

Building trust, bridging traditions: a story of collaborative instructional planning in a high school- university partnership

PDS Partners:
Bridging Research
to Practice

Bethany M. Sanders

*Department of Leadership, Learning Design, and Inquiry,
University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, USA, and*

Jeffrey C. Eargle

*Department of Teacher Education, University of South Carolina,
Columbia, South Carolina, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose – This article documents the collaboration between a high school social studies teacher and a university professor – working within an existing school-university partnership – in the design and implementation of a geography-based Holocaust lesson to support authentic learning opportunities for preservice teachers. This article responds to calls for educators in school-university partnerships to tell stories of the creation, evolution, challenges and possibilities of boundary-spanning partnership work.

Design/methodology/approach – The article utilizes storytelling as a means of documenting the importance of relationships in partnership work. Because storytelling is not dependent on traditional methods and frameworks, the authors outline the background, challenges and successes around their planning, coordination and implementation of an original lesson plan developed to model best practices on teaching difficult histories in a safe environment.

Findings – As a storytelling account, this work does not present empirical or generalizable findings. The story is offered as an example to foster reflection and conversation within other school-university partnerships.

Originality/value – Our narrative, which captures how relationships are central to partnerships, provides an illustrative example of how partnerships can support efforts to address gaps in education research and in modeling for preservice teachers for how to teach difficult histories in high school social studies classes. The authors reflect on how trust, shared expertise, reciprocal learning and collaboration can support meaningful, relevant and boundary-spanning experiences within partnerships between high schools and universities and colleges.

Keywords School-university partnership, Secondary education, Preservice education, Holocaust education, Geography education, Boundary-spanning

Paper type Case report

Like many educators, when we meet to work on a project as part of our partnership, we often find ourselves sharing quick stories – be it a relevant professional story about teaching or an irrelevant personal story about a recent holiday break. This is not a misuse of time; this is a normal means of connecting as collaborators, as people. Recently, we realized we had a story to share. In the spring of 2025, we conceptualized, developed and taught an original geography lesson on the Holocaust to both social studies preservice teachers (PSTs) and high school students. Leveraging our collaboration in a school-university partnership, we did this to model best practices in Holocaust and geography education for PSTs. At the time, our focus was on

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writing and sharing the lesson plan as an example of mapping the Holocaust (Eargle & Sanders, 2026). However, as we talked with colleagues about our work, we heard feedback like: *You know, you should share the process of creating and teaching the lesson. The two of you should tell the story of your partnership and the work you are doing with this lesson.* As important as the lesson plan is to us, we came to understand that the *story* behind the lesson – the story of our partnership – was equally important.

School-university partnerships offer spaces in which professors and teachers can bridge the traditional, siloed structures of universities and schools – and theory and practice – to innovate practice, share responsibility for student and PST learning and reflect on their own growth as educators and partners (Coler *et al.*, 2023; Cosenza *et al.*, 2023; National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021; Sandholtz & Finan, 1998; Stoicovy *et al.*, 2023). Given the value of storytelling in professional development (Rosen, 2018) and in documenting collaborations in school-university partnerships (Breault, 2010), we began to reflect on the development of the lesson, the orchestration of working with PSTs at both the university and high school, and the work we have engaged in around this lesson. As we did this, we began to see how our partnership, which has evolved from that of student-professor to collaborators, made the work possible. In our story, the lesson plan on Holocaust geographies serves as a MacGuffin. While the lesson plan propels us through the story, the value of the story rests in the way our partnership has evolved and how we work together as collaborators in a high school setting.

To tell our story, we begin by providing the context of our collaboration. To do this, we reflect on the relevant literature around supporting secondary PSTs in social studies education, explain the importance of storytelling in school-university partnerships and provide a brief overview of the program in which our partnership occurs. Next, we offer the story of our partnership and collaboration in the development of the lesson plan and the work that stemmed from this specific project. We conclude the article with a brief reflection on what this work has meant to us as educators, while leaving room for readers to find their own meaning. Throughout the article, we maintain a conversational tone to align with the storytelling approach.

Setting the stage for our story

To begin our story, it is important to contextualize our work. First, we want to share how we engaged with the literature on social studies education and school-university partnerships. Then, it is important that the reader understand why we think stories of collaboration are important to understanding school-university partnerships and how we used the PDS Nine Essentials (National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021) to frame our story. Then, we briefly explain the context of our school-university partnership before we enter the narrative of our story.

Relevant literature for context

It is important to place our story within the existing literature on school-university partnerships and social studies education. In preparing our lesson plan, and our work in general, we have observed that social studies tends to lean heavily toward the discipline of history, with civics, economics and geography regarded as subordinate (Clabough & Russell, 2025). Because our project focuses on geography education, we made note of the research indicating that social studies PSTs report being underprepared to teach geography (Bednarz, Heffron, & Huynh, 2013; Bednarz, 2016; Mitchell, 2018, 2020). Additionally, our story addresses how, despite calls for teaching Holocaust geographies, the Holocaust has traditionally been positioned within the discipline of history (Eargle & Mewborne, 2025; Machon & Lambert, 2001). Like geography education, researchers argue that PSTs need quality preparation in Holocaust education to address the complexity of the topic with sensitivity (Allgood & Shah, 2021; Caldwell, 2025; Nowell & Poindexter, 2019; Yonas, 2025). Recently, Dvir, Rutten, Butville,

and Wilson (2023) observed that school-university partnerships can serve to support teachers and PSTs in developing practices and dispositions for teaching difficult topics like the Holocaust. Based on this, we determined that our lesson plan supported PSTs in both geography and Holocaust education through a supportive environment which was made possible by an existing partnership.

