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Abstract

Many fields require practitioners to develop the dispositions, reflection, and reflexivity skills to navigate complex professional demands. Yet, there are limited methods for fostering these skills. Given that the act of qualitative coding is both iterative and reflexive, this paper shares an innovative approach to teaching students how to apply coding to their own reflective writing. We feature our process of teaching preservice teachers our self-coding method and lessons learned along the way from engaging 100 teacher candidates in the practice. Over four years, across three different higher education settings, graduate and undergraduate teacher candidates alike demonstrated insightful reflections about their developing professional dispositions and exhibited reflexivity. We conclude with suggestions on how other fields can adopt the self-coding process to develop reflexive practitioners.

Keywords

qualitative coding, pedagogy, professional dispositions, reflection, reflexivity

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Qualitative Coding as a Pedagogy for Fostering Professional Dispositions and Reflexivity

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Many fields require practitioners to develop the dispositions, reflection, and reflexivity skills to navigate complex professional demands. Yet, there are limited methods for fostering these skills. Given that the act of qualitative coding is both iterative and reflexive, this paper shares an innovative approach to teaching students how to apply coding to their own reflective writing. We feature our process of teaching preservice teachers our self-coding method and lessons learned along the way from engaging 100 teacher candidates in the practice. Over four years, across three different higher education settings, graduate and undergraduate teacher candidates alike demonstrated insightful reflections about their developing professional dispositions and exhibited reflexivity. We conclude with suggestions on how other fields can adopt the self-coding process to develop reflexive practitioners.

Keywords: qualitative coding, pedagogy, professional dispositions, reflection, reflexivity

Introduction

We are professors of teacher education and scholars of inclusive curriculum and pedagogy. As teacher educators, we work to guide the development of our upcoming teachers not just as skilled practitioners, but as future educators with the professional dispositions, the beliefs, values, and attitudes that underpin equitable and inclusive teaching practices (Borko et al., 2007; LaBelle & Belknap, 2016). As critical qualitative researchers, we work to understand how our preservice teachers¹ dispositions inform their developing teacher identities and guide their emerging classroom practices.

Over the last five years, our shared identities as postmodern critical qualitative researchers who are both invested in advancing preservice teachers' reflexive capacities led us to develop and then investigate an innovative approach to reflective writing assignments wherein students self-code their reflective journals. With this work, our goal was to develop a new method for supporting the development of dispositions, self-reflection, and reflexivity through empowering teacher candidates to become critical scholars of their reflective writing.

¹ In the United States, students who are enrolled in teacher education programs, but are not yet classroom teachers, are referred to as preservice teachers.

Reflective Writing in Teacher Education

Reflective writing assignments can promote critical thinking, help future practitioners make sense of field experiences, and consequently connect theory to practice (McGuire et al., 2009; Stuart et al., 2020). Deeply embedded in teacher education practices, reflective writing often serves as a tool for the advancement of teacher dispositions (Clarà, 2015; Cohen-Sayag & Fischl, 2012; LaBelle & Belknap, 2016). Concurrently, many reflective writing assignments support professional identity formation (Tracey & Hutchinson, 2018) as the student develops the requisite knowledge, skills, and understandings to traverse from student to novice practitioner. Reflective writing is also a tool that can aid the development of reflexivity, the way one's values and beliefs shape our identity, and therefore our awareness of decision making in practice (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2010; Wooglar, 1988). A preservice teacher's ability to engage with reflexivity is tied to their development of professional dispositions. It relies on deep investment on the part of the preservice teacher and, therefore, advancement in teacher educators' current practices. Moreover, it is the cultivation of future professional's reflexivity that is most likely to inform and potentially transform actions (O'Neil, 2012) as we strive for more just and equitable societies. While reflective writing is deeply rooted in teacher education, innovation in reflective writing practices is limited, and all too often, reflection assignments remain just another item on a student's to-do list (Beauchamp, 2015; Galea, 2012; Hobbs, 2007; Hubbs & Brand, 2005).

Reflective Writing as Qualitative Data

Many faculty researchers transform student reflective writing into data sets for their research (e.g., Kalman, 2011; McGuire et al., 2009; Siegel & Valtierra, 2018; Sproule et al., 2019). In our case, as qualitative researchers in the field of teacher preparation, we have used preservice teachers' reflective journals as textual data sources in research studies inquiring into their dispositional development (Siegel & Valtierra, 2017; Valtierra & Siegel, 2019). Similarly, to better understand the progression of preservice teacher professional identity development, Creasy and Nelson (2016) thematically coded ten preservice teachers' reflective journals that they were assigned as part of student teaching. Moreover, Zaretsky and Biglers' (2021) published a qualitative analysis of 39 preservice math teachers' reflective journals that indicated how the practice of journaling helped participants appreciate how their thinking evolved over time.

