Networking Practitioner Research: Leveraging Digital Tools as Conduits for Collaborative Work

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Abstract

Practitioner research is a powerful stance for understanding one's own practice and reporting out to other practitioners for adaptations within their own contexts. This article focuses on how engagement in a longitudinal, digitally-mediated community of practice supports essential work in practitioner research in regards to collective work as teacher educators. Drawing upon our own experiences, we explore the affordances of four digitally mediated communication channels (video meetings, shared file systems, text messaging, and collaborative writing) to promote practitioner research in teacher education across geographically disparate institutions. The authors also share a series of recommendations for teacher educators interested in sustaining long-term, collaborative practitioner research across digital spaces.

Introduction

As the number of full-time faculty in teacher education programs continues to shrink (Shulman, et al., 2016) and the number of alternative and online alternative certification programs rise (Kamenetz, 2014), there is a need, perhaps now more than ever before, for teacher education professionals to utilize and engage in a common discourse around preparation and promote transparent communication about pedagogical choices and outcomes. Elsewhere, we have written about the practices involved in a longitudinal, digitally-mediated professional development experience (Buchholz, Vander Zanden, Husbye, Wessel Powell, & Rust, in press); in this piece, we position this engagement as a promising way forward within practitioner research, emphasizing the digital tools that allow us to share our teaching practices, engage one another as critical friends (Curry, 2008; Heller, 1988; Kember et al., 1997), and inquire into our collective practices as literacy educators across geographically disparate institutions of teacher preparation.

We argue that digitally-mediated collegial collaborations provide a vital portal to enable the exploration of *problems of practice* in teacher education. For us, these problems of practice facilitate our research and include inquiry into pragmatic and theoretical dilemmas in teacher education settings such as: (a) how to tackle demonstration or teach routines in literacy education courses; (b) how to maintain a reflexive stance as teacher educators when faced with competing demands for time linked to tenure and promotion; (c) how to reduce isolation in our respective programs/institutions; (d) how to generate and strengthen resource

repertoires; and (e) how to pay attention to new theories and their impact on current practices. Likely, these problems of practice will be familiar to readers across contexts.

In this piece, we begin by delineating our common understandings of practitioner inquiry and outlining a brief history of our collaboration. We then delve into the central focus of this manuscript: the technological tools that make our ongoing practitioner inquiry possible. Through describing each tool, we highlight our fluid movement across-beneath-around these digitally-mediated communication portals while engaging in practitioner inquiry. In conclusion, we consider trajectories of support that were built upon the technological tools in use and our shared experiences throughout our ongoing inquiry-driven engagement.

Collaborative Practitioner Research

Practitioner research is often associated with teacher research and action research. These endeavors are more typically conducted in K-12 schools and among classroom teachers. However, in this piece we explore conduits for practitioner research as it has emerged in our own professional development trajectories as teacher educators in college literacy education programs. We collaborate across a spectrum of higher education institutions to look at problems of teaching practice we all face in preparing new teachers adequately. An overview of our diverse set of localities can be found in Table 1.

Practitioner inquiry is largely shaped through experience, and the work of practitioner researchers like Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2009, 2004, 1993), Campano (2007), and Simon, Campano, Broderick, and Pantoja (2012) influences our professional development. Because the practitioner is the researcher and the researcher is the practitioner, this form of inquiry assumes, expects, and welcomes a reflexive stance. Our stance as teacher researchers foregrounds what Campano (2007) referred to as interested, vulnerable, and relational identities, which means, "we are always trying to relate any portion of our research to the whole of our work" (p. 117). In this piece, we highlight networked digital tools for collaborative practitioner inquiry as one aspect of that complex relational identity of teacher educator-practitioner-researcher.

Table 1
Here and There: Authors' Localities and Types of Institutions

Author	Faculty Experience (Years)	Geographic Location	Type of Institution
Husbye	6	Midwest	Public Research University
Rust	4	South	Private Small Liberal Arts
Wessel Powell	1	Midwest	Public Research University
Vander Zanden	7	Midwest	Public Regional University
Buchholz	3	Southeast	Public Regional University

We unapologetically embrace our position as practitioners in teacher education, despite the perceived tension in our field to value research productivity over teaching excellence—a tension often concretized in tenure expectations. We actively reject the unspoken insinuation that practitioner research in higher education is a less rigorous version of research. We are positioned in particular roles, primarily as faculty who do research, just as K-12 teachers are positioned primarily as educators. However, we simultaneously value the legitimate research of K-12 educators as well as our colleagues' study of improvements in teaching in their respective educator preparation programs. We find synergy in studying teaching practices in order to improve our own practice.

