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The Benefits of Mentoring Teacher Candidates: Professional Reflection and Growth

by Maureen Connolly

Overview

When teachers serve as mentors, they inspire future educators, and they have an opportunity to engage in their own professional growth. The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) is extremely grateful to all mentors who choose to work with our teacher candidates. In an effort to support the mutually beneficial effects of the mentoring process, during the 2016-17 school year, we invited cooperating teachers working with secondary education teacher candidates in the humanities to engage in a mentoring workshop program. This program was developed, in part, based on the success of the support provided via the Woodrow Wilson Program to Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) cooperating teachers. According to a 2014 Woodrow Wilson mentoring report, “Currently, there are few examples of excellence in mentoring; too few mentors have demonstrated ability to assess and meet the needs of an adult who is learning to teach, and too few can explicitly explain the reasons for their decisions” (Fraser and Watson 10).

Typically TCNJ provides an overview of expectations of the cooperating teacher via a written overview of expectations, discussions with teacher candidates, discussions with field supervisors. Through these means, cooperating teachers are informed regarding expectations of their teacher candidates such as how long they should observe before teaching and the number of times teacher candidates will be observed. My colleagues sought to enhance the guidance for cooperating teachers because research shows that “mentoring is effective when it is consistent and based on an explicit vision of good teaching as well as an understanding of teacher learning” (Martin para. 7). Our mentoring workshop program was designed to help cooperating teachers develop a shared vision of a high quality internship experience for teacher candidates and to develop the skills to make that vision a reality.

The importance of this kind of guidance for cooperating teachers has recently been emphasized by the Garden State Alliance for Strengthening Education (GSASE). In their report summary, the GSASE calls for increased attention given to training and professional development of the school-based cooperating teachers and mentors to ensure that they have the proper skills to adequately guide and mentor a new teacher candidate or a new teacher (13). By offering a mentorship program for cooperating teachers, TCNJ is likely preparing for an element of teacher preparation that may soon be mandatory.

The Program

In Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, TCNJ invited cooperating teachers who were working with teacher candidates in the humanities to engage in three 2 ½ hour workshops. The 14 cooperating teachers who engaged in this program were compensated for their time, and light refreshments were served at each workshop session. It seems important to note this because in this profession, too often, people can feel that they have been “voluntold” to do something. The stipend and the food were ways to show the cooperating teachers that we valued their time and commitment.

The objectives for these sessions were as follows:

Objective 1: To establish a clear understanding of the college’s expectations for teacher candidates and cooperating teachers.

Objective 2: To discuss and develop effective mentoring approaches for planning, co-teaching, and engaging in productive dialogue.

Objective 3: To discuss and develop instructional approaches and feedback strategies.

The intent of the program was to help cooperating teachers hone their mentoring skills by learning from “experts” in the field and from one another. I taught the first two sessions, and two fantastic cooperating teachers from Grover Middle School in West Windsor, Laura Bond and Rachel Skupp, taught the final session. That said, some of the best teaching/guidance came from the collegial conversation that took place in each of these sessions.

Objective 1: To establish a clear understanding of the college’s expectations for teacher candidates and cooperating teachers.

In our first session, I focused on establishing a clear understanding of the college’s expectations for teacher candidates and cooperating teachers. I began the session with an overview of the coursework that teacher candidates take in addition to their fieldwork. I emphasized that teacher candidates are learning many new strategies that they want to try out in the classroom. I then took time to discuss the proposed timeline for observing and teaching. Teacher candidates at TCNJ are expected to work within a “gradual release” construct. They observe classes, getting to know their cooperating teacher’s style and approach and their prospective students’ needs. Then they begin teaching mini lessons or one course section, gradually taking on more responsibility as the semester progresses. Cooperating teachers discussed how this could look in connection with their pedagogical approaches, their students’ needs, and their curriculum. This discussion validated TCNJ’s decision not to set an absolute timeline, but rather to set guidelines for gradual release.