While preservice teachers can benefit from reflective writing experiences, the scholarship on reflection is simultaneously enriched by the writing students produce. Due to the textual nature of these assignments, researchers that analyze reflective writing tend to rely on qualitative methods. As such, we sought to develop and study an innovative approach to reflective writing assignments that could empower preservice teachers to become qualitative researchers of their own reflective writing and subsequent meaning-making.

Qualitative Coding as Pedagogy

Qualitative research's subjective nature requires the researcher to understand themselves as a multicultural being, name the philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks that guide their actions, and understand writing as a form of interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because qualitative data analysis is based in a constructivist and participatory landscape, the researcher is interested in exploring the data for the meaning behind experiences and investigating multiple perspectives. To the qualitative researcher, coding is an act of discovery. As we become intimate with our textual data, the process of

coding provides a roadmap for allowing meaning to emerge and elevate our participants' voices. On the process of coding, Miles, and colleagues (2014) write, "coding is deep reflection about and, thus, deep analysis and interpretation of the data's meanings" (p. 72). Coding is not a clinical or perfunctory act but rather an iterative process that guides the researcher to make meaning of lived experiences.

Qualitative data analysis is often presented as synonymous to coding (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016), which might account for why there is little exploration of applications of coding outside its utility in the research process. However, the nature of coding, that of exploration, discovery, and attention to participant voice is full of pedagogical possibility, rather than remaining solely in the realm of data analysis. We felt that coding can be more than the tool of a researcher; it can be a pedagogical avenue for preservice teachers to systematically interact with, and construct meaning from, their reflective writing (Siegel & Valtierra, 2018).

As professors of teacher education and critical scholars of inclusive practices, we hoped to empower preservice teachers with the systematic tools to construct (Charmaz, 2016) their self-understanding and its implications for practice. To this end, we developed a new approach to reflective writing in the context of teacher education, inspired by the act of coding qualitative research. We named our method "self-coding" as a nod to the ownership of the coding process being with the student, not with the scholar. Our conception of "self-coding" directly contrasts to the current ways that preservice teachers' journal reflections are used, both in practice and scholarship. Rather than our students writing crossing an invisible border where their textual data becomes propriety of the researcher, we hoped to empower students to develop a critical lens, and understand their reflections as contextually situated, and be able to expose subtexts, challenge dominant thinking, and engage in reflexivity (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin, 1989; Valtierra & Siegel, 2020). The "self" indicates not just the ownership of the process but also the responsibility of the preservice teacher for making meaning out of their discoveries.

Self-Coding in Action

The development of our self-coding method was informed by merging the scholarship on effective reflective writing assignments (e.g., Dukewich & Vossen, 2015; Stewart & Richardson, 2000) and the qualitative research methods literature (Charmaz, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016). As such, our self-coding methodology is directly linked to course based reflective writing assignments.

