"THEY HAVE TAUGHT ME A THING OR TWO ABOUT HUMAN RELATIONS AND CHANGED MY PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN THE PROCESS": A NARRATIVE BY A TEACHER EDUCATOR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC[1]

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Abstract: This experience report derives from a professor teaching in an English Language Education undergraduate course in a State University in the South of Brazil, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The narrative focuses on human relations and the ethical responsibility towards two groups taught. The report discusses the encounters (in synchronous classes via Google meet) with pre-service teachers by means of voices from the Philosophy (LARGE, 2015; LÉVINAS [1988] 2020), the Education (TODD, 2003; 2015), and the Applied Linguistics (BEIJAARD; MEIJER; VERLOOP, 2004) fields. Some of the examples provided also support the viewpoint of professional identity as being a process, instead of a product. In sum, the narrative provides insights related to Teacher Education, human relations, and professional identity.
Keywords: Teacher education; Remote learning; Human relations.

"ELAS ME ENSINARAM ALGUMAS COISAS SOBRE RELAÇÕES HUMANAS E TRANSFORMARAM MINHA IDENTIDADE PROFISSIONAL NO PROCESSO": NARRATIVA DE UM PROFESSOR FORMADOR DURANTE A PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

Resumo: Este relato de experiência deriva de aulas de um professor em um curso de Letras Inglês em uma universidade estadual, no sul do Brasil, durante a pandemia de COVID-19. A narrativa foca nas relações humanas e na responsabilidade ética para com os dois grupos para os quais lecionou. A narrativa discute os encontros (aulas síncronas via *Google Meet*) com as professoras em formação inicial por meio de vozes do campo da Filosofia (LARGE, 2015; LÉVINAS, [1988] 2020), da Educação (TODD, 2003; 2015) e da Linguística Aplicada (BEIJAARD; MEIJER; VERLOOP, 2004). Alguns dos exemplos apresentados também suportam a perspectiva processual da identidade profissional, ao invés de tomá-la como produto. Em síntese, a narrativa fornece reflexões relacionadas à formação de professores, às relações humanas e à identidade profissional.
Palavras-chave: Formação de professores; Ensino remoto; Interações humanas.

Sensibility is the break-up of every system.

(Lévinas, [1988] 2020, p. 63)

Setting the ground[2]

The unquestionable transformative power of narratives in Teacher Education (CHAN, 2012) is one of the reasons why I decided to use the opportunity of this report to reflect upon my professional experience as an educator so far. On this writing, I will argue that, in specific circumstances, remote English Teacher Education may increase human relations and, in my case, consequently, transform professional identity (BEIJAARD; MEIJER; VERLOOP, 2004; RICHARDSON, ALSUP, 2015). I will intertwine both the description of moments from my own lived participation in relation to two groups of pre-service teachers and the discussion of such encounters by means of voices from the Philosophy (LARGE, 2015; Lévinas, [1988] 2020), the Education (TODD, 2003; 2015), and the Applied Linguistics (BEIJAARD; MEIJER; VERLOOP, 2004) fields. Now, I turn to the contextualization of my experience.

In August 2019, I joined what I certainly describe as a distinguished team of professors from an English Language Teacher Education undergraduate course, from a State University in the South of Brazil. As a young and novice educator, the awareness of a constant building and changing professional identity was at the center in my day-to-day practice. The first months had not prepared me to what was about to come, that is, a deadly pandemic and the suspension of classes on campus, which occurred in March, 2020. It is fair to say neither I nor any other teacher educator was ready for that unexpected scenario. This explains the three-month period of training needed to use online platforms and of discipline programs' changes.

On the institutional level, it was decided that professors would adopt both synchronous and asynchronous interactions to teach the classes, via Google meet and Google classroom, respectively. From now on, assignments would also be considered as part of the disciplines time allotted, which means professors would have less synchronous contact with the undergraduate students, because they would spend some time doing their assignments. The expectation of starting the remote classes can be properly characterized by what Todd (2015) refers as shuddering[3]. Little I knew that this feeling would not be restricted to the first couple of remote classes. I have felt that my sensibility has been intensified (LÉVINAS, [1988] 2020), surely because of the pandemic, and it also affected my teaching.

