

Striving to Walk the Talk: Engaging in Shared Learning Tasks Perceived as Daunting

Introduction

As friends/colleagues teaching in different regions of the U.S., we engage in collaborative research because mutual trust enables us to be honest with one another about inconsistencies between our ideals and actions as educators (Kosnik, Samaras, & Freese, 2006). We claim commitment to modeling reflective practices. Students, we believe, should be active in constructing their and others' knowledge, including our evolving knowledge as teacher educators. However, we noted we had not been diligent in engaging in the learning opportunities we believe are worthwhile for our students (Guilfoyle, 1995; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000; Hudson-Ross & Graham, 2000; Loughran & Berry, 2005). In fact, we have assigned students tasks we have not completed, assignments that we admit can be daunting.

Valerie has been teaching for four years at a small, private liberal arts institution in the Northeast. She required student teachers she taught and supervised to videotape themselves teaching. Meeting with each individually to view and reflect on his or her practice, she was struck by students' comments that watching the video was anxiety inducing. Laurie is completing her third year as a professor at a moderately large state institution in the Southeast. She required students to place themselves in the position of a "minority," finding a location that was new, unfamiliar, and where they felt somehow different. Students then wrote reflections summarizing their experiences. In writing and class discussion, they typically expressed feeling discomfort or anxiety.

Through this inquiry we came together to support each other in completing those intimidating tasks. Our respective students helped us reflect on our experiences, allowing us to see our practices through their eyes.

Questions

1. What might we learn about ourselves and our teaching from completing the "daunting" tasks we require, thereby placing ourselves in the position of students?
2. What might students learn from our efforts to "walk the talk" and model transparent practice?

Framework

We view knowledge construction as a continually evolving process requiring critical reflection with others also examining their beliefs, assumptions, and experiences (e.g., Larrivee, 2000; Walkington, Christensen, & Kock, 2001). We endeavor to engage students in a "partnered practice of critical reflection," a process of collaboratively constructing knowledge about teaching and encouraging one another to critically reflect (Berry & Crowe, 2009, p. 86).

This study is grounded in S-STEP literature. Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) suggested self-study is enhanced by multiple, and sometimes alternative or oppositional, perspectives as we consider our practices, potential problems, and positive aspects. Although no one wishes to seek out "public failure," we see value in making our work transparent to students, modeling the researcher-practitioner viewpoint (p. 84). This requires dialogue and a process of "coming-to-know," and yet goes beyond knowing to transforming practice (p. 84). In seeking out others who might disagree and offer contradictory interpretations, we can begin to improve. Kosnik et al. (2006) stated, "Collaboration does not mean harmony. Interactions may cause the individual to question his/her position or those of others as they develop new understanding" (p. 159).

Participating in the activities our students find most intimidating and "walking the talk" opens us up to criticism and uncertainty. Berry (2008) invited students to critique and provide feedback on her teaching, acknowledging this is a "risky business" for the teacher educator, but one with potential to reframe our work (p. 36). "In doing that which one advocates for ones' students, insights into teaching and learning are apprehended in practice that might otherwise not be fully appreciated or understood if such learning was not genuinely experienced by oneself" (Loughran & Berry, 2005, p. 194). Through this self-study we endeavored to better understand students' experiences and help them achieve the goals of critically reflective practice we espouse.

Methods

Completing our own assignments, we documented our journeys through journaling and e-mail exchanges, allowing us to reflect and interrogate our experiences with a trusted critical friend. Reading and responding to each other offered a more objective, outsider perspective. All these communications were used as data sources. We shared portions of these with students, making decisions jointly so what we "held up for public examination . . . would be useful and accessible for these prospective teachers" (Berry, 2008, p. 71). We collected students' responses made in class discussions and through anonymous feedback. When students completed the assignments themselves, they submitted written reflections and met with us individually. Those reflections and our discussion notes were used as data sources to better understand how they experienced our course assignments. In combination, these data sources allowed for public, transparent discussion of experiences as well as private, safe spaces for feedback and reflection.

Valerie video recorded herself teaching the first meeting of the semester with her Literacy II students. Shortly after, she viewed the recording with 18 student teachers (STs) during a

meeting of her Seminar course. All but one ST who viewed the video had been class members in a previous Literacy II section taught by Valerie. Therefore, they shared an insider's understanding of the course and the learning objectives and activities associated with it. Prior to sharing the video, Valerie provided some context including what she saw as her objectives for the class meeting. As STs viewed the recording, Valerie thought aloud about what she had been thinking and feeling during the teaching episode, as well as what she was thinking and feeling while viewing it with them. Valerie encouraged STs to interject their observations, questions, and suggestions regarding her practice as they watched. Valerie's think aloud, along with STs' contributions, were audio recorded as an additional data source.