Following the overview of coursework and expectations of teacher candidates, we focused the discussion more directly on the cooperating teachers’ role as mentors. By reading “On Considering the Preparation of New English Teachers: What the Experts Say,” we considered common struggles of new teachers such as content knowledge, planning, classroom management, differentiation, and communication (43). Then we brainstormed ways that mentors might provide support in relation to these struggles. We utilized post it notes for this activity, and I introduced the cooperating teachers to the Post-it App, a tool for categorizing ideas and concepts. The cooperating teachers expressed excitement about this app and were glad to know that their teacher candidates might be using it with their shared students.

We read two additional articles related to mentoring, “Find Your Marigold: The One Essential Rule for New Teachers” and “Mentoring Novice Teachers to Become Teacher-Leaders”. To reflect on lessons learned and application to self, we engaged in a “Build-a Mentor” activity. For this activity, cooperating teachers created a drawing of a mentor and labeled each element of that mentor with its purpose (e.g.-ear to listen; backbone to say what needs to be said). With both the fall and spring cohorts, the cooperating teachers were so engaged in this activity that we agreed to dedicate more time at the start of Session II to recall our focus and bridge into our next discussion.

Objective 2: To discuss and develop effective mentoring approaches for planning, co-teaching, and engaging in productive dialogue.

In our second session, we focused on effective mentoring approaches for planning, co-teaching, and observing. As mentioned above, the cooperating teachers returned to their “Build-A-Mentor” activity, thus focusing on who they wanted to be as mentors. From there, we moved into a discussion of planning by reviewing the rubric that supervisors would use when they observed the teacher candidates. The cooperating teachers engaged in a carousel activity during which they

reflected on the criterion for each category such as lesson opening, responsiveness to students, questioning, differentiation, and assessment. What was particularly interesting about this is that the teacher candidates had engaged in the same activity during their methods class. When responses were compared, the cooperating teachers quickly noted that their responses were more theoretical whereas the teacher candidates' responses were more practical. For instance, teacher candidates listed various approaches they might take to differentiate lessons like varied levels of texts or choice assignments whereas cooperating teachers made reference to Vygotsky, zone of proximal development, and scaffolding. When we discussed this difference, the cooperating teachers and I agreed that it had to do with stages of professional development. Teacher candidates are very focused on the practical when they are first entering the field. Cooperating teachers who have had some professional experience are more inclined toward professional reflection and making the connections between the theoretical, the practical, and the personal. This discussion made overt another benefit of the mentoring workshops—the opportunity to engage in professional reflection.

Another support for professional reflection was our discussion of a list of conversation starters from *The Co-Teaching Book of Lists* by Katherine Perez. I included this resource to provide support for those who were planning to co-teach with their teacher candidates, however, it was meaningful for all, regardless of whether or not they were planning to utilize co-teaching. Some of the questions posed on the lists included, “Why are we doing this?”; “How will we communicate with each other?”; “What are my values and beliefs as a co-teacher?” (63). Each of these major questions had sub-questions listed to help push the professional reflection and planning further. Whether or not the cooperating teachers were planning to utilize co-teaching as part of their gradual release method, this information was generally appreciated because it supportive reflective conversations.

Our next step was to consider four dilemmas encountered by beginning teachers

1. Choosing between personal beliefs about teaching and the recommendations of others.
2. Selecting and using teaching strategies that focus on developing learners' understanding versus developing their performance.
3. Taking risks by trying different teaching strategies versus playing safe and maintaining the status quo.
4. Concentrating on the less able students instead of accommodating the diverse range of students in a class.

(Zimmerman et al. 26)

We all agreed with the concept that a mentor should be an “option provider” rather than a “solution provider” thus facilitating the mentee's ability to solve problems independently.