However, our story is less about Holocaust geographies and more about the partnership that allowed us to develop the lesson. As we reviewed the literature on school-university partnerships, we found that only a few examples and research related to social studies education exist (Chase & Merryfield, 1998; DiGiacomo, Han, Trapp, & Kahloon, 2022; Eargle, 2013; Eargle, McGee, Kelly, & Wilburn, 2026; Gieselmann, 2008; Hohenbrink, Johnston, & Westhoven, 1997; Skinner, 2024; Vontz, Franke, Burenheide, & Bietau, 2007). We noted that the literature tended to focus on social studies methods courses (Eargle *et al.*, 2026; Hohenbrink *et al.*, 1997; Skinner, 2024; Vontz *et al.*, 2007), the work of social studies teachers in supporting PSTs (Chase & Merryfield, 1998; Eargle, 2013), the development of programs for student success (Gieselmann, 2008) and teachers views of civic education (DiGiacomo *et al.*, 2022). The lack of examples is not a surprise to us given the marginalization of social studies nationwide (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2012; Social Studies Collaborative, 2018), as well as in our state (Knight, 2025). However, we did find it interesting that examples of collaborations focused on examples between middle and high school teachers and geographers that highlight instructional practices in geography education (Dawson & Mitchell, 2017; Draper, Alberts, & Carnahan, 2023; Finn *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b; Mitchell, Mewborne, & Hendrick, 2022).

In documenting our story, we contribute to the literature by providing an example of a collaboration between a high school social studies teacher and a secondary social studies methodology professor in an existing school-university partnership focused on PST education. In our earlier work detailing the lesson plan (Eargle & Sanders, 2026), we explained how we took up Eargle and Mewborne's (2025) call for teaching Holocaust geographies and Yonas's (2025) call for supporting PSTs in Holocaust education through the modeling of lessons and the providing of guidance as they teach the Holocaust. In sharing the story of our partnership, we complement our previous work by taking up Breault's (2010) call for storytelling, thus shifting the emphasis from the lesson plan to the process we undertook to develop and teach the lesson for secondary social studies PSTs and to disseminate knowledge about our partnership. In doing so, we bring focus to the importance of relationships and reflection in school-university partnership.

Value of storytelling as a methodology

The idea of telling our story was appealing because stories can help us understand processes, challenges and experiences. We found inspiration in Sandholtz and Finan's (1998) reflections – from their respective vantage points of a professor and a teacher – on the importance of relationships in boundary-spanning work in a high school PDS. That said, at times, we feel that the literature on PDS partnerships and SUPs does not speak to those of us collaborating in a high school setting [1]. For this reason, we think it is important to share stories of successful partnerships in high schools. In a recent literature review on professional development schools, Rutten, Wolkenhauer, Tekavec, Burns, and Allen (2025) found that stories about partnerships often focused on the identification and addressing of school and university needs. Stories are an important tool for learning. In deciding to tell our story, we agreed with Rosen's (2018) observation that, “when teachers share their stories, they are creating a reality based on concrete possibility” (p. 305). We were also drawn to Breault's (2010) conclusion that stories about partnerships can demonstrate value to the reader without overtly telling the reader what value they should find in the story.

That said, a good story must have a structure. For us, we decided to frame the story around the PDS Nine Essentials (National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021).

First, because our story captures our collaboration in teaching, presenting and publishing, we focus on the boundary-spanning opportunity our collaboration offered Bethany (Cosenza et al., 2023; National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021). Second, because we are actively engaged in reflection, we frame our story to focus on how we both grow from working and reflecting together (National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021; Stoicovy et al., 2023).

At the same time, as we developed our approach to telling our story, we became intrigued by Breault's (2010) called for the development of literature around school-university partnerships focused on storytelling. Although addressing professional development schools (PDS), Breault suggested storytelling as a means of documenting partnerships without the burdens of "traditional research frameworks and discourse" (p. 179). Thus, telling our story, our aim is to provide a story with structure and reflection but without a research question or generalized findings. Instead, by focusing on a project that developed out of our partnership, we provide a story others may turn to for guidance or to generate conversations about their own work. As such, we gravitated towards Breault's (2010) statement that "when we begin to view each PDS story as recounting the creation, evolution, failures and triumphs of the movement – a sort of honoring of the traditional village storyteller – we imbue future PDS stories with more significance" (p. 179). Finally, because reflective practice is characteristic of school-university partnership (Stoicovy et al., 2023), we saw storytelling as a way to model reflection to others. As we reflected on the story we wanted to share, we focused on the organic evolution of the collaboration, one that gradually included FMS administration to address challenges and concluded with plans to share our work with others.

Setting of our story

Our story focuses on a secondary social studies methods course titled *Teaching Middle and High School History and Social Studies* – henceforth referred to as *Teaching Social Studies* – at the University of South Carolina (USC) in Columbia. At the time of this work, USC's Secondary Education Program included a 5th year master's program for initial certification. In this program, undergraduates earn a degree in the content area, take four prerequisite courses in education and apply to the Master of Teaching program. In general, students begin in May of one year and complete the degree in April of the following year, with students taking courses in the summer, fall and spring semesters. Career changers apply directly to the Master of Teaching (MT) program and take 1.5 to 2 years to complete the program.

In the Secondary Social Studies Program (SSSP), PSTs take three methodology courses. The first course – *Teaching Social Studies* – is taken in May, the second is taken in June, and the third is taken in the fall semester concurrent with the first of two internships. However, given our university's history with teaching embedded methods courses on site at PDS schools (Compton-Lilly et al., 2025; Field et al., 2010; Lotter, Smoak, Blakeney, & Plotner, 2019), a challenge that we have seen is that PSTs in the SSSP do not interact with high school students as part of the social studies methodology courses. Finally, our story takes place largely at Fairview High School (FHS) (pseudonym), a school that often partners with USC to support preservice education [2]. What we find appealing about the school as a context is the diverse student population in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic levels and learning levels.