Decades ago, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) wrote, "The activity of inquiring into practice is not necessarily a good in itself; it needs to be informed by some meaningful purpose so that research questions and methods strengthen and/or transform what is already going on in classrooms and programs" (p. 42). We find this work meaningful in refining our respective classrooms and programs. Groups of practitioners working together and asking questions is the starting point; however, the documentation of what is learned in the process and then public distribution of findings propels the inquiry cycle forward.

While Cochran-Smith and Lytle often referenced elementary educators in their past work, similar tensions have begun to arise in the work of molding teacher educators into mere conduits through which other's agendas and policies are channeled, whether it be policies around third grade retention, dyslexia legislation, or standardized assessments of candidate's knowledge of foundational reading content knowledge. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009), in reference to inquiry as stance, suggest that "..the dialectical relationships of research (or theory) and practice, researcher and practitioner, knowing and doing, analyzing and acting, and conceptual and empirical research make for generative and productive tensions rather than dichotomies" (p. 123). In practice, we are neither researcher *or* teacher educator nor teacher *or* faculty, but actively moving among and between multifaceted roles as we work within the group.

Context of this Collaboration

The five of us met in graduate school nearly a decade ago where our adjoining carrels became a shared space to collectively wander the serpentine path of 'becoming' researchers-writers-teacher educators (Buchholz, Vander Zanden, Husbye, Wessel Powell, & Rust, in press). We produced/practiced a particular kind of "space" (Massey, 2005) together that sustained momentum for us as individuals as well as literacy teacher educators-practitioners-researchers to pursue solutions to problems within our own teaching practice. Now geographically dispersed as literacy faculty (Table 1), we represent a diverse scope of experiences as classroom teachers, qualitative researchers, and teacher educators; despite these disparities, our collective problems of practice look far more similar than not.

We have engaged in bi-weekly meetings (60-90 minutes) via Google Meet for over a year, coming to value and protect this routine in each of our schedules. Alongside these meetings, we have leveraged a range of other digital tools that provide professional, social, and emotional support mirroring the kind of face-to-face interactions we engaged in as graduate students pursuing our doctorates. We argue the collegial-personal synergy necessitated by collaborative practitioner inquiry across distances can be promoted through access to a wide range of tools for in-the-moment support and longer term collaborative endeavors. It is within the entanglement of phone, text composition, virtual meetings, GIF choice, and notifications sent states away to Mississippi, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Indiana that particular kinds of space(s) for practitioner research become possible. The early collaborative work of this group foregrounded members' identities--and tenure demands--as literacy education researchers, though the sharing of instructional resources emerged concurrently, often occurring in/across

a back channel such as a group text messaging thread (e.g., "Found children's lit/mentor texts easily--but finding teacher PD books for K non-fiction writing a bit harder. Send along recs!"). Gradually, a more explicit 'turn' to study/examine teacher education emerged as a result of recognizing the power in/of talking across our different courses, policies, universities, and communities. Critically, this turn was less focused on learning *about* and instead focused on learning *how*. Our overlapping identities as teacher educators and classroom researchers produced a space to collectively study our own teaching practices. We began to consider how we might take our work public as practitioner inquirers in teacher education.

Collaborative Practitioner Digital Research Tools: (Re)visioning Space(s) for Inquiry

While collaborative practitioner research is not, in itself, a novel engagement in the field of teacher education, the use of digital tools for bolstering the quantity and quality of cross-institutional group inquiry has the potential to dramatically open up opportunities to engage in co-constructed meaning making for teacher educators. Too often, due to logistical constraints, research collaborations become sequestered into monolithic pockets of one specific institution (colleagues in the same department partnering up) or a group of quite similar institutions (e.g. R1 institutions located in urban centers). Of course, such collaboration can be incredibly meaningful and produce new ways of living and doing teacher education. However, the wide range of challenges facing educator preparation in today's terrain demands that teacher educators think with greater breadth and depth across K-12 and higher education contexts. New media can enable the kinds of short term and long term connections (both in the moment as well as sustained over time) that might sustain the kind of collaborative trust and generative (re)visioning of the "what could be" in teacher education.

We have found four digital tools most generative for our collaborative inquiry: video meetings, shared file systems, synchronous collaborative writing, and text messaging. Each of these tools has specific affordances we will expand upon here and, while specific tools will be mentioned, we focus on the functionality of the tool rather than brand recognition. (See Table 2 for a list of (mostly free) digital options available for each kind of tool.) We include descriptions of these tools and examples of our engagement with them to show, rather than merely tell, the story of how these tools support our ongoing practitioner research agenda.