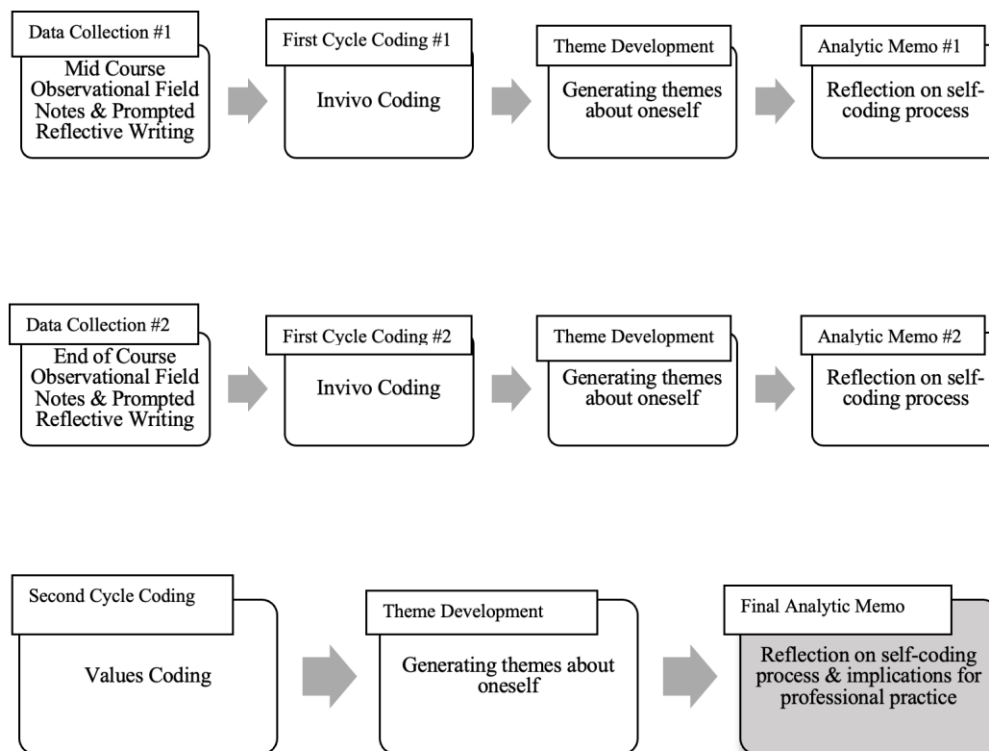
Self-Coding Process

The process begins with assigning students reflective journal prompts at intervals throughout the semester. The prompts are tailored to specific courses and their associated field experiences. Students submit their journals to their professor and receive course credit for completing the journals, but the journals' content is not assessed (Stewart & Richardson, 2000). The reflection journals serve as the qualitative data for the subsequent self-coding process.

Depending on the amount of reflective writing produced in each course, we engage students in two to three self-coding cycles over the span of each course. To begin the initial cycle, we deliver a short lecture on the purposes of qualitative research, coding, and examples of coding processes. Taking cues from Saldaña (2016), we present qualitative coding to students as a heuristic process that attributes meaning to individual datum and therefore serves as the link between data collection (students' reflection journals) and meaning making (self-coding process). Next, given its utility for novice researchers and emphasis on participant's own words, students are presented with examples of In Vivo first cycle coding and engage in a short practice exercise.

Following the lecture, students are instructed to In Vivo code a selection from their reflective journals. Our students then have class time to sort their codes into themes (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Self-Coding Method Used with Preservice Teachers



Each self-coding cycle ends with short “analytic memos” (Miles et al., 2014) guided by prompts specific to our professional dispositions, reflection, and reflexivity goals (Figure 2). In this way, the self-coding process mirrors the early part of qualitative data analysis.

Figure 2
Examples of Analytic Memo Prompts Tied to Professional Dispositions (Siegel & Valtierra, 2018; Valtierra & Siegel, 2020)

First Cycle Coding Analytic Memo Prompts
1. How did thinking about the teacher dispositions shape the way you reviewed your journal entries?
2. In what ways did coding your journal entries shape the way you reread your work?
3. After you reviewed your coded journal entries, what words occurred most frequently?
4. What theme did you come up with for your words/phrases?

As each course progresses and students engage in more reflective journaling, they repeat the process as mentioned above. Finally, at the end of each semester, we present a second short lecture on qualitative coding, this time sharing the purpose of and examples of Values Coding. Values Coding, according to Miles and colleagues (2014), is the application of three related codes that shed light on a participant’s values (V), attitudes (A), and beliefs (B). Given that Values Coding mirrors attributes of professional dispositions (Borko et al., 2007; LaBelle & Belknap, 2016), this method encourages self-inquiry into professional dispositions for teaching. We guide students through the second cycle of coding in which they sort all relevant

NVivo codes collected over the course into the three Values Coding categories. Along with another set of prompts designed to cultivate dispositional growth and enhanced reflection, we also include questions inquiring into the student's experiences using the self-coding method. These prompts help students synthesize their learning and allow us to understand how preservice teachers perceive the utility of the self-coding process (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Examples of Analytic Memo Prompts Tied to Self-coding Methods (Siegel & Valtierra, 2018; Valtierra & Siegel, 2020)

Second Cycle Coding Analytic Memo Prompts
1. As you reviewed your In Vivo codes, how did you decide which dispositional trait(s) (V, A, B) to code the words?
2. In what ways did Values Coding shape the way you think about your reflections?
3. How did coding your journal entries inform your emerging professional dispositions?
4. How did this experience inform your actions in the field over the semester? What about your future actions as a classroom teacher?

Inquiries into Self-Coding Practices

While we are both professors of teacher education and qualitative scholars with a focus on curriculum and pedagogy, we work at two very unlike institutions of higher education. The first author is faculty at a small, private liberal arts college in the Southwestern United States. The second author is faculty at a large land grant public university in the Northeastern United States. Each of our distinct institutions has provided the context for one or more of our research studies utilizing our self-coding methodology.

