At the onset of the COVID-19 shift to pandemic pedagogy and the overarching extenuating social, emotional, and political context associated with a global pandemic, my community of doctoral teacher educator peers—loosely formalized as a doctoral student-organized and -led teacher education seminar—proved infinitely more helpful than our University. I specifically use the term “pandemic pedagogy” instead of “online instruction” or “remote learning.” These latter two descriptors of virtual teaching describe courses and pedagogical strategies that were intentionally curated for virtual spaces; our instructional shifts in spring 2020 were neither intentional nor curated given their abrupt existence.

On the same day that the official move to online instruction was announced, a doctoral friend voluntarily sent an email to our seminar group entitled “Teacher Ed Resources.” The email featured a compilation of online teaching resources curated for teacher educators, and a note encouraging self-care. A second friend responded to that email asking if anyone had a survey for undergraduates regarding access to technology and anticipated support needs. I replied that I did not but would help her make one, at which time a third friend linked a pre-existing survey from another university for us to use as a guide, and a fourth friend responded that they wanted to borrow the finished product. Three days later, with two anxious student teacher candidates on my hands and still no official communication from our College of Education, I sent a note in the same email chain asking if anyone had any information. Within the hour, notes from a faculty planning meeting about how to handle The College’s student teacher candidates were in my inbox from a doctoral peer who sat in on the meeting, along with a heads up about the expected timeline of further decisions. In this same week, most of what we received from our department and our university in the way of guidance, resources, or self-care reminders was radio silence.

Our Teacher Education Seminar Group
Lessons from the Pivot

Our graduate teacher education group was initially conceived as a community of practice designed to both support novice doctoral teacher educators' development, and to close the gap that our College of Education - like many others - creates by assigning doctoral students to teach preservice teacher courses without providing the necessary preparation or support to do so. The brainchild of a few doctoral students in 2017, the seminar is entirely doctoral student-run and attended, and was in its fifth semester of existence in spring 2020. The supportive community that the seminar has created over time has tended to attract repeat takers, several of whom, like me, have been involved for all five semesters and counting.

From its inception, our seminar has aimed to support three different doctoral novice teacher educator roles: teaching assistants, instructors of record, and student teacher supervisors. We meet every two weeks during the fall and spring semesters in addition to frequently emailing, and each session is divided into two parts: discussing new and relevant scholarship about aspects of teacher education, and discussing what we call "problems of practice," where participants share their teaching challenges and questions and the group helps troubleshoot. We document the problems of practice and follow up on them throughout and sometimes across semesters. In spring 2019 we also added community conversations in which we hand select and invite faculty members to join our conversations for a day.

As COVID-19 abruptly shifted the reality of university life in March 2020, I, like many of my doctoral student peers, was wearing a variety of hats: I was supervising two senior undergraduate teacher candidates, leading our teacher education seminar, acting as a research assistant on an active project, working on a dissertation proposal that centered around K-12 schools. Then, within a couple weeks, all of those roles changed dramatically, and the first place I turned to was our seminar group. I sent an email asking if folks still wanted to keep our regularly scheduled seminar meeting even though the university had extended spring break a week. Despite the extended vacation our spring break Zoom meeting had 100% attendance.

The remainder of this chapter explores the role that this doctoral teacher educator seminar played for me and my doctoral teacher educator peers throughout the spring 2020 semester switch to pandemic pedagogy. I first briefly overview the communities of practice (CoP) literature in order to frame my understanding of how our CoP - the seminar - served its members throughout this semester. I then conclude with a brief discussion of the value of doctoral CoPs like ours, specifically in the face of extenuating, unprecedented circumstances.

Teacher Educator Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) first described communities of practice as social groups formed around a common interest by people who have a desire to learn from and contribute to the knowledge of others about that interest. In these communities, learning happens through sharing experiences, participating, and reflecting with the group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Several studies have focused on the beneficial role CoPs can have in doctoral student development; for example, Coffman et al. (2016) explored a COP's role in helping doctoral students develop their scholarly identities across responsibilities. At least one study - Kosnik et al., 2011- focuses specifically on the benefit of a CoP in helping doctoral students develop as teacher educators as I do in this chapter: as a supportive space to help us develop our teacher educator practice. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic pedagogy shift, this supportive space became more urgently needed than ever.

Hadar and Brody (2010) theorize about how communities of practice can aid specifically in the professional development of teacher educators, and unpack the mechanics behind how CoP participation translates into professional growth. The researchers found that the most
important function of a teacher educator CoP was the “breaking down of personal and professional isolation…and the creation of a safe environment in which sharing, daring, and support be(come) commonplace” (Hadar & Brody, 2010, p. 1649). After studying a teacher educator CoP for a year, they offered a layered theoretical model of professional development featuring three stages of development through which teacher educators progress via participation in a CoP: stage one is the aforementioned breaking of isolation. Stage two involves talking about student learning in ways that lead to improved teaching, and discussing and developing skills within the group. Finally, stage three is the achievement of professional development as measured by acquired or evolved dispositions towards thinking and a sense of efficacy and accomplishment surrounding one’s ability as a teacher educator. I use the Hadar and Brody (2010) layered model to examine how our seminar CoP supported me as doctoral student novice teacher educator both before and after the onset of COVID-19, and how my professional development within the seminar fluctuated during that time.