Turning partnership into practice

On the surface, we are telling the story of our work with *Teaching Social Studies* and the story of a partnership between USC and FHS. Mainly, however, we see this as a story of trust. Yes, it is the story of the trust between both Bethany and the FHS administration and between Jeff and the FHS administration. It is also the story of the trust FHS's administration had in us as educators. But it is primarily the story about the trust that exists between us as partners and collaborators in social studies education.

From student-professor to colleagues to collaborators

As our story begins in the spring of 2025, we had known each other for four years. At the time we conducted this work, Bethany was a social studies teacher at FHS. As a teacher, she has focused on geography education and has been recognized nationally for her work as a geography teacher. Since 2017, Jeff has been a faculty member at USC and is currently the SSSP Coordinator. As part of his work at USC, he partners with a local Holocaust education organization to provide professional development courses for teachers.

From 2021 to 2022, Bethany was Jeff's student in the SSSP. While Bethany was a PST, Jeff served as her academic advisor and internship supervisor. After Bethany graduated, she became a teacher at FHS. Because FHS regularly partners with USC to support preservice education, Jeff is often working with teachers and PSTs at the school. Consequently, we became colleagues as we began to work together to support PSTs. Gradually, we became collaborators through working on various projects with teachers and PSTs, presenting at conferences and considering opportunities for publications. When Bethany became a doctoral student in USC's College of Education in 2024 and began to focus her research on geo-literacy practices, this added an additional layer to our partnership as it offered us an opportunity to think more strategically about the work that we wanted to do for both FHS and USC.

From informal conversation to instructional opportunity

We have found that good lesson plans, projects and curricular ideas often stem from casual conversations with colleagues that take place randomly during the school day in hallways, break rooms and classrooms. In many ways, our story is no different. While working on another project in February 2025, Jeff identified a gap in the literature on teaching Holocaust geographies. Specifically, he noted that there was an absence of quality lessons to engage students in mapping the Holocaust (Eargle & Mewborne, 2025).

That month, we were talking one afternoon in Bethany's classroom. Because Bethany's dissertation focuses on instructional practices related to geo-literacy, Jeff brought up the idea for a Holocaust mapping lesson. The lesson would have students create original elevation profile maps to determine what the people living in Lublin, Poland, would have known about the Majdanek killing center (Eargle & Sanders, 2026). At the time, the lesson was in a conceptual stage. As we talked about it, Bethany pointed out how the lesson would align with geo-literacy skills and geographic inquiry (Edelson, 2014; Hinde *et al.*, 2007; Johnson, Watson, Delahunty, McSwiggen, & Smith, 2011; Savitz, Quesada, Gazioglu, & Hines-Farmer, 2023; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Because of the existing school-university partnership between FHS and USC, we briefly discussed how this lesson may benefit PSTs and high school students. However, we could not decide if we wanted to teach the lesson to PSTs or high school students. Therefore, while interested in the idea, we did not leave the conversation with a commitment to develop the lesson in any concrete way.

In March 2025, Jeff began planning to teach *Teaching Social Studies* in May 2025. In doing so, the question that Jeff thought of was: *How could we facilitate teaching the Holocaust mapping lesson to both PSTs and high school students?* In addition, he thought this might be a good opportunity for us to develop the lesson to present at the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) conference in October 2025. In recent years and in previous work, we have discussed how setting the goal of a conference presentation can serve to organize partnership work.

Therefore, on Thursday, March 13, 2025, Jeff wrote an email to Bethany:

Are you planning to attend NCGE? Do you want to put in a presentation [proposal] on the Holocaust? The deadline is Monday. . . . I can write the proposal, but we would need to commit to trying it out with students in May. This is what I told you about the other week.

To Jeff's email, Bethany replied:

Yes, I am planning on attending. . . . I definitely think I could make that work, especially if we did it middle May after exams and before EOCs [End-of-Course Exams]! Let me know what you need from me, I can look at anything this weekend.

We acknowledge that this process – submitting a proposal for a conference without having fully developed or taught the lesson – was rather backward. However, because NCGE is a teacher-facing conference, we felt confident in the lesson idea based on our earlier conversations. It also allowed us to think of how we wanted to facilitate the work.

In our first planning meeting, we agreed that we trusted each other to teach our respective students. We decided that we would develop the lesson and teach it to PSTs who would then help us teach the lesson to high school students. What was important to us at this point was how to best leverage the school-university partnership between USC and FHS. This meant that, in addition to developing the lesson, we would need to align schedules (Figure 1) and work with administration to facilitate bringing 13 PSTs to the school to work with high school students.

Scheduling instruction across university and school contexts

Teaching Social Studies was scheduled to be taught May 12–30, 2025, on Monday-Thursday mornings from 8:30–12:00. As we nuanced the lesson plan, we decided that Jeff would teach the lesson to PSTs first. In a subsequent class session, *Teaching Social Studies* would meet at FHS to assist in implementing the lesson in a high school setting. We would co-teach the lesson up to the mapping activity. PSTs would then teach the mapping activity in small groups with high school students. At the conclusion of the mapping portion of the lesson, Bethany would lead the document analysis and the closing discussion (Table 1). Afterward, Jeff would lead the debrief with PSTs. We agreed that, because of FHS’s bell schedule, the PSTs would need to be at FHS at 8:00 and that the class would end at 11:30.