Table 2
Four Types of Digital Tools used in Digital Communities of Practice

Digital Tool	Function	Options
File Sharing	These tools allow for shared access to documents and video and audio files, while also acting as a shared resource library.	○ Google Drive ○ DropBox ○ Box ○ OneDrive ○ Slack ○ Microsoft OneDrive ○ Apple iCloud Drive ○ iMessage
Virtual Meetings	These tools approximate physical meetings, allowing groups members to engage with one another in real time, though not in the same space.	○ Google Meet or Google Hangout ○ Skype ○ Zoom ○ AnyMeeting ○ Mikogo
Collaborative Writing	These tools allow for a single file to be accessed and worked on by multiple writers at the same time.	○ Google Documents ○ SharePoint / OneDrive
Texting	Allows for quick text-, image-, and movie-based messages to be exchanged within combinations of people.	○ iMessage ○ Google Chat ○ WeChat ○ Slack

Video Meetings. Our ongoing collaboration is grounded in biweekly meetings of approximately 90 minutes using a video conferencing application

(Figure 1). Our preferred mode has been Google Meet, which allows us to occupy the same screen utilizing a stable hyperlink. This stable hyperlink allows for members of the group to access the digital meeting space in consistently the same manner, creating, to use a metaphor, one singular door to access the digital space. These video meetings begin with an informal "catching up" time and are then guided by an assortment of collectively agreed-upon set of activities. Because of this, video meetings serve as a flexible mechanism to serve a multitude of phases in the practitioner inquiry research process, often even within the same meeting: to discuss shared readings/theories, to imagine potential research questions, to talk across individually coded data about personal and collective teaching practices, and/or to assign particular sections in a manuscript. Beyond this, these video meetings also serve as collective moorings, a space where we experience time and space synchronously before moving into the asynchronous work whose boundaries we define during these meetings.

Figure 1. A Google Meet.

It is common for the other tools—file sharing, collaborative writing, and texting—to be used concurrently during a meeting. Google Meet amplifies the power and extends the use of the other tools in real time. For example, in preparation for a Google Meet session to collaboratively engage in experimental video analysis of a classroom literacy event, each group member prepared his/her individual analysis using a Google Doc. During the meeting, individual documents were shared with the group by providing the hyperlink in a text message or video chat function, or describing its location in a shared Google Drive folder. As each group member talked through his/her analyses, instead of using the "share screen" function, fellow group members followed along in/with

the respective Google Doc on their own computer, allowing for a closer read and the ability to add synchronous comments/feedback (via Google chat or text messages) when applicable. There is no shortage of meetings at our respective institutions, but these biweekly video meetings, with an always-evolving design based on personal and group goals, work to ensure ongoing engagement through relevance (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) sustaining each of us for the reading, writing, thinking, and teaching over the following two weeks.

We are dedicated to these meetings, both because of their productivity and their facilitation of personal connection to other literacy teacher educators-practitioners-researchers. Video allows us a glimpse into one another's lives, grounding us in the unique contexts of each collaborator with views into our individual offices, kitchens, and coffee shops we like to frequent. The views remind us that, while we are inquiring into our teaching practices, those practices are enmeshed in location-specific ways of being, doing, and learning. In other words, these glimpses are visceral reminders that while we work in the larger field of teacher education, we practice in local contexts. In an audio meeting alone, we would lose this context.

File Sharing. While our video meetings provide an opportunity to come together, file sharing via Google Drive allows us to exchange readings and other documents, giving a sense of continuity to our work together. At times, these file folders became a storage place for empirical or theoretical articles that we collaboratively self-assigned to discuss at our next synchronous video chat. Files in this tool are created flexibly and filled collaboratively, but retain a stable shelf life. For example, when we became interested in learning more about how core teaching practices in teacher education were discussed, we created a folder to collect readings to orient us to the field. The contents of this folder reflect a range of subfolders with varied topics and trajectories; initially, subfolders contained collaborative writing projects, readings organized by topic, and reflections and bits of writing about problems of practice to be discussed in meetings. Over time, we added subfolders for video recordings of meetings and folders for calls for papers that we might be interested in pursuing collaboratively or individually. Initially, manuscripts and writing projects filled the shared space. Over time, a collection of videos, analytic memos, meeting notes, and other resources were added and extended.

The digital drive initially served as a practical place for us to find what we want when we want it and as an archive of our various jumping off points. For example, as we were attempting to make sense of several readings about practice-based literacy education, Nicholas shared a video file featuring his teaching in a

literacy methods course. Within the video, he engaged undergraduate students in a rehearsal of specific literacy instructional routines to be enacted with elementary students (Husbye, Wessel Powell, Vander Zanden, & Karalis, 2018). We were able to individually view the video alongside the readings we were engaged in and then collectively discuss understanding of practices and routines when we were together in the video meeting. The availability of the file as a shared resource enabled each of us to explore it when our individual schedules allowed, while the fixed deadline of our impending video chat and joint accountability served as motivators to make space in our busy schedule to query teaching routines.