To facilitate that kind of approach, we took part in a role-play activity that involved the four kinds of Language of Support that can be utilized in a mentoring dialogue--paraphrasing, clarifying, mediating, and imagining (Virginia Department of Education Mentor Training). Partners applied one or more types of dialogue to one of the dilemmas listed above. We all agreed that the low-stakes of role-play provided a safe way to practice having potentially difficult conversations.

To end this session, I shared letters from former teacher candidates in our program describing the positive qualities of their cooperating teachers. While the more researched elements of this workshop were helpful, I think that this method of closing was particularly effective because it reminded the cooperating teachers of the impact that they can have on their teacher candidate.

Objective 3: To discuss and develop instructional approaches and feedback strategies.

In our final session, we continued to focus on planning, and we discussed effective approaches for providing feedback. Laura Bond, a cooperating teacher West Windsor-Plainsboro, began by asking other cooperating teachers to prioritize elements that influence their course planning such as content/skills standards, teacher evaluation, marking period timing, assessments, universal concepts, and course goals. This activity led to lively discussion related to how to model for teacher candidates the opportunities that teachers have to work according to their own priorities while still meeting building, district, and state expectations.

Laura also challenged cooperating teachers to consider how to intentionally model best practices for student-centered learning. She discussed growth mindset, Wiggins and Understanding by Design, differentiated instruction, and integrated curriculum. She also led an activity related to developing strong learning objectives. As we saw in Session II, cooperating teachers were equipped to make strong connections between theory and practice. This conversation facilitated to help them focus on bridging planning decisions and research on best practices helped them feel better prepared for engaging in similar types of conversations with their teacher candidates.

Another conversation for which cooperating teachers wanted further support was the teaching feedback conversation. Rachel Scupp, also a cooperating teacher from West Windsor-Plainsboro, presented on how cooperating teachers can set teacher candidates up for success and how best to provide effective feedback. Rachel first had cooperating teachers reflect on their own classroom routines, structures, and systems in order to streamline classroom turnover to the teacher candidate. For instance, Rachel shared that the teacher candidate working with her students was struggling with getting students to transition smoothly to a new activity after directions were given. Rachel realized that the teacher candidate was not using her pre-established routine of saying “1, 2, 3, go” after giving directions. Once the teacher candidate started saying this, the class transitioned more fluidly. Simple realizations like this can make a huge difference for teacher candidates as they take over a classroom.

Rachel also discussed the concept of classroom presence. While it may be effective for a teacher candidate to embrace some of the cooperating teacher’s routines, it is important for that candidate to develop their own professional presence. She asked cooperating teachers to consider what defines a strong teacher presence. All agreed that it does not have to mean being loud and commanding at all times. When teacher candidates are more shy or reserved, Rachel advised them to think of attributes of their own favorite teachers or leaders and to try to take on some of these attributes. She also recommends practicing in front of a mirror and/or videotaping to help with self-evaluation.

Lastly, Rachel focused directly on mentor feedback regarding teaching. She shared a feedback loop that included discovering issues, analyzing causes and consequences, creating options and solutions, committing to action, and evaluating performance improvement. Rachel’s presentation focused on guiding teacher candidates to think through each step, thus connecting back to the concept of being an option provider rather than a solution provider. That said, the cooperating teachers stated that they liked the idea of applying the structure to themselves when they reflected on their own teaching.

Results/Outcomes

Cooperating teachers’ eagerness to apply what they learned to their own professional reflection and development in addition to their guidance of their teacher candidates speaks to how working with a teacher candidate can be mutually beneficial. It is also important to restate that in several instances, I utilized teaching and reflection strategies that were being taught to the teacher candidates. This helped the cooperating teachers better understand some of the approaches that their teacher candidates were trying and, in some cases, gave the cooperating teachers new ideas to try themselves.

Cooperating teachers completed pre and post surveys for each training session. In addition, I gathered anecdotal evidence from conversations during and after the sessions and information from items produced by the participants during training sessions. Below, are results that coincide with each objective:

Objective 1: To establish a clear understanding of the college's expectations for teacher candidates and cooperating teachers.

