A Cross Continent Collaboration: Seeking Community to Support Critical Inquiry in Teacher Education

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Abstract

Four novice teacher educators working in different US and Canada universities used online journaling and dialoguing combined with feedback from their students to explore --

1. *What it means to have a "community of practice" without geographic boundaries,*

2. *How they might support one another be critically reflective practitioners and models of democratic teaching.*

3. *How their teaching practices are interpreted by their respective students,*

4. *How they see their efforts influenced by the unique contexts of their institutions and communities.*

The authors' online community provided a viable and valued venue for self-study. Findings include insight into their taken-for-granted assumptions, how their efforts were interpreted by others, and how their thinking and efforts were shaped by their individual university communities.

Introduction

When individual professors within an organization practice critical inquiry they engage in a solitary process fraught with potential for inadvertent self-delusion and misunderstanding. For that reason, Valerie and Sandy, two novice assistant professors from colleges on separate ends of the United States, spent their first year journaling and giving feedback to one another while soliciting feedback from students as they attempted to create democratic classrooms. Both found additional, and occasionally painful, insight by opening their teaching practices to the scrutiny of others. In this, the second year of their practice, they invited two other relatively new professors, Laurie and Susan, into their self-study project, choosing teacher educators working in different universities in the United States and Canada. Their goal was to cultivate further inquiry with others who were like-minded in their commitment to critical dialogue, transformational inquiry, and democratic classroom practices. They wanted their new colleagues to also be in the early stages of their teaching careers because of the unique nature of the problems and issues of novice professors. The initial collaboration between Sandy and Valerie grew out of a long-standing friendship. An invitation to Laurie, a graduate school classmate of Valerie's, was extended when she accepted a tenure-track position. Susan was invited to participate after meeting Sandy and Valerie at AERA where the three discussed their commonalities and self-study interests.

The decision to go beyond the walls of our organizations and transcend geographic boundaries in search of a support system was intended to overcome taken-for-granted beliefs and values in our individual institutions (see Brookfield, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994), introducing new

ways of thinking to help us recognize our own cognitive distortions and reinterpret our beliefs and practices. Many learning organizations intentionally and explicitly seek out feedback and change but are somewhat bound by the organizational context itself. According to Katz and Kahn's (1978) definition of organization, "The organizational context is by definition a set of restrictions for focusing attention upon content areas and for narrowing the cognitive style to certain types of procedures" (p.277).

Our intent was to open our inquiry to others who might introduce new ways of thinking to help us, as we help them, recognize our own cognitive distortions and reinterpret our beliefs and practices. The four of us committed to regular on-line journaling and honest, thoughtful responses, collaborating as 'critical friends', over the academic year.

The following research questions served to frame our collaborative self-study:

1. What does it mean to have a "community of practice" without geographic boundaries?

2. How can we support one another and our shared quest to be models of democratic teaching and critically reflective practitioners for our students?

3. How are our individual efforts to be critically reflective practitioners, and to enact democratic principles in our teaching while in the midst of trying to navigate through new terrain as assistant professors, perceived and evaluated by our students?

4. How do we see our efforts and experiences influenced by the contexts of our institutions and communities in which they are situated? What similarities and differences emerge across our specific communities of inquiry?

Theoretical Framework

We were guided in our inquiry by social constructivism and critical social theory literature. Social constructivists view knowledge as constructed through interactions with others. This construction takes place against a backdrop of context, including "historical and sociocultural dimensions" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). Consequently, knowledge is neither static nor neutral. Rather, it continually evolves and reflects the ideologies of those who participate in its constructions.

This view of knowledge is taken up and furthered by critical social theorists. Critical social theory is concerned with uncovering the taken-for-granted or hegemonic practices and ways of thinking serving the dominant class in silencing and dehumanizing those identified as "other" (Blake & Masschelein, 2003; Brown, 2004). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) characterized critical social theory as optimistic regarding the potential of human beings to engage in ideological critiques resulting in "action to bring about a more just, free, and equitable society" (p. 347).

