

Teaching Pre-Service Art Educators How to Discuss What Matters: A Field guide to Difficult Conversations

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Background

Pre-service art educators are not properly trained on how to have difficult conversations in their undergraduate coursework. And yet, teachers are faced with “difficult conversations” all the time—in their classrooms, with administration, and between parents (Vogelsang & McGee, 2015). Typically, stakeholders avoid opening up difficult conversations out of fear of the consequences. The authors of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* define a difficult conversation as anything that an individual is reluctant to talk about or avoids talking about (Stone et al., 2010). According to research conducted in the US, a large percentage of novice classroom teachers leave teaching within the first 5 years (Cohen-Evron, 2002). Many that do stay, resort to “conservative, unimaginative pedagogy in order to survive” (Cohen-Evron, 2002, p. 79). But, perhaps we can retain some of our educators, and reverse the rate of attrition, if we teach pre-service educators the skills they need to discuss what matters most.

Research Question

What research-based strategies can be used to teach pre-service students at one university how to prepare for “difficult conversations” in their future careers as art educators?



Two pictures taken during the live training sessions at the University of Texas at Austin in the Fall of 2022.

Methods and Materials

There are two parts to this project: a written component, and a live training component. The written component contains three parts: a Workbook, a Facilitator’s Guide, and Powerpoint slides. The Difficult Conversations written components were created to accompany the live training which was conducted at the University of Texas at Austin in an Undergraduate Art Education class with 16 students in the Fall of 2022 over the course of 5 weeks, for 90 minutes each.

Prior to the first session, students filled out a preliminary survey which helped guide the content of the course. Three of the five live sessions utilized forum theatre and required the students to engage with live role play scenarios that connected to the skills taught in the workbook. During the last live session, a follow up survey was administered to gauge the success of the workshop and collect feedback from participants. The survey data and data collected from written components was collected using Qualtrics and analyzed using numerical content analysis.

Results

The purpose of this capstone project was to identify and implement research informed strategies to help teach pre-service students prepare for difficult conversations in their future careers as art educators. The project identified three strategies in the five week training, two strategies in the workbook, and ten strategies in the in person training sessions. The research informed strategies appeared effective for this group of participants. Participants were asked, “how (prepared, competent, confident) do you feel to address difficult conversations in your professional career?” (See Figure 1). The results from the numerical analysis of the pre and post survey suggest that all students grew in their preparedness, confidence, and competence in addressing difficult conversations in their professional careers. With a third of the students feeling extremely prepared, confident, and competent after attending the workshop.

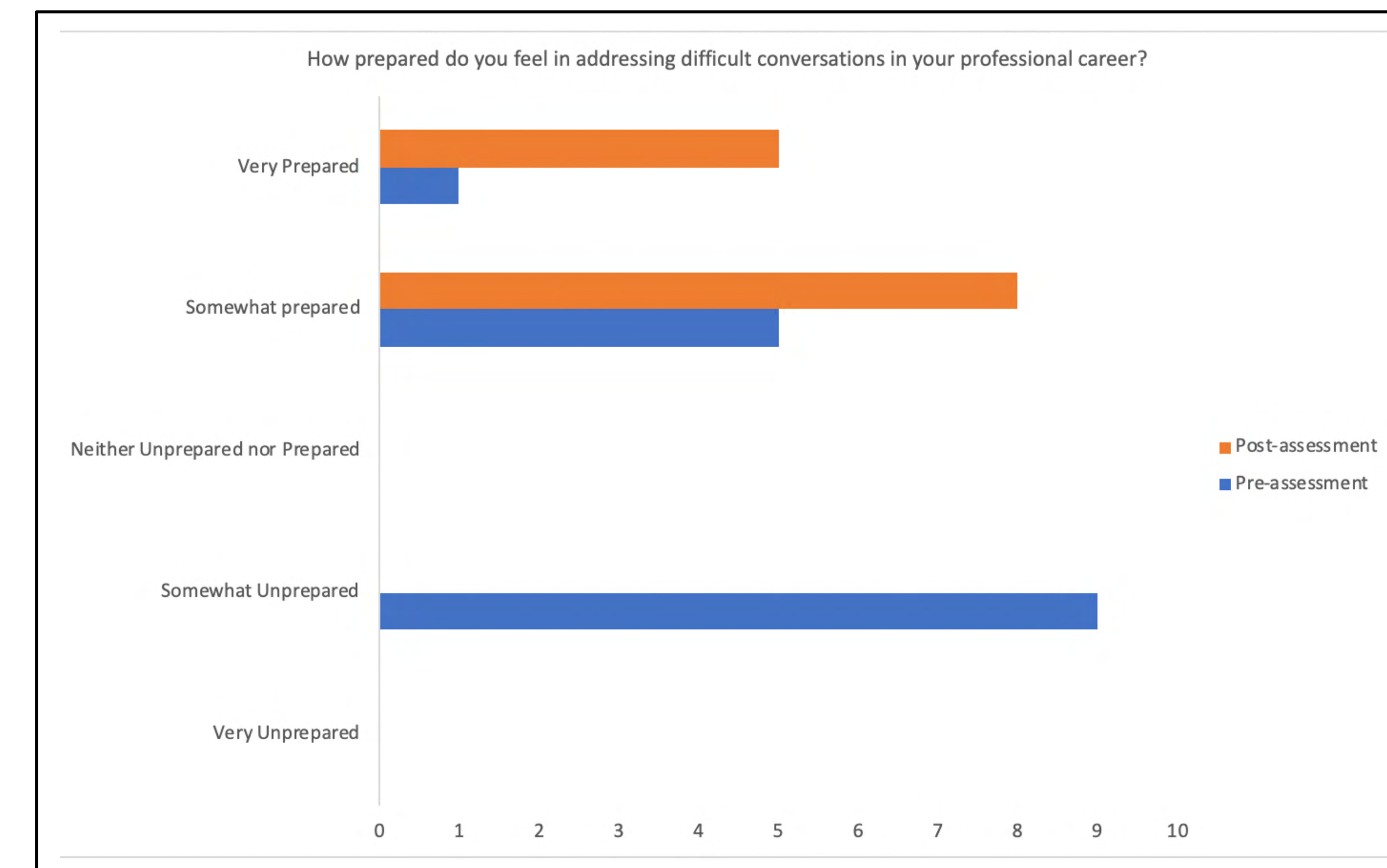


Figure 1: Graphical display of participants’ pre and post survey data

Conclusion or Discussion

The results of this project show that difficult conversations is a topic that is meaningful for most pre-service art education students. All the students that attended the workshop reported gaining skills, confidence, and competence in carrying out difficult conversations. Similarly, in the qualitative comments students reported enjoying the interactive learning process and many felt they wished they could have attended for more time.

In the future this workshop could be packaged and disseminated to other pre-service art education programs so that more art educators may experience the impact of this workshop. My hope is that the students who participated in the workshop feel adequately prepared to face their professional careers, empowered to start critical dialogues, and begin the process of shaping school campuses towards a better future for our children.

References

- Cohen-Evron, N. (2002). Why do good art teachers find it hard to stay in the public-school system? *Studies in Art Education*, 44(1), 79-94.
- Vogelsang, J.D., & McGee, S. (2015, July 29). *Handbook for facilitating difficult conversations in the classroom*. University of Florida.