After the training sessions, mentor teachers reported a better understanding of what it means to be a high quality mentor, the specific expectations of TCNJ, and how best to guide teacher candidates as they work toward meeting their TCNJ expectations for fieldwork.

In Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, pre and post surveys were used to measure progress toward this objective. Seven cooperating teachers were trained in the fall, and 6 were trained in the spring. The cooperating teachers responded to the question, *How would you rate your understanding of the expectations of cooperating teachers and of the students in the TCNJ Student Teaching/Practicum program?* Responses to this question from both the pre-training survey and the post-training survey are represented in Figures 1-4 below. Expectations of cooperating teachers are represented in red and expectations of TCNJ students are represented in purple

Figure 1. Fall Session I Pre-Training Survey

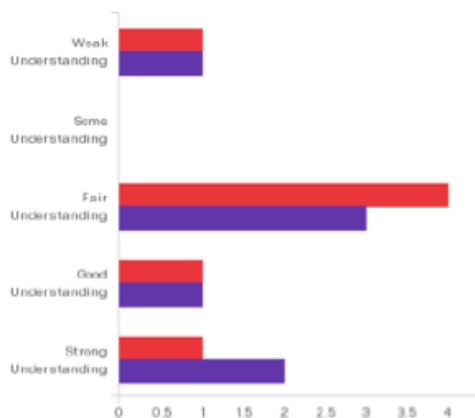


Figure 2. Fall Session I Post-Training Survey

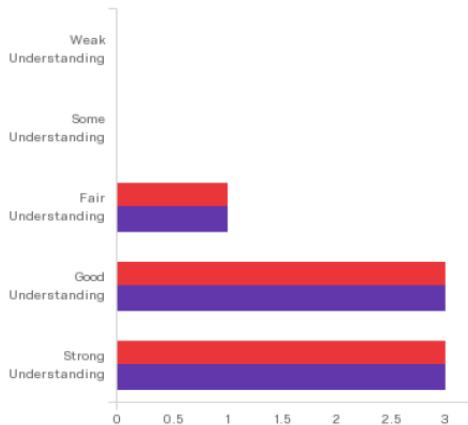


Figure 3. Spring Session I Pre-Training Survey

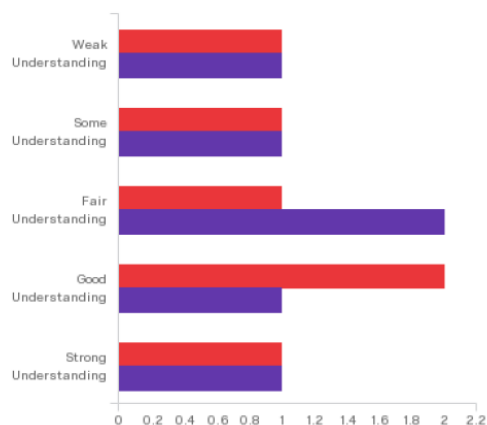
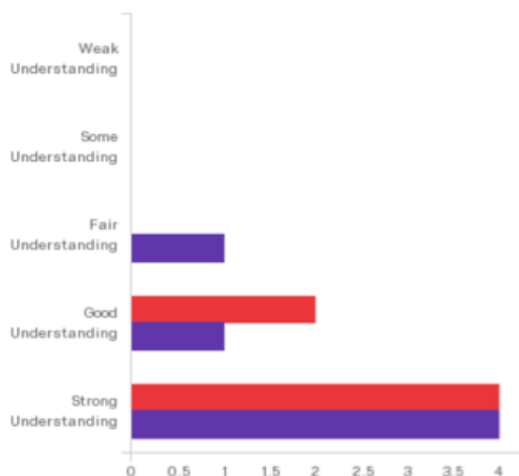


Figure 4. Spring Session I Post-Training Survey



The tables show positive growth regarding understanding of expectations for cooperating teachers and teacher candidates. The cooperating teachers who took part in the mentorship workshop shared that it was especially helpful to have the opportunity to discuss parts of the handbook regarding timeline for observing/student teaching and the Teaching Performance and Professional Dispositions rubrics that they use to evaluate our students teachers.