Educational theorists have argued critical reflection is the hallmark of reflective practitioners and is at the heart of effective educational practices (e.g. Larrivee, 2000; Walkington, Christensen, & Kock, 2001), and ideals of critical reflection and collaborative

inquiry are central to this self-study. Critically reflective teachers strive to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, values, biases, and experiences. It must be acknowledged, however, that the influence of an educator's social and institutional surroundings creates a solid context within which even the most honest reflections are often firmly rooted. The decision to go beyond our organizations and transcend geographic boundaries in search of a support system was intended to overcome taken-for-granted beliefs and values in our individual institutions. For the four of us, our professional and academic pasts and recent journeys to new communities could not help but influence our efforts. Not only were we attempting to be critically reflective of our fledgling practices, we were doing so as newcomers in established contexts and communities. Complicating our efforts to examine our practices and model principles of democratic classrooms were our understandings of our new contexts and cultures and our situated membership as newcomers.

The practice of critical reflection is central to this investigation and our ongoing professional development as teacher educators (Samaras, 2002). Because we have positioned our interpretation of what it means to be critically reflective among divergent meanings (e.g., Fisher, 2003; Gore, 1987; Harrington & Quinn-Leering, 1996; Kraft, 2002; Loughran, 2002; Rodgers, 2002; Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008; Zeichner & Liston, 1996) it is worthwhile to outline how we have operationalized the term. *Reflection* is conceptualized as the systematic, cognitive activity of reviewing one's experiences for the purpose of gaining a clearer understanding of actions in context. We consider reflection to be *critical* when it is motivated by the desire to be more just, fair, and compassionate, not simply more effective and efficient (Brookfield, 1995). We conceptualize critical reflection to include the follow components:

Open-mindedness: Suspending judgment about experiences and actions. Being open to alternate ways of believing and acting. Considering the rationales undergirding what is held as natural and right (Brookfield, 1995; Dewey, 1938; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Withitness: Actively seeking knowledge and perspectives challenging one's own (Fisher, 2003). Questioning incongruities between goals and outcomes that may be the result of misconceptions about learners and the learning community (Brookfield, 1995; Freire, 1998; Rodgers, 2002).

Consideration: Considering the consequences of professional practice for individual learners' self-concepts and intellectual developments (Zeichner & Liston, 1996), for the goals and values held for undergraduate teacher education, and for the potential influence on the social and political context (Brookfield, 1995).

Responsiveness: Acting in an effort to alter the conditions, actions, and mindsets that are obstacles to a learning environment that is simultaneously emancipating, just, fair and compassionate (Brookfield, 1995; Loughran, 2002; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Methods and Data Sources

The systematic study of our teaching has been conceived as a form of educational research. In other words, the two activities were woven conceptually into a reflective and reflexive practice to be regularly shared with our students. Reflection and self disclosure and the

aims and values implicit in them for improving practice are a cornerstone of our work with students. We viewed students as partners in our research and expect that while we influenced their work, they also influenced ours.

Reflective journals kept by the four researchers served as the backbone of our study. The content of our journals included our personal reflections, perceptions, impressions, thoughts and questions. Using Blackboard, an online conferencing tool, we shared our journals biweekly. We read and responded to one another's journals creating a four way dialogue about our experiences and reflections. Additionally, we each periodically shared with our students selections from our own journals. These selections served as springboards for discussion with students concerning their suggestions for the improvement of our practice and led to students' reflections on their own teaching and learning. Making public and transparent the gaps between instructor goals and practices allowed us to view our work as collaborative researchers lessening the evaluative role and helping students understand similar gaps in their own fledgling practices.