At other times, file sharing also functioned as an optional, resource-sharing site for interesting work that may or may not intersect with the entire group's current conversation and practitioner inquiries. In this case, such folders served as spaces for enrichment of collaborative or personal ventures. Often when a new file was added to a folder, we alerted the other members of our group during a video meeting or group text so they were aware of its presence, but there was no expectation of uptake or responsibility. For example, Julie messaged:

Whoever posted that Eve Tuck "Breaking up with Deleuze" article on our Cranky folder = winning. She is my favorite writer of the week!

Figure 2. Julie's text message regarding finding new readings in the shared folder.

While others replied within the thread and conversation followed, the article did not turn into assigned reading for the whole group.

As our curated library of folders within folders grew, it housed shared analysis efforts, writing in process, videos, and meeting notes. These shared files served as both a resource library as well as readings to investigate new theory and applications to practice. The records of our contributions in varied files form a digital trail of crumbs leading back to our initial impetus of academic collaboration grounded in practice: the heart of practitioner research.

Collaborative Writing: We are committed to supporting each other's personal writing/research goals but we are also committed to uniting our efforts to produce scholarly work together. Google Docs has been our Internet-based word processor of choice, particularly because of its integration with Google Drive, used above for file sharing, and ease of use. Of particular note is the affordance of

the platform to enable multiple contributors to leave tracks of thinking through drafting, editing, suggesting, or leaving comments on the same document both asynchronously (individually, at each member's convenience) and synchronously (when multiple co-writers write, edit, and leave comments on the same document at the same time). This eliminates the need for a single document file that is emailed from one author to another, allows for multiple authors to be working on the same document concurrently, and makes all authors aware of those changes in real time.

The ability to collaboratively co-construct a single document through individual, asynchronous contributions has been particularly important within the ending phases of the practitioner inquiry process: writing up findings for an outside audience. Google Documents has shifted the experience of collaborative writing from one that resembles something of a relay race with a manuscript being passed along from one author to another, to a process resembling a dance with opportunities to dance both alone and with others. That is not to say there aren't some relay aspects utilized in this approach to writing, such as when we establish what we've called first- and second-wave approaches to writing (Figure 3). An individual or team will frame and draft initial thinking within the manuscript based upon collaborative pre-writing meetings and a second, different individual or team will follow up afterward, working to tighten ideas, pose questions about how the first wave reflects collective thinking, and flesh out ideas not fully present yet. There are usually additional waves, but taking a first- and second wave approach reduces the pressure of getting it right the first time while maintaining accountability with a timeline to produce with co-authors.

Figure three features a fairly typical organizing email (another digital vehicle we utilize) which denotes first wave teams to move forward with specific writing projects: one nicknamed as "Donkey" and the other "Digital Literacies Book Chapter." We have found that, when writing with four other authors, it is useful to designate two colleagues as leaders of a piece. They can then video meet and start making decisions as a duo which has the distinct affordance of maintaining the multi-voiced nature of the piece without becoming overwhelming. Each pair then leads a discussion about the upcoming/continuing writing project at the next meeting, inquires about issues they want the whole group to weigh in on, and delegates items to be contributed by other members of the writing project.

Friends!

It has been too long... or it feels like it's been too long. Anyway, we're meeting in Hangouts tomorrow to work through the following:

- PoP: The Precarious Case of Involving Students (Sarah)
- Writing: Donkey Update (Julie & Christy, 1st Wave)
- Writing: Digital Literacies Book Chapter (Beth and Sarah, 1st Wave)
- Readings: Massey
- Readings: Learning in Landscapes of Practice

Figure 3. Email with first wave assignments for collaborative writing-in-progress.

While our first- and second-wave procedure may have the appearance of systematic predictability, a truer portrait of our collaborative writing process bucks any semblance of mechanical efficiency. Figure Four utilizes the "version history" function of Google documents to capture one moment in time before our first submission of this very manuscript. There, it becomes clear that various authors jump on to contribute how they want to contribute when they feel they can contribute. The "dance" previously alluded to is one that we find generative, motivating, and enlivening as writers and thinkers.