We knew that this would require careful scheduling. We decided to focus on geography classes to embrace the nontraditional approach of teaching the Holocaust with a geographic lens (Eargle & Mewborne, 2025). Next, because standardized tests in high school occur primarily in May in our state (Office of Assessment and Standards, 2024), we looked at the

Monday 05	Tuesday 06	Wednesday 07	Thursday 08	Friday 09
Exam: Advanced Placement European History		Exam: Advanced Placement Comparative Government		Exam: Advanced Placement United States History
12 First Day of Class: <i>Teaching Social Studies</i>	13 Exam: State End-of-Course Exam for United States History	14	15 Teaching the Holocaust Lesson (1): At USC – taught to PSTs in <i>Teaching Social Studies</i>	16
19 Teaching the Holocaust Lesson (2): At FMS – taught to students with PSTs in <i>Teaching Social Studies</i>	20	21	22	23 Exam: FHS Final Exam Window
26 Holiday: Memorial Day	27 Exam: FHS Final Exam Window	28 Exam: FHS Final Exam Window	29 Exam: FHS Final Exam Window Last Day of School: Fairview High School Last Day of Class: <i>Teaching Social Studies</i>	30 Final Exam: <i>Teaching Social Studies</i>

Figure 1. May 2025 Logistical Planning Calendar. **Source:** Authors’ own work taken from emails (B. Sanders, personal communication, March 13, 2025), the state assessment schedule (Office of Assessment and Standards, 2024), the academic calendars for the University of South Carolina and Fairview High School, and the syllabus for *Teaching Social Studies*

Table 1. Overview of the Majdanek mapping lesson

	Introduction	Lublin cityscape	Topographic mapping	Corroboration	Summation
Instruction	Discussion around background knowledge and the definition of “The Holocaust.”	Students analyze maps of Majdanek and Lublin Discuss Knowles’ (2024) critiques of Holocaust maps	Understand “line of sight” and topography In groups, students create elevation profile maps of Lublin and Majdanek	Students analyze primary and secondary sources to corroborate their maps Discussion of sources	Viewing a present-day photo from Majdanek looking toward Lublin, discuss the concluding questions
Questions	When you hear the term “Holocaust,” what comes to mind? When we think of the killing centers (Treblinka, Auschwitz, etc.), where do you envision them located? Why? Where were killing centers located? What did witnesses know?	When you think of a map, what do you expect it to look like? How does this map of Lublin fit that expectation? What does this map tell us that USHMM maps do not? What does this (not) tell us about Lublin? What would Knowles say about this map?	If someone lived downtown, could they see what was taking place in the camp? Can we see 2.5 miles? Can we use topography to demonstrate that people in Lublin would have seen what was occurring in Majdanek?	What questions are answered by these maps? What questions are generated by these maps? To what extent does the evidence in the resources support your elevation profile map?	How did the geographic analysis offer a new perspective of the Holocaust? How did the activity help you think about the connection between atrocity and the landscape / cityscape? What is our responsibility to act when we see persecution / atrocity occurring?
Resources	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) definition of the Holocaust	USHMM maps of Majdanek and Lublin 1942 topographic map of Lublin	Local map to demonstrate “line of sight” Free mapping tools	Eyewitness testimony, historians’ accounts, and photographs	Present-day photographs

Source(s): Authors’ own work based on [Eargle and Sanders \(2026\)](#)

relevant exams in May ([Figure 1](#)) and determined that we had a window of time between May 14 and 21 to teach the class at FHS. We eliminated the first week of class for *Teaching Social Studies* because PSTs needed background on disciplinary inquiry, lesson planning and standards. We eliminated the final week because Memorial Day was a holiday for both USC and FHS, and May 29 was the last day of school for FHS and the last day of class for *Teaching Social Studies*. Therefore, early in the second week of class for *Teaching Social Studies* would be the best timeframe.

We then needed to determine the best day. First, FHS was on an A/B block schedule, meaning that students attend four 90-min classes per day and alternate classes on “A” and “B” days. Because we needed to teach the lesson during the first block, we needed to identify whether an A- or B-day worked best. We needed to teach the lesson during the first block (8:25

AM-9:55 AM) so that Jeff could debrief with the PSTs during the second block (10:00 AM-11:30 AM). We identified Bethany's honors geography class on May 19 as the best fit for the schedule and time constraints. After determining the schedule and timeframe, we needed to focus on the lesson plan. Therefore, our next question was: *How will we develop the lesson and what are our goals with/for the lesson?* Our next step, then, was to begin developing the lesson that would fit with the *Teaching Social Studies* curriculum.

Designing the lesson with PSTs and high school students in mind

While we would teach this lesson to high school students, we focused on PSTs. Social studies PSTs often do not receive adequate instruction and development in geography education (Bednarz *et al.*, 2013; Bednarz, 2016; Mitchell, 2018, 2020). Likewise, Holocaust education is often introduced to PSTs to teach difficult history and human rights (Allgood & Shah, 2021; Caldwell, 2025; Nowell & Poindexter, 2019). Because researchers recommend high school teachers partner with university faculty to create quality geography lessons (Draper *et al.*, 2023) and PSTs need to practice teaching Holocaust lessons in supportive environments (Yonas, 2025), we developed the lesson with PST learning in mind. In addition to our lesson-planning process, we also began conversations about publishing the lesson as an article in *The Geography Teacher* (Eargle & Sanders, 2026) in addition to presenting at NCGE.

Like many collaborators, we created a shared folder online to begin developing the lesson plan and materials. We created a lesson plan document and slide deck. The lesson plan document was simple. We had two columns and multiple rows. Each row corresponded to a slide on the slide deck. In the lefthand column, we had the slide title and a note on transitioning from one slide to the next. In the righthand column, we described the content of the slide and included directions, questions, notes, etc. We then divided up responsibility for developing slides and activities. Throughout the collaborative process, while Jeff focused on the Holocaust content and methods and Bethany focused on the geography content and methods, we held each other accountable through adding comments in the document, text messages and in-person conversations. Additionally, because we envisioned writing the lesson as an article, we wrote and documented more extensively than one might typically do when collaborating on a lesson plan. Using Knowles's (2024) critiques of Holocaust maps, the resulting lesson plan was a topographic analysis of Lublin and Majdanek to demonstrate how the perpetration of the Holocaust was witnessed by the local populace (see Table 1).