In addition to the rating scale regarding understanding of expectations, cooperating teachers answered open-ended questions. Common themes that emerged in cooperating teachers' answers to pre-training survey, open-ended questions/concerns regarding program expectations and serving as a mentor were related to unit planning. The practicum requires teacher candidates to develop and teach a two week unit. Cooperating teachers expressed concern regarding how such a unit could fit within their long-range plans, how much support they should give during planning, and how much they should allow their teacher candidates to "struggle."

When asked how they would describe a mentor, before training, common among cooperating teachers' responses were related to open-mindedness and flexibility. Representative words/phrases included "open-minded", "freedom", flexible, "not scared to let their mentee take over and fail", "willingness to learn and let go", "learn from the mistakes of both the co op and the pre-service in the classroom"

After Session I, cooperating teachers were asked, *What lingering questions/concerns do you have about serving as a cooperating teacher?* In the fall, 2 out of 7 teachers stated that they no longer had concerns. One wrote, "I feel so much better having heard/seen the expectations, since the only real information I had on it came from the TCNJ program." In the spring, three out of six teachers stated that they no longer had concerns. Themes regarding lingering concerns for the spring teachers included providing enough opportunity, balancing the role of teacher and observer, and transparency for teacher candidates regarding expectations of cooperating teachers.

After Session I, cooperating teachers were also asked, *What shifted in your thinking today?* The word cloud below represents how much of the conversation and thinking during Session I in the fall revolved around understanding how to balance support and letting the teacher candidate struggle.



In the spring, responses to this question were more varied, however, a common theme of recognizing the need for professional reflection came through. The following words/phrases relate to this theme: “mentoring is more than just the content and actual teaching, but also the teacher as a whole person”, “asking the student what they expect of ME”, “understanding the give AND take that comes from having a mentee”, “Be a marigold!” (the term marigold is a metaphor for a person who facilitates growth. It was used in an article that cooperating teachers read during session I) *Objective 2: To discuss and develop effective mentoring approaches for planning, co-teaching, and engaging in productive dialogue.*

In Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, cooperating teachers learned effective strategies for planning and for guiding mentee planning and teaching. Pre and post surveys were used to measure progress toward this objective. Seven cooperating teachers were trained in the fall, and 6 were trained in the spring. The survey results for the question *How would you rate your knowledge regarding the following [co-planning, co-teaching, assessing teacher dispositions, giving teacher feedback, having a mentoring dialogue]?* are represented below.

