

Active learning in an online teacher training course: an experience with teaching cases

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INTRODUCTION

In teacher education, success is often achieved when teachers are viewed as active learners who continuously develop their professional knowledge through reflections on their experiences and challenges (Schon, 1987). Teaching cases involve real or fictional histories of teachers facing dilemmas in various educational contexts in their daily professional lives (L. S. Shulman, 1992), align well with this model. These narratives enable teachers to analyze dramatic tensions, whether resolved or not, from multiple perspectives while considering the thoughts, emotions, and intentions of the teachers involved (L. S. Shulman, 1992). This work evaluates an online teacher training course, called Teaching for Meaning in Life (TML), which used teaching cases as a key component for promoting active learning. TML aimed to provide teacher training on the pedagogy of meaning in life, grounded in Viktor Frankl's existential-phenomenological philosophy. We refrain from an in-depth explanation due to space constraints, but we can summarize its primary objective as sharpening students' conscience to discover a meaning in life, meaningful tasks in their lives, rather than merely disseminating knowledge (Frankl, 1988).

TML COURSE

The TML was a 30-hour, no-cost online extension course offered at the State University of Feira de Santana and was conducted five times between 2020 and 2022. Asynchronous sessions (totaling 12 hours) covered theoretical aspects, whereas synchronous sessions (18 hours) focused on activities involving teaching cases. These activities comprised two parts: 1) participants discussed their analysis and perspectives of two teaching cases extracted from the literature; 2) each participant wrote a new teaching case, which involved the elaboration of various drafts, and sharing and discussion of them with the group to encourage discussion, learning and feedback. A tutor facilitated all meetings.

METHOD

A total of 70 Brazilian teachers enrolled in the TML course, with 40 successfully completing it. These participants represented a diverse regions (16 of the 27 federal units in Brazil), a wide age range (from 23 to 73 years old), varying teaching time (from 1 to 51 years), diverse teaching level (from preschool to higher education) and institutions of both public and private nature. We assessed the course using a survey with both closed and open-ended questions, with

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this study focusing on the open-ended responses. We imported them into NVivo to be coded based on the principles of thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Overall, participants highlighted that their experience with teaching cases in the TML course was practical and application-oriented, driven by educational challenges and group discussions. Both modes of employing teaching cases received positive feedback, whether it involved analyzing prior cases or creating new ones. In general, we identified that teaching cases offered the following benefits: 1) Time for focused reflection on pedagogical practice: teachers rarely allocate time to actively learn about their teaching practices. Consequently, analyzing past situations enabled teachers to step back and reflect not only on that issues but also on their current pedagogical approaches; 2) Bridging theory and practice: teachers engaged in discussions of theoretical aspects from the course within the context of real, complex educational scenarios, critically reflecting on their teaching approaches in light of this theory; 3) Collaborative learning: teachers expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to work with their peers, sharing practices, questions, insights, and emotions.

CONCLUSION

While active learning is often emphasized in student contexts, its exploration in teacher contexts during their education process is less common. This study demonstrates how teacher training can be conducted in an active manner to promote teachers' professional development. Notably, the use of teaching cases facilitated the integration of theory and practice through individual reflection and collaborative discussions.

The findings underscore the critical and substantial role that teaching cases can play in teacher education, even in online formats and with diverse themes and audiences. Despite these positive conclusions, we intend to explore the distinctions between analyzing and writing cases and their unique contributions in future work.

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