The Lonely Collaborator:
Exploring AI-Supported Reflective Writing in Preservice Teacher Education

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Reflection is not a practice I am currently looking to change; it plays an essential role in developing teacher identity and self-efficacy. Over the years I have watched future educators grapple with and articulate their evolving philosophies, develop pedagogical understandings, and initial experiences in classroom settings; a process undeniably beneficial for their professional growth.

Yet the inherently solitary nature of reflection creates unintended tension with course-work. While I immerse my students in theory-to-practice activities emphasizing collaboration and communication, when I ask them to reflect, they do so in presumed isolation. They may occupy a shared physical space, but the process of transferring thoughts to a document remains, fundamentally, a solo act. I experience this same solitude in my professional writing. As collaborative as we are in our instruction, I frequently find myself sitting at my desk, coffee in hand, staring at a screen devoid of human interaction.

This tension - espousing the importance of collaboration yet facing solitude in the process of writing - led me to the idea of the *lonely collaborator*: someone who may crave dialogue in the act of writing but lacks a responsive partner. In the wake of AI's emergence, I've found myself engaging in a different kind of collaboration altogether. The speed and clarity with which AI offers feedback has become so compelling that I occasionally catch myself thinking of *Claude* as my ever-present colleague rather than a tool.

I was scheduled for a conference that resulted in two missed classes. In prior circumstances I might assign asynchronous course work followed by personal reflections as a demonstration of knowledge attainment. The students would then engage in peer feedback upon my return, but this only addressed *what* they wrote *after* they wrote it. I wanted to explore the idea of *how* they wrote; how they might use AI as a reflective partner during the process of writing to offer instant responses - and based on my own experiences - remarkably quick, clear, and efficient feedback. Of course, I suggested my friend *Claude* help in this process, but to remain compliant I welcomed the use of any AI assistance.

Preservice teachers were learning about research-based teaching strategies, pedagogical reasoning, and classroom applications. I asked them to watch a full-length lesson on multiplication via the Teaching Channel. I provided them with two focus questions: 1) How do the teacher's instructional choices and interactions with students reflect their understanding of effective pedagogical strategies? And 2) Based on what you can see on the video, what impact do you perceive these choices have on student learning? My goal was for them to use their notes from the video to synthesize their developing understanding of effective teaching practices.

I kept the associated use of AI as a collaborator relatively vague. I wanted to see how students used AI to help refine their ideas, for guidance when stuck, for editing, or for purposes that I had not thought of yet. We talked about the appropriate use of AI and how the use of AI was specific to this task within this course. I thought I did a great job explaining the assignment, and of course I provided a clear document outlining expectations. But after class a few students came to my office with concerns. They asked about my *own* concern that they could "cheat" or use AI entirely for this task. I wasn't worried about that. I *wanted* them to use AI. I was interested in seeing how they might engage with artificial intelligence as a collaborator, and their opinions of using it in that way. For them, this was outside of their comfort zone. They had been inundated with policies about not using AI, and they were fearful that they would still be accused of plagiarism in this assignment. I had to assure them that as long as they used AI as a collaborator - that is AI did not write the reflection for them - they would not be penalized. Their concern was surprising to me; I thought we had a community of trust. I pride myself on building relationships with my students. But when I introduced a tool that some had already been penalized for using, they pushed back on the trust I thought we had built. Introducing a new entity - one with perhaps unpredictable consequences - into our learning community created unexpected friction.

What happened?

I entered this process with one prediction: whether or not students had experience with AI, they would relish the opportunity to engage with a tool that had so often been monitored, questioned, or even restricted. And although initially there were some concerns about my own perception that they were cheating, I suspected that those fears were more reflective of their broader anxiety around academic dishonesty than of any real misuse of the tool. I trusted that if I framed the tool as a partner rather than a shortcut, students would approach the experience with thoughtfulness and curiosity, and with this I believe I was right. Their reflections and use of AI were thoughtful and intentional, marked by a willingness to question both the tool and their own writing. Many approached the task with a sense of experimentation, using AI not to bypass reflection but to deepen it. Rather than only fearing the technology, they engaged with it cautiously,

curiously, and critically.

> I found Gemini to be a helpful collaborative tool for improving the clarity and focus of my reflection. I had unlimited opportunities to ask questions to ensure my reflection accurately conveyed my ideas. I had to be cautious of some suggestions in an effort to maintain my own voice and perspective, but I ultimately valued the immediate and calculated feedback Gemini gave as an editing tool.

> The AI tool that I used, Copilot, helped me to ensure that my paper was clear, concise, and clarified if the specific points that I wanted to make came across effectively. The AI tool was useful, and I liked how it offered immediate feedback, so I could immediately think about and apply any edits to my reflection.

In assessing their work (and I say this with confidence, as I'm deeply familiar with their writing through frequent in-the-moment activities in class) I had no concern that anyone misused AI or presented its output as their own. That said, my initial prediction that students would relish the use of AI didn't quite prove to be true. While they engaged critically and explored its capabilities with care, many walked away feeling uneasy about the experience, and some even expressed hesitancy about using AI in the future as they missed the human connection.

> It felt like cheating, regardless of whether or not it was for an assignment, so I really spent most of my editing process piecing the AI suggestions together in a way that didn't feel like stealing.

> I found using AI was really unnerving...I felt like I was cheating on the paper because I am not used to using it for essays at all. I really liked that the AI provided me with feedback on my essay…But I felt I missed the human aspect of someone editing my paper…I did not like using AI and will not be using it again.

> I felt like some of the feedback it gave lacked personality. If I were to take some of the things I was given and put them directly into my paper, it would have been clearly written by AI. I did like some of the feedback that I was given, I was able to go more in-depth about the long-term effects. Aside from this, I didn't find it very useful. I don't think I would use Gemini again for a paper like this, as it felt impersonal. I would prefer to have a peer edit my reflection, as it flows better and includes a personal touch with terms that we use.

In teacher education (well, in my own teaching) reflection is often positioned as an individual process. I thought bringing AI into that space would disrupt what I had considered the idea of the *lonely collaborator:* someone who may crave dialogue in the act of writing but lacks a responsive partner. For some students, AI served as a helpful, responsive presence, offering clarity and structure in moments where they needed support. For others, though, it only amplified what was missing, the human connection. This experience reminded me that for our preservice teachers (and eventually, for their own students) using AI isn't just about functionality. We are

bringing something into our teaching that is starting to shape the emotional and relational aspects of learning. Reflection isn't only about clean sentences and polished ideas; it's about voice and trust. While AI can offer useful feedback, it doesn't provide encouragement, challenge assumptions, or recognize growth in the way a peer can. AI must be one option among many, not a replacement for the relationships that make learning meaningful.