We first piloted the self-coding method with a group of graduate preservice teachers in the fall of 2016 at the first author's institution (Institution A) with a total of 15 preservice teachers. After our pilot, we implemented and studied the self-coding method in three subsequent studies, across our institutions of higher education. In each iteration of inquiry into our method of teaching qualitative self-coding, preservice teachers were completing fieldwork designed for them to connect course concepts to practice. In our case, fieldwork takes place in elementary and secondary classrooms. In each study, we collected and thematically analyzed transcripts of participants' self-generated codes, themes, and analytic memos to examine how the self-coding method influenced dispositions, reflection, and/or reflexivity across the different institutional contexts.

Following our pilot study, this method's second iteration was a cross-institutional study at the same private liberal arts college and a small private university in the Northeastern United States² (Institution B) with a total of 25 graduate level preservice teachers. During the cross-institutional implementation, which took place spring of 2017, we taught similar graduate courses, which allowed us to collaboratively use and study the self-coding method's utility across similar courses but in different institutional contexts (Siegel & Valtierra, 2018).

Next, we implemented the process at a large land grant state institution in the Northeastern United States over three sections of the same undergraduate course taught by the second author over three semesters: the fall of 2018, spring of 2019, and fall 2019 with a total of 45 preservice teacher participants (Valtierra & Siegel, 2020; Institution C). In total, we have implemented and studied how the self-coding method influences and empowers preservice teachers' dispositions, reflection, and reflexivity with a total of 100 participants.

² The second author's institution at the time of the study.

Table 1*Iterations of Implementation of the Self-Coding Method*

Year(s)	Institution(s)	Student Status	#Participants
2016 (pilot)	A	Graduate	15
2017	A & B	Graduate	25
2018-2019	C	Undergraduate	45
2019-2020	A	Graduate	15
			100

Cross Institutional Findings & Lessons Learned

Analytic memos were collected and analyzed to understand if and how the self-coding pedagogy influenced preservice teachers' professional dispositions, reflection, and reflexivity. For each iteration of the self-coding method, transcripts of participant memos were independently thematically analyzed by both researchers. We then compared initial salient themes until we reached consensus and developed a codebook. Next, we independently completed second cycle coding using the codebook. We then compared second-cycle codes until we reached consensus. Salient codes were collaboratively conceptualized into broader themes. Finally, we conducted a cross-case analysis of all iterations of the self-coding pedagogy, looking for common themes (Cresswell & Poth, 2018) and salient quotes that supported the themes.

Across contexts, in each implementation of our self-coding method, preservice teachers found that the experience of self-coding bolstered their reflexive abilities. The preservice teachers often reflected that the process of self-coding helped them pay closer attention to the meaning of their reflections. As one preservice teacher in 2019 wrote:

This exercise has helped me to reread my observations and prompt answers in a completely different way. Instead of reading my observations back to check for grammatical or spelling errors, as I usually do, I was able to reread my journal to look for connections and certain characteristics of professional dispositions. (Analytic Memo, Participant 22, Institution C)

The self-coding process also made professional dispositions—an often-ambiguous concept—"more concrete"³ and helped preservice teachers to "see" dispositions in action. It was typical for preservice teachers to reflect that via the self-coding process, "I realized that a lot of these teacher dispositions are shown when I did not even think about it" (Analytic Memo, Participant 37, Institution C; Valtierra & Siegel, 2020).

When analyzing their reflective writing, preservice teachers could make sense of their thoughts, connect their thinking to professional dispositions and trace how their dispositions evolved over a semester (Siegel & Valtierra, 2018). Analysis of preservice teachers' analytic memos often produced reflections such as, "I now look at everything through a 'dispositional' lens. I am able to identify the dispositions much more confidently" (Analytic Memo, Participant 22, Institution B). Others noted how the self-coding process helped them realize

³ We use quotations for salient themes that came from participants own words.

“the importance of teacher behavior and how it deeply effects student behavior ... It’s a chain reaction” (Analytic Memo, Participant 3, Institution A).

The process of self-coding journals helped elevate the quality of reflections and fostered self-awareness. Just as the postmodern qualitative researcher subscribes to reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018), our analysis of analytic memos indicated that by the end of each semester, several preservice teachers realized the crucial connection between reflection and their actions in the classroom. Akin to Wooglar’s (1988) theory around the relationships and distinctions between reflection and reflexivity, one spring 2018 preservice teacher ruminated that “teacher reflection is supposed to be active and not passive, meaning we are to actively think about how we think as teachers and then assess whether what we are doing is effective or ineffective” (Analytic Memo, Participant 39, Institution C; Valtierra & Siegel, 2020).