On this narrative, I will focus on the impact of human relations (that is, between pre-service English teachers and me) on my own professional identity in order to illustrate the

intensified volatility in the remote teacher education, during COVID-19. I believe this writing of mine also works as a response to educators' uneasiness related to students' lack of participation in remote learning environments (regardless of their teaching context). Most of the students neither open the cameras nor the microphones, which makes the synchronous classes more challenging. I have been teaching a few groups since the pandemic started in March, 2020. Nevertheless, I decided to center my narrative on two groups that I had finished teaching in February, 2021, on the same subject; one in the afternoon and one in the evening, constituted of 13 and 11 pre-service English teachers, respectively. I consciously made the decision of not providing more detailed information regarding the context and the pre-service English teachers as to preserve their identities (WILES et al, 2008).

After this brief context description, I now turn to some theoretical notes on (remote) Teacher Education (SPALDING et al, 2011) and on learning *from* the Other[4] (TODD, 2003; 2015). Next, I rely on a few examples of mine within the classes taught to argue about the greatness of ethical human interactions and how I responded to them. Following this section, I draw on voices from teacher identity studies (BEIJAARD; MEIJER; VERLOOP, 2004) to reflect upon my own transformations. Lastly, I share the final remarks.

Theoretical notes on (remote) Teacher Education and on learning *from* the Other

> If teachers educators are in agreement on anything, it is that teacher learning is complicated […], not only because teachers learn to teach by drawing on a complex array of internal and external resources, which are difficult for researchers to disentangle and understand, but also because it occurs over time and is contextualized, unpredictable, and often idiosyncratic (SPALDING et al, 2011, p. 3).

Spalding et al (2011) argue why there cannot be a save-the-world approach when it comes to Teacher Education. It was so then, when we were on campus, and it is so now, when we are on screens. As teacher educators, we can rely on a few features that have been seen as fruitful to take into account. One of them is well-discussed by Sharon Todd (2003; 2015), who is a professor at Maynooth University, in Ireland. She has been working with the Levinasian theoretical framework in the education field for some time.

Todd (2015, p. 54) states that if we want to promote an education responsive to the injustices of the present, which I believe to be one of the core ideas of Teacher Education, it is done "[...] not by defining what it is we should be building toward in the future, but by outlining a commitment to confronting what is in the present". Taking this reflection to the current pandemic moment, it is not about imagining a new and better Teacher Education in the future, but doing it now. One possible way of doing it can also be found in both Lévinas' and Todd's writings.

Lévinas ([1988] 2020) suggests recognizing the possibility of humanness in violence and confronting it in order to feel the grand responsibility that I have for the Other. Relating it to the educational scenario, it is only when we, as teachers' educators, become aware of the institutional power we bear that we can deeply care and attend[5] (TODD, 2003) to our pre-service teachers' voices (i.e. needs). That is to say, realizing the atrocities that can be committed allows us to better comprehend the responsibilities we uphold as teacher educators.

This idea is just a hint of what can be learned from Lévinas' (1998; [1988] 2020) and Todd's (2003; 2015) voices. By acknowledging our responsibility, we shall be constant guardians to the needs, sufferings, and anguishes of our pre-service teachers. When they reveal such feelings to us, I see it as our responsibility to attend (TODD, 2003). Now I turn to a few examples from my teaching practice and discuss them oriented by the aforementioned authors.

Same subject, different lived experiences

Even though I have been teaching a couple of groups in different subjects, I have decided to focus on two groups in this narrative. I taught both of them weekly on the same subject, but on different timetables. As I reflect retrospectively on my interactions with both groups, I recall that in a first moment I attempted to approach them equally. For instance, I tried to assign them the same readings and guide discussions under the same parameters. Little did I know, as Lévinas ([1988] 2020) later warned me, each human being embodies unique lived experiences. Consequently, it is certainly unfruitful to take for granted what will work in a class regardless of who the students are. Only my contact with the pre-service

English teachers from each group afforded me the chance of adjusting the way we would address the content and, most importantly, learn *from* each other.

At the beginning, both synchronous (via Google meet) and asynchronous (via Google classroom) interactions were of the utmost relevance to converge and to differentiate our experiences from different standpoints in the remote educational environment. To provide an example, my openness to attend (TODD, 2003) to their voices led me to reorganize the way I had been posting activities on the platform. Pre-service teachers from one group strongly recommended that I posted all the assignments on Google classroom with deadlines, so they could access all the required tasks at once, whereas students from the other group did not refer to this necessary change. This technical example was only possible of solution due to our openness.