After sharing and discussing the video, Valerie asked STs to complete a short anonymous questionnaire about the experience. Items included "What do you think Valerie learned about herself and her practice as a teacher educator?" "What was shared through her think aloud or students' comments that was most intriguing/interesting/surprising?" and "What do you hope you will learn or experience through watching yourself teach?" Valerie compiled the responses and shared them with Laurie. She also provided Laurie with entries from her teaching journal she wrote prior to and following the recording of her teaching and its viewing with STs.

Laurie asked students in a graduate-level diversity course to place themselves in the position of a minority in any context (n = 11). She typically has given students examples of possible contexts but allows them to choose based on their comfort level, access, and availability. Six of eleven in this class chose to attend religious services. In response to this common interest, Laurie chose to attend a Baptist church, as it is the predominant religion of her students. As she asks her students to do (but which most do not), Laurie attended the service alone, thereby not employing a "safety net" or "buddy system." During the experience, she took brief, surreptitious notes which she used when writing her reflection. Laurie then sent that reflection to her 11 students, asking for their feedback, thoughts, and opinions. Questions included "Is this a 'typical' Baptist service or does every church have its own 'culture' determined by its members?" and "How does my 'minority' experience help you engage with this assignment yourself?" Students also freely commented on the narrative of the experience, adding their own questions, providing "insider" knowledge, and comparing Laurie's experience to their own. Laurie shared her reflection and student feedback with Valerie, soliciting her perspective as a research partner and critical friend. Laurie used her notes and reflective narrative, the students' responses, and Valerie's responses as data sources, along with students' reflective narratives on their own minority experiences.

Collaboratively, we coded and analyzed data to find themes and inconsistencies in students' and our experiences. We systematically engaged with our individual data sets, identifying codes, emergent patterns, and questions for consideration which we then shared with each other. Laurie's week-long visit to Valerie's home offered the chance to collectively engage with the data as a whole. We were able to exchange ideas, meaningfully discuss and reflect, and identify together the broader patterns and divergent themes that might inform teacher education at large (Samaras & Freese, 2006; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Analyzing our journals/narratives and students' reflections/feedback allowed us to compare and contrast our interpretations of experiences with theirs. Finally, we prepared summaries of our individual and shared analyses

as a tool for further reflection and to facilitate the writing process.

Results

Through our teaching, we began to appreciate the discomfort/difficulty students faced completing particular tasks. We committed to complete these assignments ourselves and to share our experiences with students and each other. We anticipated "courageous conversations" would follow (Singleton & Hays, 2006), impacting our own and students' learning.

Consequences for our students. As we had anticipated, our efforts to complete the daunting assignments we required of our students had consequences for them and their learning. While it did not completely alleviate students' anxiety, it did help to mediate some of their uneasiness. It also provided students with tangible models of how the tasks were structured and how a completed assignment might be presented.

- "It sort of breaks the ice. I now know someone with her experience still feels awkward when they expose themselves for criticism." (Valerie's ST)
- "Realizing we can talk through it and explain our rationale behind things helps. I was expecting us to be watching it in silence and watching her body language to gauge how good of a teacher I was :(I'm much less nervous now." (Valerie's ST)
- "This definitely helped me conquer some of my fears and made me realize what I might be missing out on." (Laurie's S3)
- "I can honestly say I had a very negative attitude about this from the beginning, but now I'm looking forward to it!" (Laurie's S5)

In doing so, we were able to help our students consider how the tasks would provide them with an opportunity for self-discovery and learning.

- "I want to see what students see as I teach so I can improve each aspect. There are so many things to consider when you are up in front of the room, so I hope to make sure I am thinking about each one." (Valerie's ST)
- "My goal has always been to change the world, but maybe at the same time, I should have the goal of how can the world influence me?" (Laurie's S1)
- "I don't ever want to forget this feeling... I need to remember my students may feel the same way about my class. I hate that they may feel so alone and out of place. I hope by remembering how I felt, I will have more compassion and understanding." (Laurie's S2)

By thinking aloud and sharing excerpts from her journal, Valerie modeled what she meant when she described and encouraged her STs to be critically reflective. Laurie modeled this through the written narrative of her minority experience and through in-class explanation of the process from start to finish. Modeling the process of critical reflection, along with our own apprehension when completing these tasks, helped students more fully engage in the tasks themselves and more openly, honestly question their own beliefs and practices.

For both groups of our students, they noted our efforts to "walk our talk" reinforced and supported our espoused ideals of aspiring to be authentic and vulnerable in our practice and students of our own teaching. Doing so enhanced our trustworthiness and, we believe, the likelihood our students will choose/be willing to "walk their talk" as teachers.

