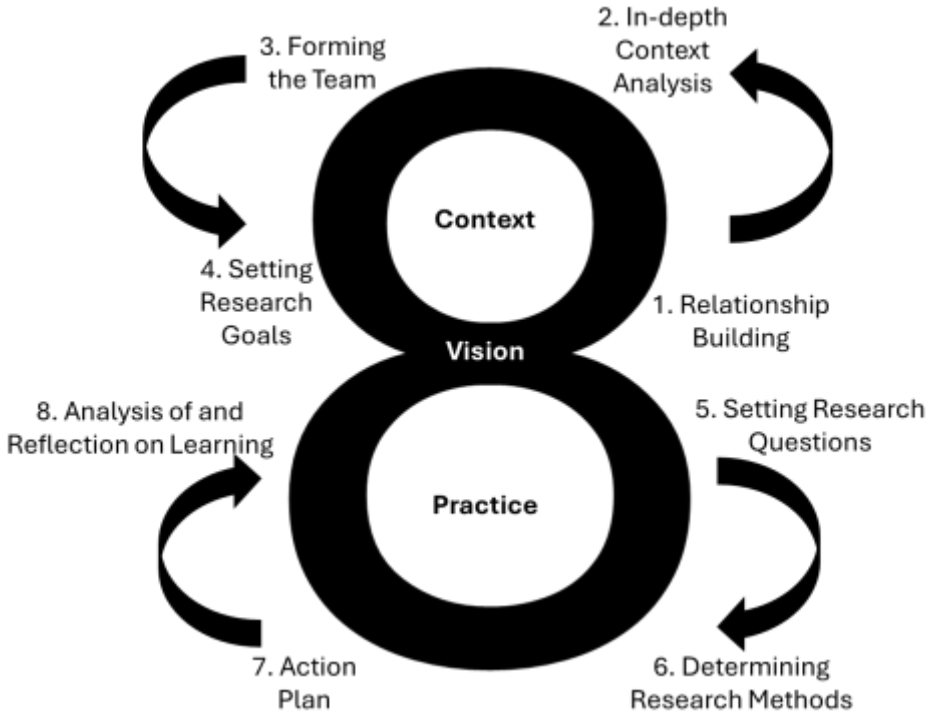

Figure 1: The PALAR process[48]

Recruitment

Members of the relevant stakeholder groups made up each PLC:

1. Students from the three campuses (Potchefstroom, Vanderbijlpark, and Mahikeng) registered in the fourth-year modules. Each campus had about 80 fourth-year students, with 15 students assigned to each PLC. Each PLC was supervised by a lecturer and an in-service teacher. The choice not to participate in the research component was presented to the students, and those who opted out were placed in a different PLC. These students' information was just used as part of their learning experience in the module; it was neither gathered nor used for research.

2. In-service teachers who teach English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) or English as a Home Language (EHL) at the Senior and FET Phase, and are currently employed and willingly involved in the project. To alleviate any sense of coercion and guarantee that undue influence was avoided after obtaining permission from the Department of Basic Education (DBE), an independent person was assigned to get in touch with these teachers and ask for their participation.

[48] Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, "A Model for Designing Action Learning and Action Research Programs," *The Learning Organization* 9, no. 4 (2002): 143–49.

3. The Senior and FET Phase modules in English for Education are taught by 10 lecturers.

An EFAL or EHL teacher, a lecturer with expertise in English for Education at the Senior and FET Phase, and roughly 15 students enrolled in the modules made up each PLC. Two camps for the fourth-year English for the Education department and students were organised by the tertiary institution at a Conference Centre in March 2025. Teachers who chose to take part had to go to one of these two camps.

Data Generation

All parties involved work together to decide on the data generation techniques. PLCs may use a variety of participatory techniques (such as digital storyboards, photovoice, and reflection templates) to gather information about the difficulties in the first cycle and the problems in the second (the project had two PALAR cycles), but these techniques were chosen by the PLCs themselves. The techniques used were intended to promote dialogue, encourage innovation, and investigate various viewpoints. The PLCs examined the issues in the first cycle. In the second, they conceptualised an ideal situation and then created plans of action to realise and evaluate this vision. As part of their reflection tasks, students created digital stories to document their work.

The following is an example of a pre-service teacher's digital storyboard – permission was granted from the student to use their face:

Figure 2: Example of a pre-service teacher's digital storyboard

Additionally, through the application of fishbone analysis, participants were able to describe the difficulties they faced when teaching English and in the classroom, and suggested possible solutions. Participants were made aware of the collaborative nature of the process, which guaranteed that all viewpoints would be taken into account when making decisions.