Seminar: Before and After

Even the briefest examination of our Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 seminar notes reveals that doctoral student teacher educator needs during the shift to pandemic pedagogy were complex. Through the frame of Hadar and Brody’s (2010) three-layer model of professional development, whereas most of the community’s pre-shift problems of practice reflected a progression to stage three, “professional development,” a majority of the community’s post-shift problems of practice regressed back to between stages one and two, “breaking isolation,” “talking about student learning,” and “improving teaching” (see Table 1 for details). Additionally, more post-shift problems of practice were dynamically connected across other layers of the doctoral student identity; for example, balancing teacher education responsibilities with dissertation complications and social and emotional needs. Below, I use my own experiences in two of the key aspects of seminar--problems of practice and community conversations with faculty--as examples of the shifts that occurred as a result of the pandemic pedagogy adjustment, as well as the role of our seminar CoP in addressing those shifts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hadar &amp; Brody (2010) Framework Level</th>
<th>Fall '19 PoPs*</th>
<th>Fall ‘19 PoP Example</th>
<th>Spring '20 Pre-COVID PoPs**</th>
<th>Spring ‘20 Pre-COVID Example</th>
<th>Spring ‘20 Post-COVID PoPs**</th>
<th>Spring ‘20 Post-COVID Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1: Breaking isolation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>What are mutual expectations agreements? Do I need to do them?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Giving number grades to people sucks…I feel like a butt when I do it…</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>I'm still trying to figure out how to run my class…help? I guess I just need to talk through my ideas so I...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
Number and example of problems of practice at each Hadar and Brody (2010) level before and after the onset of COVID-19 pandemic pedagogy
### Lessons from the Pivot

| Level 2: Improvement of teaching | 17 | What are the best ways to scaffold full-class discussions? | 4 | One PST** regularly holds the class hostage with very specific questions about her placement and assignments...how do I stop this without crushing her spirit? | 8 |

[How do we create] meaningful and deep equity and social justice conversations online; research says ‘hey, you can’t do this!’

| Level 3: Professional development | 20 | How do we self-reflect and collaborate as teacher educators? | 6 | I am a 3-year doc student and I haven’t supervised or been in a K-12 classroom. Is this impacting my ability to be a teacher educator? Should I be diversifying my experiences? If so, how? | 1 |

How are PSTs reflecting on COVID-19 illuminating inequities in the school system and classrooms? Is there anything we can do about this as teacher educators?

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*PoP(s) = Problems of Practice  
**PST = Preservice Teacher  
***Overall number of PoPs in spring 2020 is lower due to fewer seminar participants and length of post-COVID PoP conversations

### Shifting Problems of Practice

Prior to the pandemic, the problems of practice I posed in seminar consistently reflected the professional development (third) layer of the Hadar and Brody framework. For example, in February 2020 I posed a problem of practice to the group about one of my student teachers’ classroom mentors. I asked how much and in what ways it felt appropriate to push back against mentors who are restricting their student teacher; I detailed how I handled a specific incident and then asked for other interpretations. The discussion around my problem included one supervisor agreeing that this has been a problem for her in the past, too, and offering a solution that worked for her: having the student teacher reflect-and-project by asking “how did this go and how might you do it differently in your own classroom?” and encouraging a conversation
Lessons from the Pivot

with both parties about giving the student teacher enough autonomy as part of the university agreement.

This problem of practice and its response is indicative of my professional development in our seminar CoP. After five semesters participating in and leading the seminar, I have definitely come to feel supported, and less isolated in my teacher educator role. I know that seminar is the safest space for me to express questions about my practice (stage one). Isolation is further broken in this particular instance when a seminar participant commiserates with my experience. In reflecting on how the supervision conversation went and what I felt my student teacher was and was not learning, I was talking about student learning in a way that would improve my teaching (stage two). Finally, in posing the question and thinking about how to improve my supervision strategies, I was engaging in (stage three) professional development thinking, as were my peers who were reflecting on their own teacher education experiences in order to help me think through my own.