Once the lesson plan was drafted, we met to discuss where and how to differentiate between the PST and high school versions. Key differentiations included:

- (1) PSTs received more historical background on the camp system during the Holocaust.
- (2) While high school students were provided brief notes on Knowles's (2024) work, Knowles's chapter was collaboratively read by PSTs using the jigsaw strategy.
- (3) When creating elevation profile maps, high school students collected elevation data every 0.5km, while PSTs collected elevation data every 0.25km.

These decisions were made so the PSTs had stronger content knowledge and became familiar with the maps and technology used to collect elevation data. By doing this, it was our intent that the PSTs would feel more comfortable when working with high school students. Finally, Jeff showed PSTs a clip from *A Real Pain* (Eisenberg, 2024, pp. 57:55) that depicts the characters touring Majdanek; but we did not show this to high school students because of the R rating. However, we used the inclusion of *A Real Pain* with PSTs to discuss appropriate film use and procedures in the classroom. These differentiations were discussed in the debrief with PSTs after working with high school students.

Partnering with administration for collaborative instruction

As we developed the lesson plan in early April 2025, a new question arose: *How can we work with FHS administration to support this project?* This question is important because a strong partnership requires a shared responsibility among all involved to support and promote innovation, reflection and respect (Coler et al., 2023). At this point, we had a concrete logistical plan and an outlined lesson plan to share with the FHS administration.

Coordinating logistical support. During late March and early April, we had informal conversations with administrators at FHS. By this, we mean that Bethany may have mentioned it in another meeting she had with an administrator, or Jeff might have discussed it in general terms when seeing an administrator in the hallway while he was at FHS. However, by mid-April, we felt that it was important to meet more formally with the administration. The immediate issue was logistical support. One of the main points of the conversation involved the process for bringing 13 PSTs into the school. We determined where they would find available parking. We also agreed that the front office personnel, for security purposes, would be ready to assist them in the scanning of their driver's license and the issuing of visitor's IDs. Additionally, during the meeting, it was decided that an administrator would join us in the front office to welcome the PSTs to the school and show support for the partnership.

Additionally, we encountered a unique logistical challenge that needed administrative support. With groups of three high school students working on the elevation profile map (Table 1), our goal was to have one PST helping each group. Because there were 13 PSTs in *Teaching Social Studies* and 20 students in Bethany's geography class, we would need to combine two classes to have enough high school students for PSTs to work with. The administrators helped us identify the Advanced Placement History Seminar (APHS) class, an elective offered in the district to support A.P. students in history courses, which is a class to support students in the Advanced Placement history courses. This made sense because those students would have already finished their course content, taken their A.P. exam and would not have a final exam attached to APHS. Additionally, we determined that having two classes of high school students plus 13 PSTs in Bethany's classroom would make the room overcrowded. Therefore, we all agreed to ask the teacher next door to Bethany, who had a planning period during the first block of the day, to use his classroom during the mapping activity. This would allow us to spread students and PSTs across two classrooms. Such logistical support, while seemingly mundane, is an important part of a partnership, as it demonstrates the school's commitment to utilizing space, personnel and resources for preservice education.

Addressing content with sensitivity. In addition to arranging logistical support, we also shared our lesson plan (Table 1) with the administration. We thought it was important for the principal and assistant principal of instruction to be aware of the questions around civic responsibility. In particular, the question: *What is our responsibility to act when we see persecution/atrocity occurring?* (Table 1). While this question may seem both logical and innocuous, we understand that the Holocaust can be regarded as a controversial topic in secondary schools (Conner, Bohan, & Badger, 2025) and that topics in a geography course are often political and controversial (Fry, 2018; Tredinnick & McCrackin, 2026). For this reason, Eargle and Mewborne (2025) advised teachers to align lessons on Holocaust geographies to standards. Because we aligned the lesson to relevant standards and frameworks (Eargle & Sanders, 2026), we were able to have a standards-based conversation with administration. Additionally, given our current sociopolitical context, we acknowledge that social studies teachers report feeling unsupported by administration when focusing on prodemocracy education (Kaka & Hollstein, 2023; Kaka, Littenberg-Tobias, Kessner, Francis, & Kennett, 2024). While Bethany has not experienced this, we thought it was best to be transparent in the conversation with the administrative team. At the end of the meeting, it was understood by all that we – Bethany and Jeff – had been diligent in our planning and were prepared to guide PSTs and high school students through challenging conversations around the Holocaust and culpability related to persecution and genocide.

Teaching Holocaust geographies

After planning the lesson, determining logistics and collaborating with administration, the time came for us to teach the lesson. As noted earlier (see [Figure 1](#)), Jeff first taught the lesson to PSTs on Thursday, May 15 at USC. We co-taught the lesson – with the aid of the PSTs – to high school students on Monday, May 19 at FHS. The PST version of the lesson took 2.5 hours, and the high school version took the full 90-min block.

Preparing PSTs for meaningful instruction. When we set the dates for teaching the lesson at USC and FHS, it aligned with the instructional goal of the SSSP to engage students in disciplinary inquiry ([Swan, Lee, & Grant, 2018](#)) and authentic intellectual work ([King, Newmann, & Carmichael, 2009](#)). In planning the lesson, we considered the demographics of the PSTs in *Teaching Social Studies*. Like many social studies teachers ([Hill, Stearns, & Owens, 2015](#)), most of the PSTs had history degrees. We should note that we are both graduates of USC's SSSP and we both have bachelor's degrees in history; therefore, we recognize the importance of positioning PSTs to understand a discipline other than history. Compounding this, a quick show of hands unsurprisingly revealed that several PSTs had taken a Holocaust *history* course as an undergraduate, aligning with what [Eargle and Mewborne \(2025\)](#) referred to as the history bias in Holocaust education. While teaching the initial lesson to PSTs, it was important that Jeff engage in conversations on geography and geographic inquiry. First and foremost, this was important for the PSTs' education as *social studies* teachers. Second, it was important because they would be supporting and working with high school students in a *geography* class.