Data Analysis

The data were thematically analysed by PLCs. In a similar vein, the lecturers in their PLCs conducted theoretical analysis in addition to thematic analysis for academic publications. Thematic content analysis was performed on the qualitative data obtained via reflection questions, fishbone analysis, photovoice, and critical discussion groups. This kind of analysis involves "searching across a data set to identify, analyse, and report repeated patterns" and "descriptive presentation of qualitative data."[49] All parties involved came to an agreement after the topics were methodically determined.

Data Management

To preserve all of the generated data, a Google Drive repository was created. The lecturers involved in this research were given access to the archived data, which were kept in separate files for each PLC.

Validity

The quality assurance approach was used in this study.[50] Outcome validity is the degree to which "actions occur which lead to a resolution of the problem."[51] This project's goal was to find answers to the problems that stakeholders were facing. Inquiring about how challenges are framed and handled to support ongoing learning for the individual or system is part of process validity, which encompasses "methods and form of relation with participants."[52] This project aimed to promote ongoing learning via teamwork and attaining sustainability. Democratic validity "refers to the extent to which research is done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation."[53] This project aimed to involve all stakeholders in all the stages of the project, including planning, decision-making, implementation, and ethical standards. All parties involved must "deepen their understanding of the social reality under study, and there should be change" to ensure catalytic validity.[54] This project's goal went beyond simply doing research, producing data, and disseminating findings; its main objective was to make transformation possible through teamwork.

Ethical Issues

This study's ethical considerations were analysed from two different angles. The first step involved submitting an ethical clearance application to the ethics committee of the tertiary institution (XXX-00283-22-A2). The participants then provided a written agreement, in which they explicitly stated that they were willing to engage voluntarily and that they understood that they might withdraw at any time without facing any consequences.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the use of reflective digital storyboarding as an assessment tool for pre-service teachers (final-year English for Education students) to reflect on their participation in a service-learning project aimed at narrowing the theory-practice gap in secondary teaching. Overall, the digital storyboards helped students to reflect on their teaching identities and professional development and the barriers related to their future roles as English teachers, as well as possible solutions to overcome these

[49] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101; Rosemarie Anderson, "Thematic Content Analysis (TCA)," *Descriptive Presentation of Qualitative Data* 3 (2007): 1–4.
[50] Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States : SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452226644.
[51] Herr and Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation*.
[52] Herr and Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation*.
[53] Herr and Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation*.
[54] Herr and Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation*.

barriers. Prominent themes related to teacher preparedness, the importance of collaboration and mentorship, critical and innovative thinking, and problem-solving emerged.

Barriers to teaching

a. Preparedness

Student reflections through the digital storyboards exposed a number of barriers that in-service and novice teachers (i.e., pre-service students) believe shape their experience of teaching English at the secondary school level. A recurring theme was preparedness, with many students pointing to their limited classroom experience, lack of confidence, and perceived gaps in knowledge to support their standpoint. One student noted, "I am filled with uncertainty and self-doubt", while another said, "novice teachers often lack practical classroom experience. They may also face challenges if they have gaps in their content knowledge". Another noted that while they (the students) have received sufficient training on theoretical aspects related to the profession, this does not "necessarily prepare us enough for the day-to-day lives as educators". A study conducted on the threats to novice teachers' development reports that the first five years of a teacher's profession are delicate and that novice teachers generally lag behind in upskilling themselves and facing the "real" and "practical" issues related to the profession, and, in effect, struggle to put knowledge into practice.[55] Similarly, a study that looked at South African novice teacher resilience found that novice teachers report feeling overwhelmed by the challenges upon entering the profession and find the transition from student to novice teacher particularly difficult.[56] These reports align with the reflections done by the participants of our study.

b. Professional development

Additionally, participants reflected on the lack of professional development as a barrier. In-service teachers reported that there are limited opportunities for professional development, and in instances where there are opportunities, teachers do not have sufficient time to participate in them. One participant reported that teachers "simply do not have enough time to attend workshops that occur on weekends." Professional development opportunities are crucial in helping teachers effectively deal with the various challenges of their profession.[57] These professional development opportunities are echoed by a study that was conducted on the professional development of teachers in South African schools and concluded that continuous professional development goes beyond fulfilling requirements, which is crucial to the well-being and empowerment of teachers.[58] While the importance of professional development cannot be disputed, teachers experience frustration with continuous professional development policies and often respond to these programmes as an act of compliance rather than meaningful growth opportunities.[59] Additionally, a study with a group of high school teachers indicated that teachers felt that while there is a range of professional development opportunities available, these do not always meet their needs and are not sufficiently monitored.[60]

c. Lack of resources

Another important barrier that emerged was the lack of resources as a persistent challenge in schools. Students reflected on the difficulties in teaching in under-resourced contexts and the impact this has on teaching. One student noted that, "having little or no resources at all is also a barrier to teaching English;

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[55] J. L. Makhananesa and S. Sepeng, "Exploring Threats to Novice Teachers' Development in Selected Secondary Schools in South Africa," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 21 (2022): 259–71.