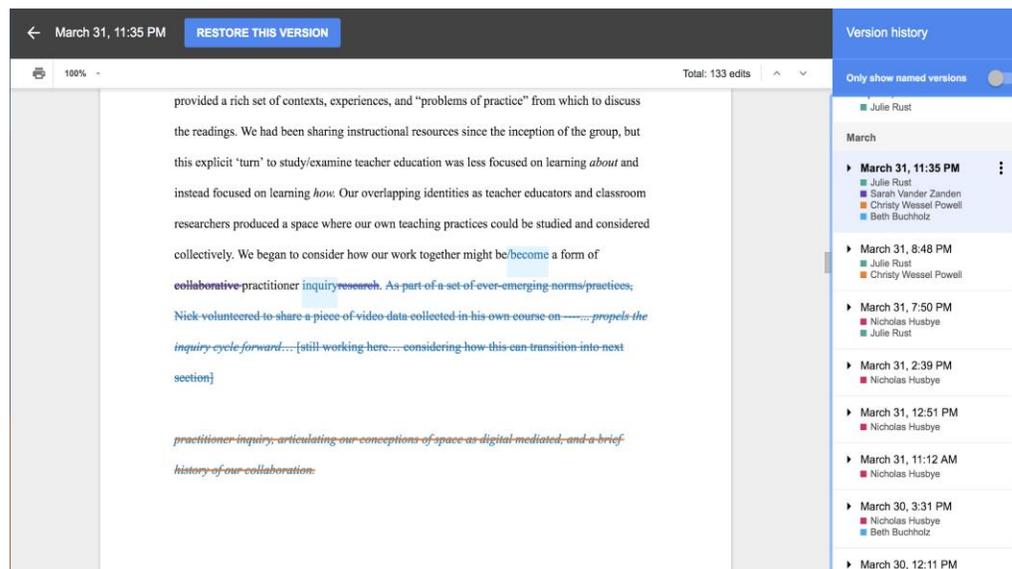*Figure 4.* Collaborative writing tools allow us to track our collaborative writing projects, not to assign credit, but to see how ideas develop through the process.

Texting. While video meetings, synchronous writing, and file sharing are the tools that support the majority of work recognized by academia in general, the ongoing texting thread growing over the course of our collaboration is the mortar

that holds our collaborative work together. Our texting thread has taken on both social and work dimensions. On it, we post pictures of our snow days, vent about a particularly frustrating thing that happened in class, ask if anyone has recommendations for a particular article or book, gather suggestions for course policies, check in to see what our goals are as a group before the next Google Meet, send words of encouragement, virtual high-fives or silly GIFs, and help hold each other generally accountable. Texting supports the maintenance of our relationships with one another on a daily basis, though it is also an exceptional tool to support our in-the-moment work as practitioner researchers.

Early in our collaborative work together, we sought to make sense of post-structural and posthuman theories and ascertain their potential for impacting teacher education research in ways that resulted in better prepared pre-service teachers. Reading Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) was a core activity during this time. A dense and complex text, we relied heavily on texting to find our ways into the authors' words. Figure 5 captures one such instance: Beth sends out a particularly interesting line from our reading and, while the responses might seem flippant in this decontextualized example, it pushes our collective thinking. Insertions like this, which are common as we encounter interesting articles, book chapters, and entire books that relate to collaborative or individual projects, have the effect of keeping our collective thoughts on the relationship between theory and practice. In this way, texts not only support our social connections with one another but also serve as a way to maintain our engagement with theory and research between our video meetings.
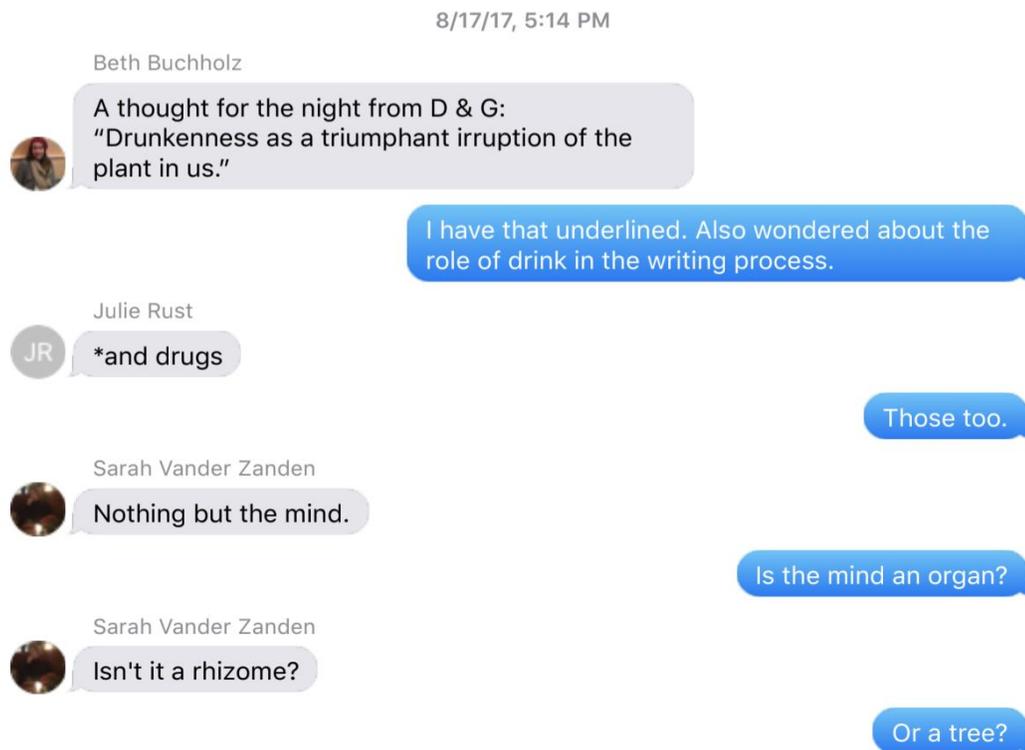
Figure 5. Theory inserts itself into our day through texting.