Post-pandemic pedagogy shift, my problems of practice trended noticeably backwards on the Hadar and Brody model from professional development to improvement of teaching (stage two). For example, my and another participant’s limited experience with Zoom led to a 20-minute demonstration of Zoom teaching tools by a peer in March, and in April we had several “how to” questions about the logistics of supervising student teachers remotely that we thought through as a group. This return to skills-based problems of practice is a reflection of the unsureness that we were all experiencing given our newly changed roles, and indicate a regression away from the nuanced thinking and self-efficacy that are indicative of professional development thinking. It is also important to note, however, that neither myself nor anyone else reverted back to before stage one. The existence of the seminar as a safe space to seek support and work through problems did not change: isolation remained broken and the seminar continued to give us a safe space to navigate pandemic pedagogy hurdles together with others who were experiencing similar challenges in the same new reality.

Community Conversations with Faculty

Our community conversations with faculty in April 2020 reflect the same backwards slide through the Hadar and Brody professional development framework as our problems of practice did. In the fall 2019 semester, the first wondering I brought to our faculty conversation was a complex one about how to better infuse social justice education practices into undergraduate methods courses. This wondering is a reflection of my perceived efficacy at the “basics” of teacher education, and a desire to think more deeply about my identity, and values as a teacher educator. Fast forward to the first spring 2020 community conversation, and my first wondering was about time management: with so much time needed to re-think and re-plan my teaching, I was struggling to keep up with my dissertation proposal writing, and quarantining at home was making me feel more frustrated than productive. I wanted to know if and how faculty were experiencing the same struggles. I was seeking to break isolation (stage one). The fact that several of them were also struggling was comforting and made me feel less alone, and several people--both tenured faculty and doctoral students alike--shared successes and failures at everything from time management to using breakout rooms in Zoom to supervising student teachers.

Again, this shift in thinking between pre- and post-pandemic reveals two noticings: on one hand, as an entire community of practice our thinking was moving away from the nuanced complexity of professional development as we were forced to spend more time trying to parse through the basics of pandemic pedagogy and improving our (new) methods of teaching. On the
other hand, however, the preexistence of our community of practice provided a space to do this parsing together. The space allowed us to create and share tools with each other, as well as find support and comfort in basic connections like the fact that even tenured, highly respected faculty members were struggling with their teaching and behind on due dates like us.

**Discussion**

The format of our seminar is an easily replicable model for any graduate program to follow. Each semester we send out an interest email to all doctoral student teacher educators explaining the seminar and its purpose, and inviting them to join. Then, we meet on a bi-weekly basis and follow a simple format: we first spend one hour reviewing and discussing teacher education research and scholarship surrounding a particular theme, such as formatting assessments, creating discussions, having social justice conversations, etc. We then spend a second hour on problems of practice following a specific protocol: we first go around the group and all members get a chance to share any problems of practice and these problems get recorded in a log; once all problems are recorded, we discuss and troubleshoot each in turn, taking notes on the conversation; finally, we check in on past problems to see if there are any updates and/or further discussion required. The seminar remains entirely doctoral student-run to remove any concerns about power dynamics, but we do invite selected faculty members to join our community once or twice a semester. The seminar is not required, but it is listed as a doctoral course and is worth one credit if students enroll; each semester about half of the participants take the course for credit, and half just show up to participate in the community of practice organically.

Academia can be emotionally isolating, especially for doctoral students who are juggling a multitude of roles, many of which are completely new. The space can be confusing, depressing, and draining, and often comes with little departmental guidance or support. Pandemics are literally isolating, and only serve to intensify preexisting emotional isolation. The role that my doctoral teacher education seminar CoP played for me and for others in the spring of 2020 is a testament to the benefit of CoPs in higher education, especially for novice teacher educators like doctoral students that receive little other guidance. Personally, ongoing participation in the seminar has been instrumental in my own development from feeling isolated and unsure at my institution, to improving my teaching, to fully identifying as a teacher educator and working to help others do the same. I can easily point to a dozen specific examples of how my teacher educator identity and practice have grown as a direct result of the seminar, and several of my peers have indicated the same. However, I have never appreciated or needed that community of practice as much as in Spring 2020: the semester that easily could have been the most isolating time to be a novice teacher educator, but was not because of our seminar and the support I gave and received therein.

There is quite a bit of literature surrounding the role of CoPs in education, but, unsurprisingly, nothing addressing the supportive potential of CoPs in times of crisis or abrupt change. As it turns out, however, times of crisis or abrupt change may be where communities of practice can do the most good. Research on teacher identity tells us that every teacher identity, including that of a teacher educator, is actually composed of a variety of sub-identities (Beijaard et al., 2004). As those sub-identities change and grow - or suddenly appear in response to a global pandemic - teacher educators’ ability to teach and develop professionally ebbs and flows. Creating spaces that provide support and guidance through those undulations is an invaluable step for colleges of education to take. Communities of practice like our teacher education seminar are essential spaces to have in place to support doctoral students in all times, but
especially in times of exceptional circumstances like global-pandemic-induced shifts to fully remote learning.

References