[56] Melanie Moen et al., "Measuring South African Novice Teacher Resilience in Coping with Teaching Challenges: A Rasch Model Framework," *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, April 30, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-11-2023-0166.

[57] Moen et al., "Measuring South African Novice Teacher Resilience in Coping with Teaching Challenges: A Rasch Model Framework."

[58] Thokozane P. Dyosini, "Professional Development of Teachers: Perceptions and Challenges of Foundation Phase Teachers," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14, no. 1 (November 15, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v14i1.1572.

[59] L.A. Johns and Z.C. Sosibo, "Constraints in the Implementation of Continuing Professional Teacher Development Policy in the Western Cape," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 33, no. 5 (November 2019), https://doi.org/10.20853/33-5-3589.

[60] Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani, "Teacher Professional Development Activities in Africa: Insights from South African High School Teachers' Experiences," *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* 12, no. 8 (2023): 493–503.

the sharing of textbooks among learners can be difficult for a teacher". Another student expressed the following: "The school I was based at lacks resources. This issue made teaching hard." As the most unequal country globally, South Africa grapples with severe resource shortages in schools. These inequalities are reflected in South African schools.[61] The Mail and Guardian reported that 78% of public schools lack libraries, and over 3,000 schools use pit toilets.[62] Overall, many South African schools, particularly in rural areas, lack adequate infrastructure, technology, and learning resources.[63] The lack of resources not only comprises teaching and learning, but also contradicts pre-service teacher training programmes where the inclusion of technology, preparing for the fourth industrial revolution, and developing 21st-century skills are prioritised. This could also account for the misalignment novice teachers experience when they step into the classroom.

d. Managing day-to-day functions

Preservice teachers generally expressed fears about handling the day-to-day functions that are expected from teachers, which they believe are not necessarily covered by their training. One student noted, "There are some things that the university does not prepare you for." These day-to-day functions include classroom management and administrative tasks. One student expressed that, "Managing diverse classrooms can also be challenging, especially if they (teachers) have large classroom sizes with different proficiency levels and needs." Another student added, "It is very difficult to control and manage their (learners') behaviour," while another said the lack of practical classroom experience impacts their ability to manage their classrooms effectively. Effective classroom management is crucial in the facilitation of meaningful learning experiences.[64] In South Africa, effective classroom management is directly impacted by large classes. A study cites that in a sample of over 200 South African teachers, 53% felt ill-equipped to deal with large class sizes that, in turn, negatively impact classroom management and administrative workload.[65] Additionally, a study explored the hindrances to effective classroom management and found that one of the challenges to effective classroom management includes teaching large class sizes, in which novice teachers, in particular, struggle to establish and maintain effective classroom management.[66] These challenges are similar to those echoed by the pre-service teachers who participated in this research.

Additionally, pre-service teachers feel unprepared for practical demands, such as handling administration. One participant noted, "The burden of administration – there is no specific module that teaches us how admin works at schools." In the study, one of the most common themes that emerged among teachers who felt unprepared for the teaching profession was the apparent under-preparedness for administrative work. Their research found that teachers do not feel adequately prepared for tasks, such as "preparing subject files for moderation, attending meetings and workshops, skilling out and submitting various forms and documents to the department, marking and financial management." Furthermore, in a survey with a sample size of over 1,200 participants, 70% of teachers reported that "having too much administrative work" was their main source of stress. This factor validates pre-service teachers' feelings of being underprepared or overwhelmed by the administrative duties that

[61] V. Sulla, P. Zikhali, and P. F. Cuevas, "Inequality in Southern Africa: An Assessment of the Southern African Customs Union" (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2022).
[62] V. Jagarnath, "Unequal Schools Mean Unequal Futures," *Mail & Guardian Thought Leader*, December 5, 2024, https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2024-12-05-unequal-schools-mean-unequal-futures/.
[63] Jagarnath, "Unequal Schools Mean Unequal Futures"; Samukelisiwe Purity Zondi and Bongani Reginald Qwabe, "Infrastructure-Led Development and Quality Education: Implications for UMzumbe Local Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal," *African Journal of Governance and Development* 11, no. 1.1 (2022): 190–212.
[64] Dineo Mamaile and Bunmi Isaiah Omodan, "Exploring Challenges Hindering Teachers' Implementation of Classroom Management Strategies in Gauteng High Schools, South Africa," *Research in Educational Policy and Management* 5, no. 2 (December 2, 2023): 245–62, https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2023.22.
[65] H. Hofmeyr et al., " Teacher Preferences and Job Satisfaction in South Africa," *Teacher Demographic Dividend Project* (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2024).
[66] Mamaile and Omodan, "Exploring Challenges Hindering Teachers' Implementation of Classroom Management Strategies in Gauteng High Schools, South Africa."