Our goal was to establish a mutually self-disclosing context with one another and our students, free to ask and answer questions, compare our own practice with others, and probe for deeper understanding of complex issues. Jourard (1968) noted that when we remain in authentic contact with a participant, "…consistently in dialogue, [we] may actually lead him to the edge of…clearing the way for the emergence of a new self" (p.124). Journal keeping over time allowed us to look back at our own practices, the "self in action" (Elliott, 1989) over the course of the year, to monitor our professional and personal development.

In addition to journaling and dialoguing with one another, we each solicited written, anonymous feedback from students through periodic course feedback forms and through end-of-course evaluations (see Appendices A and B). Both instruments incorporated items adapted from feedback instruments developed by Brookfield (1995). Results from feedback instruments were compiled by each author and shared with one another and with our respective students. In many instances the sharing of compiled feedback with students sparked additional dialogue about our goals and students' perceptions of our efforts and their learning.

As we progressed through the academic year, we engaged in an iterative process of reading and re-reading our journals and feedback received from students. We identified and discussed common and divergent themes that emerged. Themes were analyzed as they related to our guiding research questions, particularly questions 3 and 4. Finally, as we neared the end of the study, we each reflected on our valuing of the community we had created. How did we each appraise the experience and its influence on our aspirations to be critically reflective practitioners and enact democratic classroom practices?

Results

Prior to embarking into our respective professorships, our thinking had been grounded in our various roles as practitioners and graduate students. During the course of this study, through journaling, dialoguing online, and soliciting feedback from students, we gained insight into our taken-for-granted assumptions, developed greater awareness of how our efforts were interpreted by others, and acquired understanding of how our thinking might be shaped by characteristics of

our contexts and relationships with others. Additionally, the community we developed with one another served to strengthen our resolve to maintain our efforts to be critically reflective and enact democratic principles. Finally, this on-line relationship among the four of us provided an important arena for exploring our vulnerabilities in our fledgling professorships, helping to alleviate some of the anxiety inherent to beginning new careers in new communities.

Democratic Classroom: Assumptions and Issues

We agreed we were committed to democratic classroom practices: creating classroom communities in which students and professors openly communicate, mutually respect one another, and jointly engage in critical inquiry intended to inform and transform practice. Discussions in this collaborative community often centered on challenges in conducting classrooms that are democratic. As we sought feedback on our curriculum and instruction from students, we noted some difficulty in having genuine, non-coercive dialogue because of the inherent power differences. We noted patterns between non-traditional and traditional students. Non-traditional students were more willing to participate in these critical conversations, offering constructive feedback that was useful and could improve our courses. Younger students were more often less willing to offer substantive feedback and seemed to experience more discomfort. Some did not immediately see value in the process and wanted us, as the ones "in charge," to give them explicit directives rather than work collaboratively on developing and improving the course.

Despite commitment to an engaged pedagogy and our intentions to include all students in designing and implementing the learning process, each of us had isolated but difficult encounters with students who ranged from unresponsive to hostile. Like first time parents, we assumed our good intentions and caring attitudes would evoke perfect attitudes and behaviors in our charges. We anticipated they would be excited by the prospect of exploring educational issues, questioning, unearthing biases, bearing witness to gaps in traditional thinking, and creating new ways of thinking. Many were:

- *I have felt more engaged when I was required to question my own ideas and defend my standpoint.*
- *You really had me thinking on my drive home about spelling and the use of the games vs. worksheet and test. Oh wait, I mean reflecting <Grin> on the many things we do in education out of habit or false beliefs. Thanks, I like to challenge conventional thinking!*

However, some students were confused and frustrated by our failure to provide formulaic responses to their questions:

- ◆ *Examples. Explanations are okay but having concrete examples as to what to do in the classroom are more helpful.*

They wanted clear, precise, and infallible answers to thorny issues. When none were forthcoming, or when questions were turned back to them for deeper examination and thought, a few became hostile and frustrated. And we, as instructors, sometimes became defensive. Our first and easiest response tended to blame students and/or their previous educational experiences. According to students, most of their learning experiences have been in behaviorist-oriented, traditional classrooms. Teachers dispensed and students received wisdom. Characteristically, much of their college program also followed that format. According to Ritchie and Wilson (2000), "Education programs …are dominated by an orientation that breaks learning into skills and then focuses on methods to teach mastery of those skills" (p.36).