On the first day of *Teaching Social Studies* earlier that week, Jeff explained that the class would meet at FHS on May 19 ([Figure 1](#)). Then, after teaching and discussing the lesson on May 15 with the PSTs, he steered the conversation to the sterile nature of modeling instruction on USC's campus. Jeff explained the differentiation in the lesson implementation that the PSTs would observe and why we made those choices. For example, Jeff discussed the difference between the jigsaw of [Knowles's \(2024\)](#) chapter for PSTs and the summarization and note catcher for the high school students. He also discussed the use of *A Real Pain* ([Eisenberg, 2024](#)) and the importance of understanding district or school policies related to the use of films. Finally, Jeff reviewed logistics and protocols for entering FHS and the professional expectations while interacting with teachers and students at FHS.

Co-teaching students for authentic learning. On Monday morning, we met the PSTs in the FHS front office at 8:00. As planned, an administrator met with us and welcomed the PSTs to the school. We then walked to Bethany's classroom where we reminded the PSTs of the agenda for the morning. Specifically, we reminded the PSTs of when we (Bethany and Jeff) would be teaching the students and when they would be teaching the students. We also explained to them how we planned to divide the high school students into groups. Additionally, we explained to the PSTs that groups would be spread across two different classrooms. Lastly, we (Bethany and Jeff) discussed last-minute adjustments and logistical issues related to high school students having access to materials through the district's online classroom platform. We did this openly as a means of modeling for PSTs how we interacted with one another as partners, and how we were thinking about minor adjustments until the beginning of instruction.

As the high school students entered Bethany's classroom, we directed PSTs to observe from the walls to provide enough desks for the high school students. After the bell rang, Bethany welcomed Jeff, the PSTs, the students from APHS, and the APHS teacher. We then began teaching the lesson where Jeff primarily taught the Holocaust content and Bethany primarily taught the geography content. Once students were divided into groups, we assigned a PST to each group and then assigned groups to a classroom. While we both took responsibility for the learning of both PSTs and high school students, Jeff primarily focused on supporting PSTs and Bethany primarily focused on supporting high school students. That said, there were times when Jeff interacted with the high school students, and Bethany interacted with the PSTs. Thus, we created a space in which traditional boundaries between theory and practice – between university and high school – were bridged.

As the groups were mapping in the two different classrooms, we circulated between the two rooms. The APHS teacher remained largely in the hallway watching both classes. After groups finished creating their maps, we all reconvened in Bethany's classroom. Bethany then facilitated the discussion of the corroborating documents and the questions around culpability and civic responsibility. Putting Bethany forward for this part of the instruction was by design as we wanted PSTs to observe how she leveraged positive student-teacher relationships to have a conversation around challenging history.

Preparing PSTs through a reflective debrief. After teaching the lesson to high school students, Bethany had to transition to her next class during the following period. As planned, Jeff took the PSTs to another classroom to debrief the experience. We went to the classroom of an English teacher who had a planning period; because this teacher often works with PSTs, the teacher gladly offered the room for our use. The debrief focused on the differentiation between the PST version of the lesson and the high school student version of the lesson. Jeff also discussed what PSTs observed related to student learning, although we do not document that here in our story. Additionally, prior to the class, PSTs read [Eargle and Mewborne's \(2025\)](#) work on teaching Holocaust geographies in secondary schools and [Warren's \(2021\)](#) work on teaching the Holocaust with the victims' humanity at the forefront of instruction. Jeff prompted discussion among the PSTs to align the Majdanek mapping lesson to those readings. Jeff then explained the concept of the spatial citizen ([Bednarz, 2019](#)) and had PSTs think about how the lesson provided relevance through geography. Additionally, knowing that it is important to avoid using the macabre to teach the Holocaust ([Culbertson, 2016](#)), Jeff steered the debrief to address how the lesson avoided teaching the Holocaust with shock. Then, to address one of our goals of this project, Jeff led the PSTs to discuss how geography was used to teach about challenging civic and moral questions and how Bethany guided high school students through the concluding conversation.

Sharing, teaching and extending the work

By the time we taught the lesson in May, we had received notification from NCGE that our proposal to present the lesson was accepted for the October 2025 conference. Shortly after teaching the lesson on May 19, we met briefly to discuss the overall work and how PSTs and high school students responded. We then, as planned at the onset, began to think about the conference presentation and the article. Because disseminating information about innovation in school-university partnerships is important ([Polly et al., 2023](#)), the questions we asked at that point were: *What do we want to share about this experience?* and *Where and how do we share it?*

Given that Bethany was a doctoral student, Jeff saw this as an opportunity to model for her how a presentation can become part of the writing process. We agreed to meet in early June to develop an outline for an article detailing the lesson plan and divide up writing responsibilities. Because the NCGE conference and *The Geography Teacher* are both teacher-facing with an emphasis on practice, we decided to draft an article that, while addressing our partnership and our focus on PST education, would primarily detail the lesson plan ([Eargle & Sanders, 2026](#)). We agreed to have a draft ready by August. Although we originally planned to hold the manuscript until after the NCGE conference in October 2025, we felt comfortable with the draft in August after several colleagues provided us with feedback. While we submitted the article in August 2025, we were able to use feedback from the NCGE presentation in October when making provisions following *The Geography Teacher's* peer review process. This still allowed Bethany the opportunity to see how presenting and publishing can interact with one another.