await them.[67] Being unprepared for these seemingly endless tasks results in teachers spending valuable teaching time completing these tasks - time they could have dedicated to their subjects.

Solutions

A key objective of this study was for in-service teachers and pre-service students to collaborate not only to identify the barriers teachers experience when teaching English, but also to brainstorm possible solutions to these barriers. Key solutions that were raised were the importance of collaboration and mentorship, as well as the importance of professional development.

a. Collaboration and mentorship as a solution to barriers

One of the most significant findings in this study was the acknowledgement by pre-service teachers that collaboration and mentorship are key to thriving in the profession. Mentor teachers not only provide practical guidance but also emotional support, which is both important for the development of professional identities.[68] Mentor teachers serve as role models and found that mentoring influences the self-efficacy of novice teachers. Furthermore, novice teachers pointed to the importance of collaboration between peers as crucial to their ongoing development, especially in instances where mentorship does not occur.[69] Collaboration among teachers significantly contributes to continuous professional development.[70] Collaboration fosters the provision of an effective learning environment, which is also linked to self-efficacy.[71] The importance of collaboration was highlighted by the pre-service teachers involved in this study, who expressed genuine gratitude for being afforded the opportunity to learn from experienced teachers and believe that continued mentorship would be instrumental in the successful transition from a novice to an experienced teacher. Furthermore, through the collaboration of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers, reciprocal mentoring was fostered where both participants share unique perspectives and experiences and learn from one another.[72] It is argued that mentor-mentee relationships can significantly impact shaping professional identities and pedagogical practices of both pre-service and in-service teachers.[73] Some important insights that emerged from the storyboards to support the importance of mentorship and collaboration are as follows:

- *"I should ask one of the experienced teachers to be my mentor. Regular discussions and feedback from them (mentor) can be very valuable."*
- *"I should collaborate with other teachers in my school or district to share resources. I can create a communal resource pool where educators can access and contribute materials".*
- *"We learned a lot from our mentor teacher and she was kind enough to be open to new opinions and views from our side."*
- *"As students, we have many questions, we have a lot to learn and experience ourselves. Having an in-service teacher next to you that has been through all your doubts and fears helps in preparing us for the reality of what awaits."*

[67] Hofmeyr et al., " Teacher Preferences and Job Satisfaction in South Africa."

[68] Xinyue Zhang et al., "How Mentor Teachers and Emotions Influence Professional Identity and Career Decisions of Preservice Preschool Teachers," *Frontiers in Education* 10 (August 26, 2025), https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1569062.

[69] Julian Burger, "Constructivist and Transmissive Mentoring: Effects on Teacher Self-Efficacy, Emotional Management, and the Role of Novices' Initial Beliefs," *Journal of Teacher Education* 75, no. 1 (January 11, 2024): 107–21, https://doi.org/10.1177/00224871231185371.

[70] Bongani D. Bantwini, "Developing a Culture of Collaboration and Learning among Natural Science Teachers as a Continuous Professional Development Approach in a Province in South Africa," *Teacher Development* 23, no. 2 (March 15, 2019): 213–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2018.1533491.

[71] Nor Syahrul Bariyah Johari, Norazlinda Saad, and Marini Kasim, "Teacher Collaboration: Significant Influence on Self-Efficacy of Secondary School Teachers," *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)* 11, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 1873, https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v11i4.22921.

[72] H. Pursell, "What Is Reciprocal Mentoring? Balance Learning in Enterprise," Guider (blog), 2024, https://guider-ai.com/blog/what-is-reciprocal-mentoring-balanced.

[73] Daniel Rojas Rodríguez and Ingrid Rodríguez, "Tutoría y Reciprocidad Como Marcos Para Construir La Identidad y El Desempeño de Los Docentes," *Ciencia Latina Revista Científica Multidisciplinar* 8, no. 5 (October 18, 2024): 2367–84, https://doi.org/10.37811/cl_rcm.v8i5.13705.