In line with the postmodern qualitative researchers’ keen awareness of their social location in relation to that of research participants, some preservice teachers made parallel connections to the relationships between teachers and students. As one preservice teacher in our most recent implementation mused, “to build relationships across difference requires deep reflective practice, critical awareness of my positionality and being present to listen, understand and act out of compassion” (Analytic Memo, Participant 92, Institution A).

Self-Coding: A Promising Pedagogical Practice in Teacher Preparation and Beyond

Our implementation of the self-coding method has facilitated preservice teachers’ self-awareness of their emerging professional dispositions across time and university contexts. Many were able to name how their newfound self-awareness informed how they envisioned future classroom practices. It seems that the process of reflective journaling was enhanced by the systematic method of self-coding, which equipped preservice teachers with a new pedagogical tool to aid the process of cultivating the reflexivity necessary for navigating a complex and demanding profession.

Though the research studies that informed the development of our “self-coding” method are in the field of teacher education, many other fields also aim to cultivate students’ dispositions and reflexivity so that they can navigate complex professional contexts and situations. Given the success of the self-coding method in contributing to our participants’ professional dispositions, reflection, and reflexivity, we propose that this method could prove fruitful for teacher educators and faculty in a variety of other fields who are interested in cultivating student dispositions, reflection, and reflexivity to prepare them for uncertain and complex professional situations.

In our field, teachers’ professional dispositions are critical because they guide instructional decision-making. Teacher dispositions call for a moral commitment to ensuring all students, regardless of ability, income, race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, or linguistic background, receive a rigorous and inclusive classroom experience (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), 2010). Given that reflective writing assignments are a common pedagogical tool for cultivating teachers’ professional dispositions (LaBelle & Belknap, 2016), the self-coding process offers teacher educators an innovative approach to these types of writing assignments.

Like teaching, professions such as social work, medicine, counseling, and psychology rely on practitioners’ dispositions or specific ethical and moral commitments to guide professional decision making (Fidan & Meliha, 2020; Owen et al., 2018; Stuart et al., 2020). As such, it is customary in many fields for university faculty to engage students in reflective writing assignments (e.g., Baum, 2012; Dukewich & Vossen, 2015; Russel, 2020; Stuart et al., 2020). Faculty use reflective writing assignments for various purposes, including to help students make sense of complex disciplinary concepts (Kalman, 2011), to self-assess growth

over time (Sproule et al., 2019), and in the development of professional dispositions. For instance, like teacher preparation, several studies in the counseling field focus on professional dispositions (e.g., Landon, 2020; Owen et al., 2018; Sabella et al., 2020). One such recent study used a scale to assess preservice counselors' dispositions of diversity tolerance, compassionate communication, prosocial tendencies, positive attitude, self-awareness, and openness (Owen et al., 2018). Moreover, Sabella and colleagues (2020) inquired into how field supervisors developed, assessed, and mitigated resistance to certain professional dispositions in counseling education. In response to findings in both studies, an adaptation of the self-coding method is a potentially fruitful opportunity for counseling faculty to develop students' dispositions and reflexive capacities.

Conclusions

To respond to the urgent demands of uncertain and complex professional situations effectively and ethically—a teacher responding to a student outburst, a doctor responding to inexplicable patient symptoms, a social worker navigating a child abuse case—faculty should help explicitly link students' dispositions to reflexivity. The cultivation of student dispositions in many fields is essential and reflective writing is seen as a foundation to this work. However, there is a risk of leaving reflection as benign introspection (Wooglar, 1988) if writing assignments are not followed up with an opportunity for future professionals to examine their thinking systematically and critically. Our self-coding method offers a practical next step to facilitate a chance to hold up a reflective mirror as students learn to embody professional values, beliefs, and attitudes. Moreover, this method seems easily adaptable to numerous professions.

Across time and institutional settings, our self-coding method has shown to be an effective pedagogical tool to shift student reflection toward the reflexivity needed to understand how to navigate complex professional contexts. Over the years, we have presented the self-coding method at international interdisciplinary conferences where, anecdotally, this practice has garnered interest from scholars in several professions. While it is apparent that the self-coding method has proven useful in teacher preparation, we propose that an adaptation of the method could be valuable to many other fields. Our effective use of the self-coding process across institutions and with both undergraduate and graduate students suggests that continued implementation in our field and other professions could contribute to refined professional dispositions, reflection, and reflexive skills.

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