Figure 5. Fall Session II Pre-Training Survey

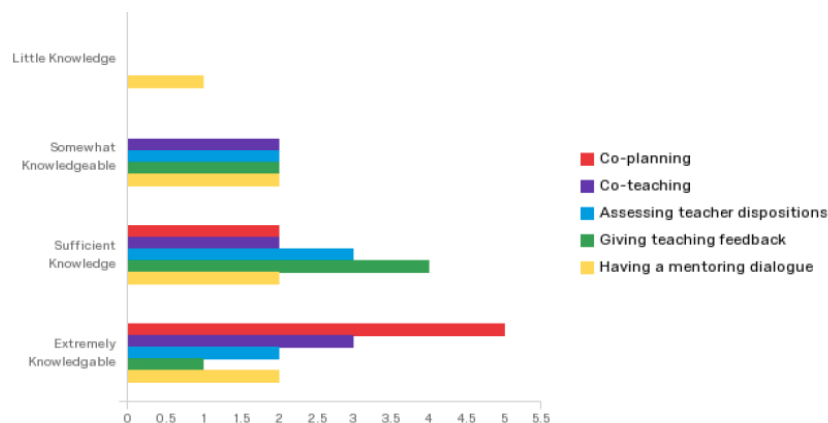


Figure 6. Fall Session II Post-Training Survey

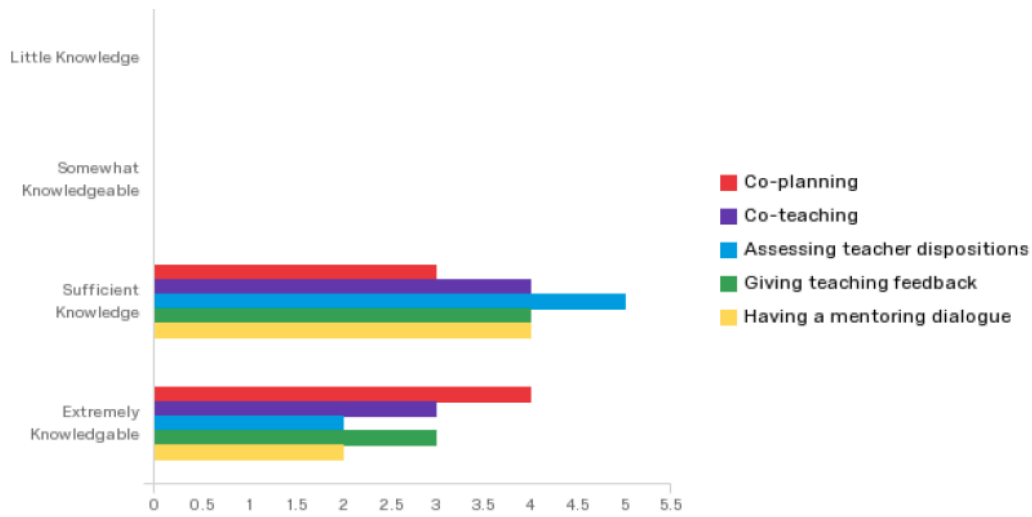


Figure 7. Spring Session II Pre-Training Survey

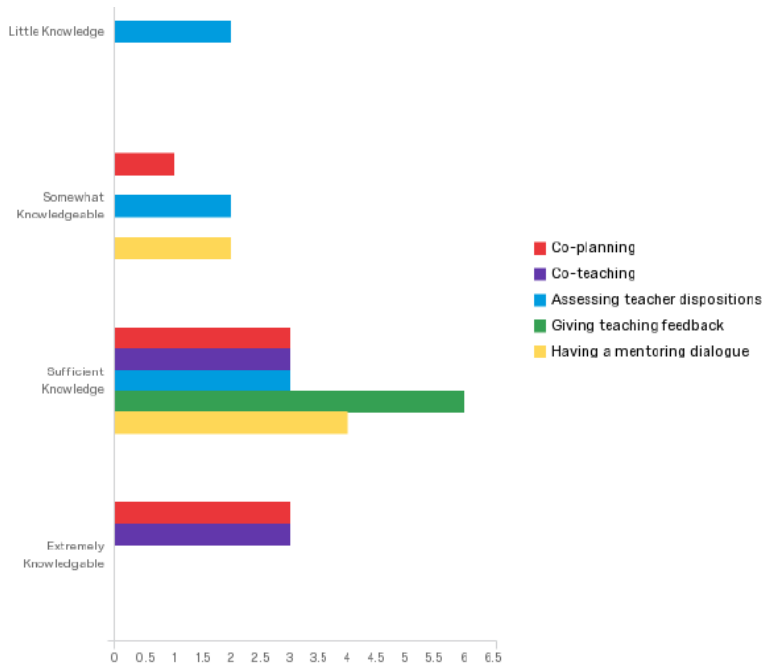
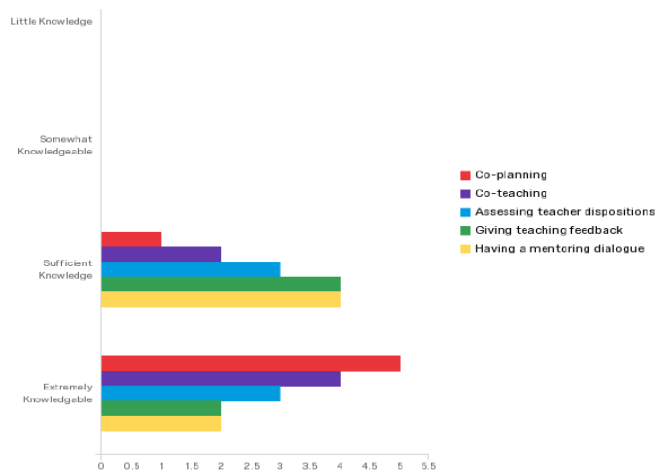