In addition, we have had the opportunity to share this work beyond NCGE and *The Geography Teacher*. First, in September 2025, we co-taught the lesson to middle-level social studies PSTs. Jeff teaches the middle-level social studies methodology class as an embedded course at a local middle school. For that class, we invited social studies teachers from the

school to join and learn alongside the PSTs (see [Eargle et al., 2026](#)). Then, in January 2026, we shared our story with the faculty in Jeff's department at USC. Additionally, in June 2026, we taught the lesson to teachers who were taking a graduate-level professional development course offered through a local Holocaust education organization. Not only did these opportunities allow us to disseminate information about our partnership beyond traditional PDS platforms and venues ([Polly et al., 2023](#)), but they also provided Bethany with an opportunity to engage as a teacher educator beyond her role as a coaching teacher for interns ([Cosenza et al., 2023](#); [National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021](#)). For both of us, continuing to share the lesson as professional development allows us the opportunity to continue conversations around teaching Holocaust geographies. In doing so, we have generated additional ideas and are engaged in forthcoming work on Holocaust maps and mapping, thus creating a cycle of continued reflection on and improvement for our own practice.

Reflecting on our partnership

For school-university partnerships to be successful, collaborators must take time to reflect on the work and on their growth ([Stoicovy et al., 2023](#)). The initial purpose of this collaboration was to develop a hands-on experience for PSTs in a secondary social studies classroom while simultaneously providing an engaging and thought-provoking lesson for high school students even near the end of the school year when we knew they would have an eye on summer. Although the focus of the collaboration was creating a learning experience for our respective students, we later realized – through reflection, conversation and recounting the *story* of our work to colleagues – that the collaboration had become a meaningful learning experience for both of us as well. In documenting our work, we answered [Breault's \(2010\)](#) call to contribute stories to the literature on school-university partnerships. By embracing storytelling, we placed a focus on the “power of storytelling and the experiences of the tellers without forcing the story into a narrowly defined and inadequate research framework” ([Breault, 2010](#), p. 179). Therefore, we did not develop research questions or seek to generalize findings. Instead, we sought to provide a story that others may find useful as they generate ideas for what is possible in their partnerships. Likewise, although we do not identify generalizable findings, we do offer brief individual reflections on what we have learned through this process.

Bethany's reflection

When Jeff approached me regarding a collaborative lesson plan, I saw the potential to address a variety of topics: PST education, geo-literacy, Holocaust education and school-university partnerships. However, agreeing to work on the project felt organic. As a PST and as a teacher, I have been involved in school-university partnerships. The very idea of collaborating on a lesson that would serve my students, PSTs and further the school-university partnership made sense. I would be remiss not to reiterate how trust has been an underlying factor that has shaped our collaboration. However, it was not until Jeff and I were debriefing the lesson plan, writing the first article ([Eargle & Sanders, 2026](#)) and preparing to present on our partnership at one of Jeff's department meetings at the College of Education that we had finally defined trust as a key factor in the success of our collaboration.

At the time of this work, I was about halfway through my doctoral program and had yet to begin my literature review for my Dissertation in Practice. Working on our project provided a space to practice and prepare for the dissertation writing and action research process. A significant portion of the lesson plan development and writing involved researching a gap in the literature. Because I had very limited experience in identifying gaps in the literature, our collaboration proved to be valuable to the process of my own doctoral studies. Additionally, this experience reflected the action research process where we identified a problem in our respective educational spaces, collaborated on a solution and implemented that solution. We

have since reflected on this process and used our reflection to shape our next steps in our collaboration (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Furthermore, our collaboration broadened my practice as a teacher educator, becoming a type of boundary-spanning work (Cosenza *et al.*, 2023). While not part of our original plan for this project, Jeff and I co-taught the lesson to middle-level PSTs in the Fall 2025 semester. At that point, I had coached a few practicum students but had yet to teach a full lesson to a larger group of college students. When teaching it to middle-level PSTs, I recall feeling the same emotions I experienced as a PST standing in front of students for the first time – nervous and wondering whether I was teaching the lesson effectively. The experience became an additional learning opportunity where I engaged in a different type of teaching and facilitated a familiar lesson. It was a glimpse behind the curtain on PST education, where Jeff provided both real-time and post-lesson feedback to me on the differences in educating high school and college students.

This collaboration is an experience that both Jeff and I individually, and upon reflection, collectively, identify as a turning point in the evolution of our partnership from student-professor to collaborators. It is important to recognize though, that this shift required an adjustment period in my own thinking and how I participated in our partnership. It took a few years of working together within a larger school-university partnership, as well as my own transition from seeing myself as a PST to seeing myself as a professional, for me to fully recognize that the expertise, experience and perspectives I brought to our collaboration were meaningful and equally important. In practice, the transition from a student-professor mindset required me to reevaluate how I participated in our discussions and meetings. I was no longer a PST whose primary role was to listen, learn and ask questions; I was a professional whose knowledge and experiences could contribute in new ways and, in some cases, change the direction of our collaboration. With this reevaluation came a new sense of ownership in the collaborative process as I participated in what Sandholtz and Finan (1998) described as cross-institutional and boundary-spanning roles. I began to see myself not simply as someone invited into the work, but as someone whose knowledge, experiences and perspectives could help shape it. At the end of the day, becoming true collaborators required more than a change in our roles, it required a change in how I understood myself and what I had to offer within our partnership.

Jeff's reflection

One reason that I enjoy partnering with Bethany is that we are both drawn to the opportunities within a school-university partnership to create new spaces of teaching and learning that also expand our roles beyond that of *professor* and *teacher* (Cosenza *et al.*, 2023; Laughlin, 2021). Just as Bethany admitted to being nervous when teaching PSTs, I will admit to being anxious about working with high school students, especially students I did not know. And I was going to do this in front of my PSTs! However, it was important for PSTs to see me as a teacher; just as it was important that they saw Bethany as an emerging expert on geo-literacy methodology. So, I echo Bethany's comment above about trust. Because our relationship is marked by mutual trust and respect built over time, I felt confident in co-teaching with her. By putting myself in a new professional experience, I was able to grow and reflect with a trusted collaborator.