Moving students out of their comfort zone might have accounted for some of their upset, but we knew, and gradually confessed to one another, we also held some culpability. Our attempts at establishing an engaged pedagogy were less than perfect. We fell back on what we knew, what we had experienced as students, what was more typical in our departments and what made us feel comfortable. Although we claimed a commitment to democratic practices, all of us struggled with defining and describing a democratic classroom as we nibbled around the edges of democratic practices:

Sandy: *I want each of my first class sessions to focus on the shared responsibilities of students and instructor in making the class meaningful…the notion of shared responsibility is really foreign to our college culture. (9-21-09)*

We were excited about asking for written, anonymous feedback during the course and moved tentatively into exploring responses with one another and with our students**.**

Susan: *It will be interesting to gather responses that help me better understand if what I'm perceiving reflects participants' experience, and what else may surface - and to have examples of their perspective to interrogate (9-26-09).*

We struggled with how to use feedback so students understood we valued their voices and were willing to adapt to their needs. We struggled with balancing our roles as "experts" with our commitment to democratic processes in designing and implementing coursework.

Valerie: *Again, I'm faced with what to do with their feedback. I want to be responsive, but I'm not sure I can. They don't want lectures, but they want a little less group stuff.*

The large group discussions seem to leave a lot of folks out. I have a need to make sure they actually do the readings and have something to grade them on. A test would really feel out of place. (10-4-09)

Students sensed, and we acknowledged, the unequal power in the classroom that presented itself in a variety of ways. It would be difficult to deny the professor is situated in a privileged position. We issue grades and recommendations for teaching positions. We hold a positional power obvious to our students. In conversations with one another, we acknowledged our instinct to revert to positional power when students criticized us or presented challenges to our authority.

Giroux (1983), in his writing on critical pedagogy, suggests experience must be situated within a theory of learning. Professors must respect the way students feel about their experiences and allow them to express those feelings in a classroom setting. Situating their experiences within a theory of learning is the next step, requiring time, patience and finesse on the part of the instructor. It is tempting to abduct students' experiences and "tell" how it relates to learning theory. But this is a process best engaged in cooperatively so each student, along with the instructor, becomes a valued voice within the classroom's discourse. While we were unwilling to provide pat answers to their questions, we were eagerly interpreting their experiences rather than encouraging them to do that for themselves. John Dewey (1962) believed a student's greatest asset is his or her own direct experiences, and an instructor's failure to incorporate these experiences reinforces student intellectual subservience. Recognitions of unequal power presented opportunities to question our idealistic notion of a democratic classroom in our reflections and conversations with one another - and with students. Dialogue served as a foundation for self-critique and as a foundation for relationship building with our collaborative group and with students. Turning the lens directly upon ourselves as individuals, and collectively as colleagues, enabled us to grapple meaningfully with some of the tensions, anxieties, and vulnerabilities inherent in our roles as 'new' teacher educators. Our examination of the tension between perceived and actual democratic classroom practices continues.

Responding and Balancing Feedback

Motivators at the heart of this collaborative self-study were a genuine willingness on the part of all four participants to investigate our efforts to be critical, reflective practitioners who endeavor to enact democratic principles in our respective classrooms, and the harnessing of courage to see self-study approaches as both research and (improved) practice. In this, we were also prepared to collect data in the form of feedback from our students and further examine how they perceived, experienced, and evaluated our teaching selves. We set out to request regular feedback from students in our current classes and thus, as new professors, we were also agreeing to study our teaching as perceived and evaluated by our students - taking their feedback into account in efforts to continuously improve practice. The kind of feedback gathered delved more deeply into understandings of students' perceptions of course content and our approaches to teaching than the usual end of course evaluations distributed for tenure and promotion purposes. In this regard, we felt we were genuinely *"navigating the public and private"* as we *"negotiated*

our own diverse landscapes of teacher education" for the purposes of this study. The processes of actually collecting the data resulted in further questions, "soul-searching," subsequently resulting in supportive, thought-provoking responses from others in the group:

> **Valerie:** *I asked for feedback, they gave it to me, I shared it with them, and invited them to discuss it with me. Now what? As a critically reflective practitioner who claims to want to make her practice more transparent, what am I supposed to do next?* (9-24-09)

> **Sandy:** *I was impressed with feedback from your Literacy group…my impression was that they feel actively engaged and they are learning a great deal. What more can you want? Why the mixed feelings…?* (9-24-09)

"Seeing ourselves through our students' eyes" was another consistent thread through discussions related to feedback as well as more 'informal' responses resulting from day-to-day interactions on campus and in classrooms:

> **Susan:** *I found myself wondering … when (did) I 'lecture' in class? … fascinating how perceptions of what I think I'm doing, and how teaching behaviors are perceived (differently) by students… all the more reason for gathering valuable feedback of this nature…* (11-18-09)

Patterns in the analysis of feedback collected for our own purposes gradually began to highlight students' needs and helped us realize that the issues they were questioning also informed our practice and programs. As an example, Laurie talked about explaining the purposes of the study to a class group who then made it clear they were supportive of her efforts:

> **Laurie:** *They have very strong opinions but tend to be more productive and constructive, less critical and "rude" about their program … they are eager to help the program improve and willing to share their experiences and frustrations…* (12-2-09)

Along with our collaborative discussions, data from the questionnaires have been catalysts for self-questioning, reflections, further shaping and re-shaping our teaching, interactions with students, and ongoing planning and presentation of responsive course content.

Community

The experience of participating in a collaborative self-study resulted in a range of outcomes for each of us. Below are some excerpts from our individual reflections on the significance of having a "community of practice" without geographic boundaries:

Laurie: *Being part of this collaborative community provided me with a "safe space" in which I could question my teaching practices and the institutional practices in which I am now immersed. Often, my colleagues in this community provided the support and mentoring I was not afforded as the only new faculty member in a long established, nationally respected program. ...Simply knowing it is not "just me" affirmed my commitment and renewed my passion for teacher education.*

Sandy: *I have felt a certain sense of isolation in my fledgling professorship and a concern about rocking the boat in a well-established department. I am struggling with both improving my own practice and making a contribution to my department. With so little experience with other universities, I'm not sure how to gauge some taken-for-granted policies and practices and am hesitant to initiate controversial conversations with my college peers. Questions can be perceived as criticisms. Suggestions can be threatening. The collaboration group provides a safe space to ponder and question and test ideas.*

Susan: *From Ontario to Pennsylvania, Utah and North Carolina..."Just who do we think we are... and how do we know this?" (Mitchell, Weber, O'Reilly & Scanlon, 2005). For me, the community has enabled a "revision of pedagogical spaces" for studying my teaching self...*

Valerie: *Our community provided me with a space in which I could think "aloud" about my practice. Not always for the purpose of soliciting input; sometimes, simply to organize and analyze my own thoughts. Others' responses to my musings provided opportunities to see my practice through different lenses and prompted me to consider further my taken-for-granted assumptions...*

Thus our community has provided a 'safe space' in which to question, examine, enhance, and develop our practices as teacher educators, and has provided support and critical friendship. The potential for feeling isolated and under pressure as 'new' professors has been diminished by the opportunity for self-study and collaboration with others facing similar dilemmas in other locations.