Figure 8. Spring Session II Post-Training Survey



Cooperating teachers showed gains in their perceived knowledge within each category. It is interesting to note that the majority of cooperating teachers in each cohort rated themselves as having sufficient knowledge rather than being extremely knowledgeable in regards to giving teacher feedback and having a mentoring dialogue. They knew that our next session would focus further on this, so I believe that they recognized that there was still more to learn. Also, many times, our discussion led to greater questions, thus it would be difficult to consider oneself extremely knowledgeable.

Objective 3: To discuss and develop instructional approaches and feedback strategies.

Cooperating teachers were asked to rate their knowledge level regarding

- How to approach long-range planning for your course
- Applying UBD and differentiation in unit design
- Writing quality objectives for student-centered learning
- Methods for providing effective feedback
- Awareness of your own feedback practices
- Deliberate classroom presence
- Strategies to foster reflective teaching practices

Figure 9. Fall Session III Pre-Training Survey

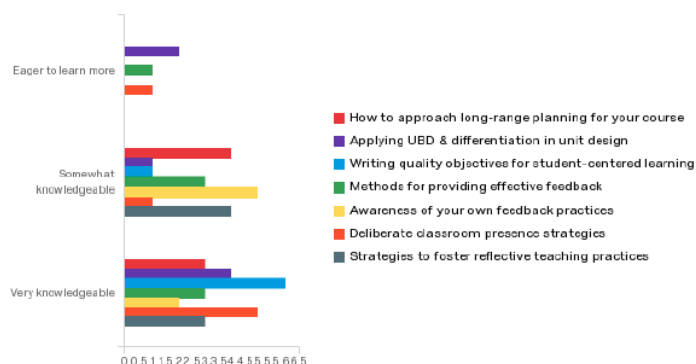


Figure 10. Fall Session III Post-Training Survey

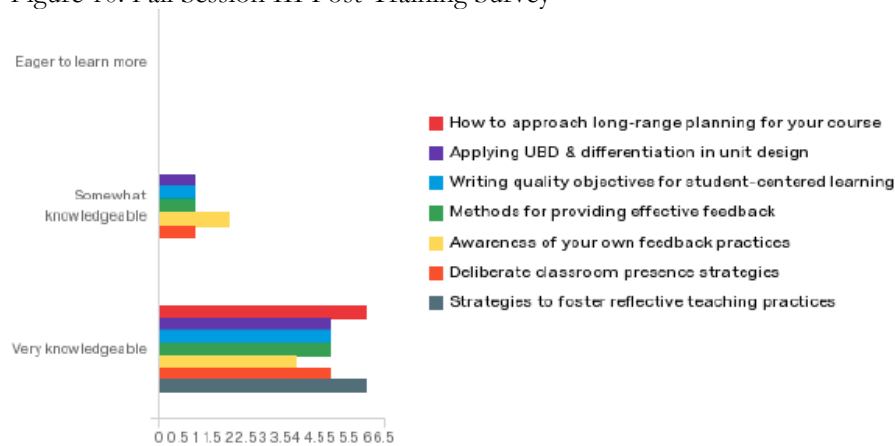


Figure 11. Spring Session III Pre-Training Survey

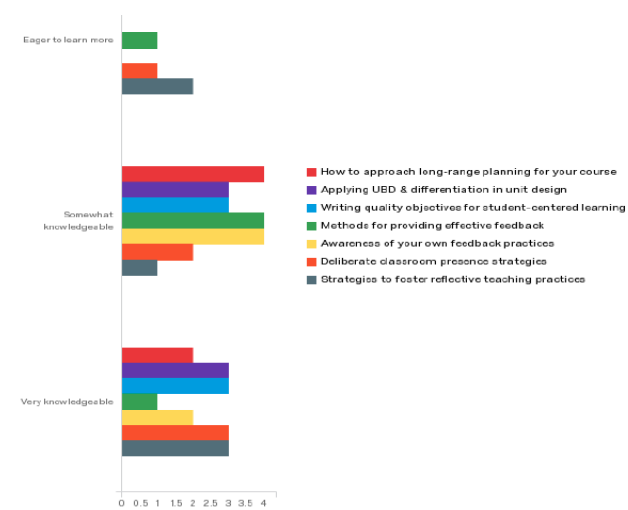
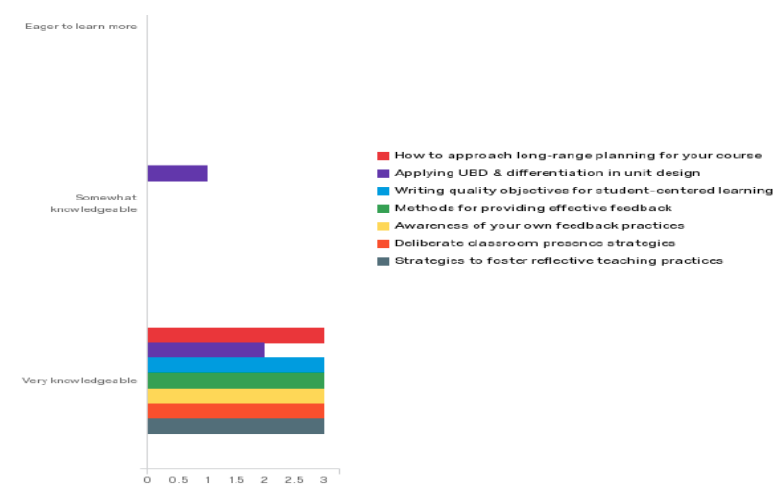


Figure 12. Spring Session III Post-Training Survey



Cooperating teachers shared that they were eager to learn more about how to approach long-term planning, applying UBD and differentiation in unit design, methods for providing effective feedback,