Even though the program for the aforementioned discipline was well designed to instigate pre-service teachers' lived (classroom) experiences, I do believe such sharing of personal and intimate examples can happen in any discipline. I often centered the classes on their examples, which most of the time were related to their teaching practicum, not only because I knew the pedagogical benefits (DOBOZY, 2009), but also due to the awareness of my ethical responsibility to attend (TODD, 2003) to their issues. For me, providing a safe space where they could share their thoughts, questions, and anxiety. It was as important as (or should I say more important than) theoretically discussing a paper assigned for that class. I recall one synchronous meeting (via Google meet) in which two pre-service teachers, who were responsible for leading the discussion, asked me at the end of the class if the discussion was as expected, because their colleagues participated so much that they did not have time to share the examples from the paper they had read. I responded to them: “that was not the expected; that was way better than I had imagined”.

As Lévinas ([1988] 2020) warns us, there is always the possibility of being violent by not recognizing, listening or responding to the Other’s presence. If things had gone this way, Rocha’s (2020) question would be the most important one: “What do we lose in dangerously dark times like the ones we live in?” Relying on a political scientist and a philosopher, she responds: “we lose everything; we lose everyone” (ROCHA, 2020, p. 119 – emphasis added). This is what we, as teacher educators, risk to let happen when we do not realize that on the

other side of the screen there is a human being, full of uncertainty in these times of crises; genuinely tired of being in front of a computer for hours and hours. Ultimately, I believe we all, teacher educators and pre-service teachers, have unconsciously intensified our sensibilities, and lucky we are because of that. As I referred to in the epigraph, "sensibility is the break-up of every system" (LÉVINAS, [1988] 2020, p. 63) – we can together overcome even the hardest times, as the pandemic has proven to be.

Constantly transformed professional identity

As a process and not a product, professional identity is seen as "[…] not something one has, but something that develops during one's whole life" (p. 107). That is to say one key question is: "Who am I at this moment?" (BEIJAARD; MEIJER; VERLOOP, 2004, p. 108). In my case, I would reply that I am a teacher educator who recognizes the privilege of interacting with phenomenal pre-service English teachers, who, unquestionably, have changed my own identity as an educator by means of the synchronous classes we have had, via Google meet.

Regardless of my openness to every single class to be as dialogical as possible, I cannot erase from my mind a comment made by one of the pre-service teachers during one synchronous class of ours. Although I do not bring her own words, they were so powerful and stroke me so profoundly that I remember them being something like this: "I do not participate much in the classes because I do not feel that I can contribute". This spontaneous expression of hers weighed tons on my shoulders. I felt responsible for that. In my viewpoint, she meant her experience did not matter; her timid participation would be unnoticed. On the contrary, I noticed and cared. This passage made me reflect a lot on how I had been approaching the synchronous classes. In the beginning of the discipline, I mentioned they could feel free to participate at any time they desired, consequently I would unlikely call any of them by name to share their thoughts around the topic under discussion. After this pre-service teacher's comments, there were times I have called her to contribute; not to force her to, but to demonstrate her voice, her lived experiences, and her ideas were valued. It turned out we started discussing each time less the examples from the theoretical papers and more those the pre-service English teachers brought to the classes. To some extent, I imagine that all teacher educators feel somehow responsible for the experiences that pre-service teachers get

to live and later remember about their own past experiences on the English Language Teacher Education undergraduate courses they attend to.

Another constant change in my professional identity was the unfolding request for both formal and informal feedback on how the discipline was going. Requiring formal discipline feedback was part of my teaching practices when on campus. However, because of the round-the-clock changes I felt it was necessary to learn the pre-service teachers' more often. Then, I would start every synchronous class (via Google meet) by asking them how they were coping with this time of crisis and whether we could adapt anything in the discipline in order to be more sensitive to their personal and professional lives. This change has taught me that there is always room for feedback; as each class is an unique encounter with the Other (LÉVINAS, [1988] 2020).