What these Digital Tools Produce for Collaborative Practitioner Research

We share these four tools not because the tools themselves are necessarily "new" or "innovative," but because of what they have made possible when used over time in tandem with geographically dispersed colleagues. Certainly, our use of these tools ebbs, flows, and shifts with time, but collectively these tools have become a kind of meshwork to our ongoing work as teacher educators-practitioners-researchers engaged in thinking about our own practice, and thinking about these practices across institutions. We want to draw attention to the affordances of these tools to engage in practitioner research *differently*.

The most salient difference is the possibility for these tools to be leveraged to support teacher educators in navigating the changes in educator preparation and policy. While there is, to some extent, local influence over the ways teachers are prepared, those local controls are being increasingly impacted by larger forces such as the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association

Center for Best Practices, 2010) and assessments such as the EdTPA (Crofts, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2015). Leveraging digital tools for practitioner research across multiple sites creates opportunities to speak back to large-scale educational reform projects with data that extends beyond one single course in one particular context. We argue it is an opportunity to exercise intelligent professional responsibility, "the democratic accountability in teacher education [that] is grounded in trust of the profession, builds on professionals' knowledge and collective commitments to local and larger goals, and yields useful and valuable information concerning program improvement" (Cochran-Smith, et. al., 2018, p. 167) The goal of any teacher education program is to support the development of high-quality teachers for the areas the program serves; it is the immediate space in which local and national policies play out. Through uses of networked practitioner research, there is potential to speak back to these policies as they are lived, drawing attention to the negotiations that must happen between the abstraction of policy and the specificity of the classroom.

Designing for Collaborative Practitioner Research in Online Spaces

While digital tools help structure our collaboration, the ways in which we use the tools in service of our larger goals is most important. As a group, we entertain several goals simultaneously: to understand emerging research, to engage in our own collective inquiries, and to produce writing that conveys our work. Beyond these pragmatic goals, we have sought to use technology to reify our connections to one another. The ethos that operates alongside the utilization of these digital tools is an important component supporting our ongoing collaboration. For others who may be considering constructing similar arrangements, we outline thinking that has supported our work together.

Keep digital collaboration for practitioner research manageable. Despite the fact that many of the tools that support virtual collaborations can accommodate large numbers of people, we have found one vital component of keeping our work together sustainable has been keeping the number of collaborators manageable. Given the lack of restraints presented by digital spaces, it may be tempting to give in to the idea the number of people who your collaborative group can sustain is limitless, only constrained by the number of individuals who can log online or can be supported by whatever tools the group decides to utilize. While access is important, the design of a longitudinal collaborative group requires the number of participants to be manageable for the group as a whole. One of the strengths of our collaboration has been our ability to articulate the boundaries of the work we do together with a recognition of the unique experiences, interests, and skills we each bring to the work.

In suggesting the maintenance of a research collaborative, we are not suggesting the design of an exclusive club. The purpose of this activity, after all, is to support building relationships across different geographic locations around common work. While the authors of this manuscript comprise a core collaborative group there is permeability among membership depending upon function. Engagement is not an all-or-nothing endeavor, allowing there to be space for multiple kinds of participation.

Another key component of keeping practitioner research manageable is choosing collaborators that you work well with, that you trust, and whose research interests overlap/compliment your own. In addition, willingness to rotate first author/leadership positions ensures that one member of the group doesn't carry too heavy a load. A tactic we have enacted to keep our work together manageable is to choose an overarching theme or interest that might inform our work during a given semester. For example, to date, we have chosen three foci: post-qualitative inquiry, the practice-turn in teacher education, and just catching up on young adult literature. Choosing a theme carves out a tentative road map that we can choose to either follow or veer away from, but does not limit us from discussing, reading or collaborating about other issues.