In defining partnerships between schools and universities, the National Association of Professional Development Schools (2021) described the creation of a learning community in which all collaborators are engaged in learning and growth. For me, this means that university faculty are engaged in learning and growth as well. At the time of this writing, it has been a decade since I left the high school classroom. In working with Bethany, I am positioned to think in practical ways about lesson planning. In this case, I knew that the lesson plan we created would be taught to high school students, allowing me to shift my thinking away from largely theory and toward practice. There were times during the development of the lesson plan

when Bethany pointed out how I could improve my contributions to the lesson; thus, the comfort level of our partnership allows me to be open to learning from her and her to be confident in teaching me. I value our partnership for the ways that it keeps me authentically engaged in the present teaching context.

Finally, any reflection on my partnership with Bethany must include how our relationship has changed because of the school-university partnership. Like [Sandholtz and Finan \(1998\)](#), Bethany and I have developed a relationship in which we are comfortable working together within the blurred cultures of the high school and university that is created by the school-university partnership. Unlike [Sandholtz and Finan \(1998\)](#), our relationship began as student-professor and developed into professional collaborators [3]. While it may be easy for me to claim that our background as student-professor allowed me to quickly develop a partnership with Bethany, I had to move past the previous power dynamics and stop viewing her as a student. Certainly, I saw her as a colleague after she graduated. Yet, it took time for our relationship to evolve and for me to see Bethany as an equal partner in our collaboration, someone whom I can turn to help me grow and learn. This is important for me to recognize as a professor because [Teitel \(2003\)](#) reminds us that successful school-partnerships require parity among collaborators. To have my relationship with Bethany transition from student-professor to colleague to true collaborative partner has been rewarding, and the story captured in this article exemplifies that experience.

Summarizing thoughts

In this work, we demonstrated how the trust among those working in school-university partnership can be leveraged to engage secondary students as global, spatial and geo-literate civic participants who can think critically and contribute to discussions regarding issues of social justice and civic participation ([Bednarz, 2019](#)) and prepare PSTs to step into engaging these challenging histories with purposeful instructional planning and collaboration grounded in geographic, historical and civic education. While this is important to us as social studies educators, we recognize that our story is not simply about the importance of PST education in geography or Holocaust education or the structure lesson itself. Our story is about what can emerge when school-university partnerships create space for trust, collaboration, reflection and reciprocal learning. In sharing this story, our goal is to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding school-university partnership work and professional learning for the mutual benefit of PSTs, teachers, professors, administrators and, ultimately, students.

Framing the story of our partnership around the PDS Nine Essentials of boundary-spanning work ([Cosenza et al., 2023](#); [National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021](#)) and active and collaborative reflection ([National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2021](#); [Stoicov et al., 2023](#)), our intent was to bring focus to how we learn and grow alongside each other within a larger school-university partnership structure. Our collaboration – and the process of sharing its story – illustrates both the intended and unexpected benefits of partnerships, teaching and professional learning fostered through trust and the mutual development in school-university partnerships. In line with existing research ([Laughlin, 2021](#)), the nature of our collaboration, the trust between us as colleagues and the power of third spaces created by school-university partnerships blurred the traditional roles of theory and practice. Jeff provided the lesson structure, historical context, and Holocaust education resources, while Bethany provided the supporting theoretical frameworks of geo-literacy and the broader implications of geography education. Our respective expertise intersected and informed one another in meaningful ways that strengthened the lesson and learning for high school students, PST education and our own professional growth.

We agree with [Sandholtz and Finan's \(1998\)](#) conclusion that “true collaboration is hard work. It takes years to build trust and establish personal relationships” (p. 18). Arriving at the point where we could share this story took us five years and a significant shift in our relationship to no longer see ourselves as a student and a professor but as peers and partners.

Yet, stories of such collaborations – whether that of Sandholtz and Finan (1998) or our own – are important to demonstrate what is possible in a school-university partnership when relationships and trust are developed. Breault (2010) reminds us that stories matter because they help document the creation of meaningful, new educational spaces and relationships that can shape both educators and students in powerful ways. Therefore, we offer our story to encourage meaningful dialogue and action among school and university actors in PST preparation and in-service professional development regarding the teaching of challenging histories to foster critical, historical and geo-literate thinking. We hope that engaging in our own storytelling of our collaboration encourages others to reflect on and share their own partnership stories – not as accounts of perfection, but as evolving and dynamic stories of collaboration, uncertainty, challenges, learning and growth.

About the authors

Bethany M. Sanders is Doctoral Student at the University of South Carolina and a high school social studies teacher. Her doctoral studies focus on teaching geo-literacy in the secondary classroom contextualized within a school-university partnership.

Jeffrey C. Eargle is Clinical Associate Professor and serves as the Secondary Social Studies Program Coordinator at the University of South Carolina.

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Notes

1. As a rather cursory example, we reviewed the 9 most recent issues of *PDS Partners* from 2023 to 2026 – Volume 18, Issue 1 to Volume 21, Issue 1. Excluding the 10 articles in Volume 18, Issue 2 in 2023 on the revised Nine Essentials, 56 articles were published across 8 issues. Of those, we identified only 4 articles focused exclusively on high school partnerships. As readers of the journal, we have noticed this trend. This is not the fault of the editing team for *PDS Partners*; it speaks to a general need for research on and documentation of high school partnerships.
2. Because we use a pseudonym, we do not provide specific details that would identify the school.
3. Here, we acknowledge that Bethany is currently a doctoral student at USC. However, Jeff is not a faculty member in her program. While we note that there is a “doctoral student-professor” relationship that officially exists, we prioritize our relationship as collaborators in a school-university partnership. As we have explained to colleagues, the “doctoral student-professor” relationship is like an application on our phone that is running in the background. We know it is there and we use it when we need to, but it is not the application we primarily use.

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Corresponding author

Jeffrey C. Eargle can be contacted at: EargleJ@mailbox.sc.edu