and strategies to foster reflective teaching practices. While they showed growth in all areas, in the both the fall and the spring, 4 out of 6 cooperating teachers who responded expressed appreciation for mentoring dialogue sentence starters that were provided.

Lessons Learned

The outcomes reported via survey and open-ended responses clearly indicate the positive impact of mentorship training for cooperating teachers. The post-session surveys from all six sessions indicate growth in relation to the objectives for the sessions. Participants' open-ended responses were overwhelmingly positive. Some favorite comments are listed below:

- “My expectations and those of my mentee are much clearer.” (Fall Post-Session I Survey)
- I found it beneficial to hear the voices of my peers describe their roles as mentors” (Fall Post-Session I Survey)
- “I cannot wait for her to start so I can use some of the things I learned today!” (Spring Post-Session I Survey)
- Some also made mention of apps that were shared during this session. (Spring Post-Session II Survey)
- Love the ‘what a mentor looks like’, “love the station activity” (Spring Post-Session II Survey)

Significance

In a time of Student Growth Objectives and teacher evaluation being tied to test scores, a program like this is extremely important. Potential cooperating teachers may be hesitant to work with teacher candidates because they may be concerned with “giving up” time with their students, or working with a teacher candidate may feel like too much responsibility. Programs like this can transform participants' views of serving as cooperating teachers by making this role not only an opportunity to mentor but also an opportunity for professional growth.

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