- "☺ Thank you for experiencing this with us!" (Valerie's ST)

- “I hope I can put myself in the position of being a student with me as a teacher. I might think about how I would respond to my actions and teaching methods.” (Valerie’s STs)
- “The experience has forced me to look at my classroom and my students with a different perspective and realize how much I can learn from them.” (Laurie’s S4)
- “I understand more about diverse cultures and plan on continuing to foster relationships with my students while making my classroom a safe place to learn and discuss diversity.” (Laurie’s S6)

Consequences for our selves and our practices.

Putting ourselves in the shoes of our students was an anxiety-filled experience, both in having the experiences we required of students and then inviting students to respond to us as learners.

Valerie. Beforehand, I firmly believed one or multiple STs would pounce on the opportunity to “take me down.” In hindsight, this was a wholly irrational fear and would have been completely out of character for the relationships we share. Where does that fear come from? I really had to do some soul searching to confront my propensity for anticipating the worst and imagining that others see me in an unfavorable light. In the end, the experience, my students’ feedback, and Laurie’s perspectives contributed to me stepping out of my pattern of self-deprecation for two reasons: first, it is not a healthy or happy way to live and experience my professional work; second, it is an unhelpful model to provide students. In this self-study, Laurie’s role as my critical friend was to remind me critical reflection is not a rally cry for beating oneself up. There is always room for growth, but the path to being an effective teacher educator is not through being flawless in my performance; it is through my willingness to seize opportunities to grow.

Not just in this experience but through all my interactions and self-talk, I am inclined to look for my shortcoming, and I find it nearly impossible to embrace and celebrate the good work I do. If I heard one of my student teachers running herself down the way I typically talk about myself, I would despair and probably shake her by the shoulders! What kind of a model am I being when I spend so much time throwing myself under the bus? That is definitely not what I want my student teachers to see as the goal for this assignment and not what I want them to see as healthy and helpful reflection or the point of being a reflective practitioner. (Valerie’s journal)

Laurie. Even though we had committed to this endeavor, I still managed to put it off. I knew the majority of my students and colleagues are members of the Baptist church, and I continually profess the importance of seeking knowledge about school communities and students to better understand them and meet their needs. I realized my fear stemmed mainly from a complete lack of information. I wondered, only to myself at first, if there would be extreme practices, although I had only media images to feed that concern. I also feared (this was confirmed) I would be singled out and “targeted” as a visitor. I realized quickly why students feel this task is “daunting” and why they sometimes resist.

What happened next caused me to stammer and sweat, forcing me completely out of my comfort zone. At this time, the preacher stood up and asked everyone to greet their neighbors. Initially, congregation members turned to those nearby and shook hands, said “good morning,” and chatted briefly. Then, one by one, they started

coming toward me... Each person was welcoming (is it possible to be TOO welcoming?) and kind, wishing me a good morning, a happy new year, and saying they were glad I was joining them. While this greeting time was welcoming and not unpleasant, it served to highlight my outsider status and made me feel very uncomfortable. (Laurie’s reflection)

This experience produced great discomfort and helped me understand what I ask my students to do is no easy task. Like them, I felt anxious and out of place. After reflecting and writing my narrative, I actually looked forward to sharing it with them, knowing it would foster discussion about why we all have similar negative expectations and how those moments of “disequilibrium” are necessary for growth and learning. In our discussion, we highlighted the way many of our students must feel, increasing empathy and promoting advocacy for them. Our discussion also emphasized the idea that we all possess privileges, one of which is to choose to not participate in activities or communities where we feel unsafe or uncomfortable. These lessons were important for us all as teachers and as members of a diverse social world.

We were challenged to consider how to structure the tasks’ requirements so students’ potential for learning was optimized without requiring them to engage in experiences so laden with fear their learning was impinged through affective filters. First and foremost, as their teachers, we must have the capacity to listen to their anxiety and respond in a manner that helps them mediate their fear. Additionally, we must be clear in articulating our rationales behind requiring the tasks, what we hope they will learn through engaging in them, and what criteria we will employ to give them feedback and evaluate their efforts.

Significance

Through this self-study we endeavored to make our critical reflection and knowledge construction transparent. Childs (2005) acknowledged, “We are probably not born critical reflectors/reflective thinkers;” rather it is a skill we must teach, refine, and practice ourselves (p. 144). This self-study is an example of our efforts to be critically reflective practitioners and to learn in concert with students (Hudson-Ross & Graham, 2000). We are engaged in the “critical exploration of experience, perceptions and positions; the insight gained into these can then be used as a starting point for engaging with others, and for starting to develop shared understandings” of our practice (Kirk, 2005, p. 240).

With students, we developed learning communities where we all more closely examined our pedagogy to ensure its meaningfulness, relevance, and appropriateness (Guilfoyle, 1995; Loughran & Berry, 2005). We simultaneously taught students and ourselves. Hopefully our students will be willing to be similarly vulnerable, seeking their students’ feedback in the spirit of lifelong learning. Likewise, we hope other teacher educators are encouraged to critically examine what they ask students to do.

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