- *"In-service teachers help us in connecting real-world challenges with classroom learning. Through that, they mention what they have faced and the solutions they used to overcome their challenges."*
- *"Teachers with more experience can assist new teachers by giving advice on how to handle challenges."*
- *"Peer-learning – new teachers can learn through observing experienced teachers."*

These reflections reinforce that collaboration and mentorship are crucial to teacher growth. In fact, mentoring is a powerful tool for developing confidence and leadership. It further shows that mentorship and peer-collaboration are crucial to fostering a culture of support and belonging. In this way, collaboration and mentorship could be instrumental in shaping sustainable professional development. Mentorship and collaboration featured most prominently as a solution and proved to be indispensable elements in developing confident, reflective, and capable teachers.[74]

b. Developing a professional identity through digital storyboarding

South African teachers experience challenges with staying motivated and developing their professional identities.[75] The pre-service teachers in this study have also identified the lack of professional development as a barrier to effective teaching and learning. Through collaborative brainstorming and the use of digital storyboards as reflection, novice teachers have identified key points that could work to counter the perceived lack of professional development. One student noted that one must "Dedicate extra time to self-study." Through critical reflections, they also came to the understanding that they should be self-determined, creative and innovative to address the challenges they experience.

- *"Sometimes it's better to create your own resources."*
- *"Make up your own technology"*
- *"I developed better problem-solving skills and do believe that I am now more prepared to face the workplace"*

These reflections illuminate that creating the storyboards encouraged pre-service teachers to think creatively to address challenges. Through presenting their ideas visually and verbally, they were able to see patterns in their learning and recognise that self-determination and taking action lead to professional growth. The storyboards were, thus, instrumental in creating space for critical reflection, creativity, and the exploration of possible solutions.

Furthermore, through engaging in critical reflection through the storyboards, students also seemed to develop an awareness of their professional identity. One participant notes, "Teaching consists of so much more. We are the teacher, the helper, the administrator, the healer, the psychologist…" This shows that the storyboards helped them visualise the complexity of the different roles they will fulfil as teachers. In a sense, the digital storyboards functioned as a mirror and a guide in that they helped students critically reflect on their development but also fostered the confidence and determination to make decisions that will ultimately direct their professional journeys.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In relation to the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are made. At the institutional level, there is a need to have structured mentoring programmes. Mentorship models to enhance teacher leadership (such as one-on-one mentoring, peer mentoring, and group mentoring) are suggested to be

[74] A Mori, "The Power of Mentorship: Enhancing Teacher Leadership through Educational Mentoring," *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal* 28, no. 2 (2024): 1–3.
[75] Moen et al., "Measuring South African Novice Teacher Resilience in Coping with Teaching Challenges: A Rasch Model Framework."

employed[76]. Institutions should consider creating PLCs where experienced and novice teachers share their experiences in a reciprocal manner. Another recommendation is to develop digital storytelling in various education modules and allow students to share and peer-review digital stories. Providing technical and pedagogical support may be helpful to support students. A definite move towards more process-focused assessment that values reflection rather than traditional assessments should be prioritised. In terms of policy and systemic recommendations, we suggest encouraging and maybe even mandating reflective practice modules where transformative approaches apply and integrate technology literacy, as this is necessary when creating digital storyboards. It is also recommended that professional development frameworks should be established that initiate and employ the use of digital storyboarding for career-long reflection. The last recommendation is to follow up with these students once they enter the profession, as a more longitudinal study may provide insight into the long-term effects and value of a service-learning project such as this.

CONCLUSION

According to the reviewed literature, immersive, reflective, and collaborative learning strategies are necessary to bridge the theory-practice gap. PLCs and critical-service learning integrate reflection while tying classroom instruction to practical application. Digital storyboarding creates the platform for the transformation of student perspectives when faced with disorienting dilemmas for which they have to find a course of action. Digital storyboarding is also a multimodal form of learning indicative of a paradigm shift, which is instrumental in preparing students for the demands of 21st-century classrooms. When combined with PLC support and mentorship, these strategies foster teachers' professional identities and preparedness to effect change, indicating that reflective digital storyboarding can be a potent, transformative assessment technique in teacher preparation. Longitudinal studies on the sustained implementation of reflective practices and exploring and comparing digital storyboarding in cross-cultural contexts may strengthen research on innovative assessment practices and ultimately improve the scholarship of teaching and learning. Small steps need to be taken in order to effect systemic change, and specifically to narrow the theory-practice gap. Such changes call for collaboration, reflection, and technologically-enhanced approaches and strategies.

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[76] A. Mori, "The Power of Mentorship," 1–3.

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