During the exceptional pandemic period, the university had recommended that professors reserved an amount of time from the discipline so then undergraduate students could do the assignments asynchronously. In my discipline, with both groups, we had initially agreed on having one synchronous meeting each fifteen days. However, after some months, we realized that we would all benefit more by meeting synchronously every week, even though it would be for a shorter period of time. This experience taught me that pre-service teachers, and myself included, do prefer more real time interaction (Google meet) than asynchronous tasks (Google classroom). Nevertheless, I consider it is necessary to stress that all the aforementioned pre-service teachers had access to internet connection and proper devices to participate in such classes.

A fourth continuous change relates to the way the synchronous classes were approached. During the first ones, I was designing the meetings based mostly on one type of interaction, that is, either teacher-centred or student-centred. However, the pre-service teachers' frequent feedback indicated that all synchronous could actually be a mix of such approaches. Consequently, the classes would usually start with a brief contextualisation by myself, followed by numerous thought-provoking questions that I would pose to the students (aimed at allowing them to reflect upon their own teaching practices) and end the classes with some closing arguments.

I had often mentioned to these students that I felt sorry for not having the opportunity to interact with them on campus. Undergraduate students from one of the groups I have never met in person, for example. As I finish this writing, I wonder whether this remote interaction had afforded me different feelings from those I would have had on campus, and because of these new feelings I emphasized and got even closer to these pre-service English teachers. In sum, different experiences allow us to create and let grow different feelings, too.

Thanks to the constant uncertainty of the synchronous classes (Google meet), I had gotten to live what I lived. Ultimately, I am confident to affirm that they taught me a thing or two about human relations and changed my professional identity in the process.

Final remarks

As I have been arguing, there is no such a thing as a recipe, a guide, or a set of instructions on how to relate to students' lived experiences. However, it is essential to state that an openness to hear and to attend (TODD, 2003) to what the Other says is a milestone. To put it differently and expand the reasons why this narrative cannot be taken as prescription, I quote Todd (2003, p. 37):

> As teachers and students, we tentatively come together in anticipation of an encounter of which we cannot predict the outcome; the exchanged looks, the tones of voice, the artifacts of curriculum, the passion of opinion, the indifference to a question, the time and space to be negotiated, the desire for love and recognition, all of this and more comprise the tiny yet colossal details that shape and shake the ground upon which educational edifices are built.

Not all synchronous classes turned out as expected because either human relations or technological problems occurred. During these classes, we were always aware that the connection could fail, the dog could bark, someone could enter the room, and many other unexpected occurrences, but ultimately, I valued the time we spent together. Each one interacts in different ways for specific reasons, and I believe it explains why not everyone opens the camera every class; why not everyone opens the microphone every time that feels like participating in the discussion. Every class can be seen as a singular encounter and it can also turn out to be ethical (LÉVINAS, 1998; ([1988] 2020) if we attend (TODD, 2015) to each Other' voices (i.e. needs).

I hope this narrative can be read as an invitation for reflecting upon how we relate to each other in synchronous (remote) classes in the education scope. More than challenges that sometimes seem to be unsolvable, this remote Teacher Education may also provide us insights regarding learning, teaching, interacting, and living.

Throughout this writing, I have indicated a couple of examples of transformed professional practices and my own identity, such as: from formal to continuous informal feedback, from one-method class to a mix-method one, and from discussing authors' examples to reflecting upon pre-service teachers' own teaching experiences. In sum, I hope this narrative provokes new insights related to Teacher Education, human relations, and professional identity.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for this professional and learning experience, which was only possible thanks to my university colleagues and the pre-service English teachers who avidly participated in the classes. I also recognize the contribution from *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (CAPES) by granting me a PhD scholarship.

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[1] All quotes published in papers originally in Portuguese and here employed are my own translation.

[2] Considering the current Brazilian resolution for research in the Human and Social Sciences area (CONSELHO NACIONAL DE SAÚDE, 2016, p. 2), one of the items from the article first states that "research that aims at the theoretical deepening of situations that emerge spontaneously and contingently in professional practice, as long as they do not reveal data that can identify the subject" does not need to be submitted to and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), that's the reason why this experience report was not analysed by an IRB.

[3] The unexpected, the uncertain, and the unwilling implication.

[4] As I employ this term based on the Levinasian theory, I write it with a capital letter as Emmanuel Lévinas did.

[5] It is "[...] a notion of listening that does not merely respect the Other's alterity but indeed *attends* to it. […] how listening does not only contribute to an ethical response to suffering, but – through its very capacity for attentiveness – how listening can itself be an ethical response" (TODD, 2003, p. 118).