Ensure time for the personal. As a collaborative group, our work together is exactly that: work. While the majority of our time is spent thinking through readings, establishing workflows for written manuscripts, and checking in on individual and collaborative projects, we also check in with one another personally. We want to know about each other's families, life happenings, pleasure reading, and viewpoints on the current state of the world. We welcome opportunities to connect on a personal level as, like many others who live at a distance from people they enjoy, we miss the opportunity to be in one another's life in the physical way that was possible while we were graduate students. Furthermore, the work becomes more valuable because we are invested in the people with whom we collaborate.

There is a particular balance to maintain, however, and that balance looks different for us depending on which technological tool we are using. Google Docs, for instance, are rarely spaces where the personal is explicitly addressed, through it does occasionally appear in a comment in a collaborative manuscript. Conversely, text messages are an ongoing thread of our quotidian lives, though work does make an appearance as we remind each other of deadlines and prompt with questions. Google Meet is, perhaps, where we demonstrate the most balance as it would be recognized by the outer world. Because our meeting times are

finite--90 minutes every other week--we try to ensure we only spend the first fifteen to twenty minutes catching up with one another before digging into work. That we shift to work so quickly speaks to the importance of the role other technological tools play in our ongoing collaboration: we can transition so quickly because we know there will be other opportunities to speak to the personal.

Be upfront about individual and collaborative value. There are far-too-numerous pulls for an academic's time, from teaching to research to supporting students. In describing this work, we want to ensure that we convey the value we collectively and individually experience in this work toward advancing our research goals. We want to ensure this is not just one more thing, but, rather, a space that has been fortifying and meaningful. We have come to define value in a variety of ways over the course of the collaboration; in the beginning, value was found in the opportunity to collaboratively discuss new directions in our field, directions we ourselves were unsure about, wondering together about how this might impact our practice. Later, while we continued to read together, we also shifted to collaborative writing and, more recently, data analysis. As the work shifts, so does the perceived value, with an emphasis on *what questions are of value to the collective us and individuals right now*? Time is always a resounding item of value, so we strive to ensure our time is filled with activity worthy of that value.

There is a sense of larger, collaborative strategy as collective value is negotiated within the group. While we are invested in work we find valuable and with people we enjoy, we also exist outside of this experience, as teacher educators and researchers whose career goals—tenure, full professor, a sabbatical to finally write that book—can exist alongside this collaborative work. In this way, we seek to attend to the ways our activities support individual measures of success as well as collective. Keeping value at the forefront creates the opportunity for group members to decline devoting time and energy to any given inquiry trajectory; a subgroup may emerge to take on that work. These splintered projects become part of our interactions, with inquiries about their progress, without taking away from the work of the larger collective. The ability to be a part of as well as apart from this collective work sustains each of us.

Expect to experiment, find a rhythm. Academic life, for a variety of factors, has gathered an enormous amount of speed (Berg & Seeber, 2016); faculty members are being asked to do more with less time to do it in. In a workplace rooted in a culture of efficiency and productivity, time must accounted for (e.g., CVs, mid-tenure review). Despite our emphasis in the previous section around the careful use of time and realization of clearly articulated group and

individual expectations, we also have found great value in the serendipitous discoveries that can be made when carving out the space(s) to take risks, experiment, and play with theories, data, or questions that may or may not result in a line on our CV. While we are currently in a heavily-productive season of our collaboration, focused on submitting manuscripts and proposals, this productivity was generated from our initial, playful purposes. We have spent many video meetings together analyzing teaching videos, playing around with our own use of post-structural theories and methods, sharing our "go-to" coding practices. Much of the time we have spent in conversation has not nor likely will result in a publication or presentation. However, the time spent was not time wasted. These moments produced different forms of ripples: ideas for new teaching approaches, a better understanding of a methodology we might pick up for a future analysis, a sense of something that has proven to *not* be theoretically useful.

Of course, trust is the necessary prerequisite to vulnerability of this sort; it is the safety net that enables openness to risk such as when we shared our messy coding practices and experimented with new ones. Risk becomes an opportunity for growth through the group's mutual support. The prerequisites of trust and safety allow critical friends communities to fully function because participants "transition out of the usual working relationship structures, so they can connect more deeply and collaborate more effectively" (Mattoon & McKean, 2018, p. 4). Trust was built from the time we took away for social affiliation building at the beginning of each Google Meet. It was built when we vented about a terrible teaching day via group text. It was reaffirmed when we misunderstood a key tenant of an article we collaboratively read and the group listened and asked questions rather than laughed and dismissed.

We argue that practitioner research across multiple sites refutes what Ellul (1967) described as technique: "*the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given stage of development) in *every* field of human activity" (p.xxv, italics in original). Utilizing digital tools to support collaborative practitioner research will be inefficient; technologies may not work on any given day, time needs to be devoted to understanding each of the contexts within which everyone is a teacher educator, and, given the various interests a group of people embody, there may be lines of reading and inquiry that do not result in publications or presentations. In other words, a collaborative research group must be willing to find--and accept--its own internal rhythm(s) in each season, understanding "there is no right beat for all communities, and the beat is likely to change as the community evolves. But finding the right rhythm at each stage is key to a community's development" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 63).

Discussion

This issue of the *Journal of Practitioner Research* seeks to reconceptualize the role of practitioner research in a world of rapidly changing policies regarding educator preparation. It is important to be clear about our intentions: we wish to convey the emerging importance of digital collaboration in navigating the changes in educator preparation policy and practice. Together, we have been able to leverage these technologies to engage in longitudinal inquiries into our own individual teaching practices, while also providing opportunities to develop a common sense of the field of literacy education teacher preparation. While presentations at local and national conferences and writing for multiple audiences are important venues for distributing our work, informal collaborative networks are another way forward, offering teacher educators opportunities to engage in the intellectual fortification of teaching practice (Figure 6). Rather than these digital networks supplanting current channels for sharing practitioner research, we propose they sustain, expand, and provide nuance to the work of practitioner research.

Within an ecosystem that includes digital networks for practitioner research, there is a built-in component of "going public" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) with one's research. As demonstrated in the examples above, coming together and using our teaching as objects of inquiry to more fully understand new concepts and ways forward in educator preparation allowed for ideas for move from an individual local to a collaborative network. When considering the transformative possibilities of this digital networking, we envision collectives of like-minded teacher educators working in parallel, pursuing their own inquiries, reporting out in journals and conference presentations. In this way, these networks would inform one another without needing to be a member of multiple and a possibly overwhelming number of neworks.
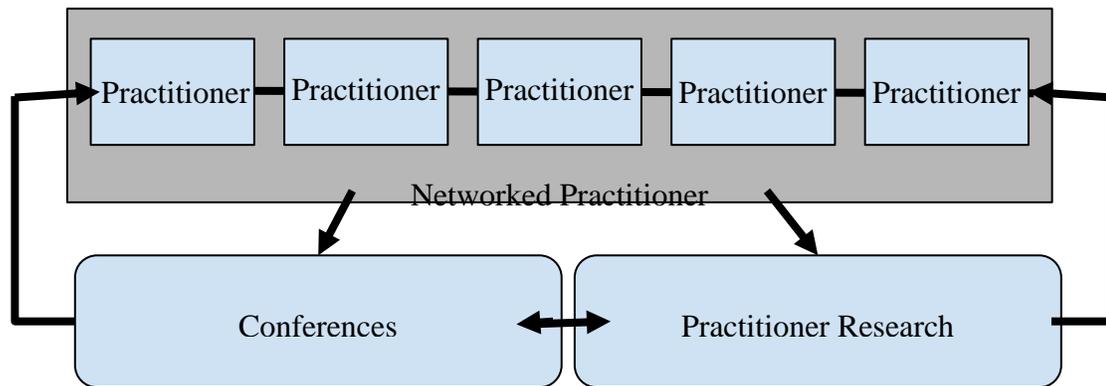
Figure 6. A Model for Networked Practitioner Research.

Furthermore, practitioner research affords one pathway for teacher educators to demonstrate self-accountability, speak back to critiques from external accountability systems, making a clear and transparent case for the kind of educator preparation Schools and Colleges of Education engage our preservice teachers in. This is more important now than ever, as policy makers and influencers need to encounter a unified approach to educator preparation that stretches beyond singular institutions. As teacher educators within teacher education programs, we have responsibilities to one another, to one another's pre-service teachers, and to the students those pre-service teachers will engage in their teaching to ensure our teaching is rigorous, well-designed for the daunting and complex task of teaching for student learning, and made as accessible as possible for learners. Such work begins in educator preparation.

Conclusion

The challenges facing teacher education are not faced by isolated institutions of higher education alone; rather, they impact the entire field of teacher education and must be addressed collaboratively. It is not enough to engage in individual practitioner research without connecting it to the work of others and, even better still, to engage in practitioner research alongside critical friends who share a common inquiry focus. Within this article, we have argued for the importance of making space for networked, collaborative communities of practice within which literacy educators can engage in practitioner research,

drawing upon instances of our practices engaged in such a community. In the writing of this manuscript, it strikes us how lonely work in academia can be, how isolated and incomprehensible to others it often seems. We hope that this glimpse into our experiences engaged with one another to support our own thinking about teacher education, who we are as teacher educators, and who we are to one another encourages readers to create their own networked practitioner research community.

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