Significance

The significance of this study is threefold. First, there was substantive benefit for us as novice assistant professors—working together to better understand the challenges we face and questioning our practice so we ultimately improve and better meet the needs of our students and our communities. Secondly, we believe there was significant value in the modeling we were providing our students, in both collaboration across contexts and in critical reflection. Research overwhelmingly suggests that critical reflection does not typically occur without sustained support and modeling from mentors and/or teachers (Bullough, Young, Hall, Draper, & Smith,

2008; Garmon, 2004; Milner, Flowers, Moore, Moore, & Flowers, 2003). By involving students and making our goals/struggles transparent, we are demonstrating a different teaching approach that dispels the notion of teachers as all-knowing and above question. Finally, this research and our collaboration around an 'emerging scholarship perspective' offer an opportunity to initiate a shared discourse with the potential to further understanding in the broader self-study community. Sharing our results of utilizing critical reflection and innovative research methods may encourage and support others in examining their practice in authentic ways.

Ultimately, we believe our initiation of transparent practice, ongoing questioning, and reciprocal and dynamic reflection with one another and our students has helped us evolve as teachers. Additionally we have demonstrated "teaching as research" can be conducted by novice professors alongside preservice teachers with the goal of modeling and inspiring collaborative relationships and reflective practice.

Sergiovanni (1994) contended an expansive collegial learning community requires a new kind of relationship between and among community members, transcending the physical proximity that tends to contain thinking within the confines of shared institutional and local norms. Sharing and support of teacher/researchers living and working across the continent produced for each of us effective professional collaboration beyond our own institutional boundaries. Aristotle spoke of a *polis*, a bond of friendship embodying a shared recognition and pursuit of a good. We believe this sharing and equality among four novice assistant professors working and learning alongside novice teachers, all of whom are embarking on new careers, is foundational to the formation of a more open and reflective teaching/researching community of learners.

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Appendix A

Course Feedback Questionnaire

Please take a few minutes to respond to the questions below. They have been adapted from Brookfield's (1995, p.115) text *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* and are designed to help me understand your perceptions of the course to this point in the semester in an effort to refine my practice. This activity is strictly voluntary and anonymous. Please <u>do not</u> put your names on your papers.

1. At what moment in the class meetings to this point in the semester have you felt most engaged with what was happening?

2. At what moment in the class meetings to this point in the semester have you felt most distanced from what was happening?

3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class have you found most affirming and helpful?

4. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class have you found most puzzling or confusing?

5. What about the class has surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to an experience in the class, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.)

Appendix B

Course Title & Number: _____
Instructor: _____
Semester: _____

This Evaluation Form is intended to help the instructor gain a clearer understanding of how to assist future students' learning and how her actions as a teacher have been perceived by students this semester. Please answer the items candidly. The evaluation is anonymous and your participation is voluntary.

Please complete the following statements:
1. What most helped my learning in this class was:

2. What most hindered my learning in this class was:

3. What most helped me take responsibility for my own learning is this class was:

4. What most prevented me from taking responsibility for my own learning in this class was:

5. I believe the instructor's goals or objectives for this course were:

Please respond to the following statements by checking one of the boxes and answering the question that follows:
6. In this course, I found that:
    ☐ many different teaching approaches were used.
    ☐ some different teaching approaches were used.
    ☐ very few teaching approaches were used.
    What are your feelings about the teaching approaches used?

7. In this course, I found the instructor to be:
    ☐ always responsive to students' concerns.
    ☐ sometimes responsive to students' concerns.
    ☐ rarely responsive to students' concerns.

What are your feelings about this level of responsiveness?

8. In this course, I found the instructor:
   ☐ consistently tried to get students to participate.
   ☐ sometimes tried to get students to participate.
   ☐ rarely tried to get students to participate.
   What are your feelings about the amount of participation by students in this course?

9. In this course, I found that:
   ☐ I regularly received information about my learning.
   ☐ I occasionally received information about my learning.
   ☐ I rarely received information about my learning.
   What are your feeling about the frequency with which you received information about your learning and the quality of that information?

10. In this course, I found that the instructor enacted democratic principles in her teaching and work with students, modeled being a reflective practitioner, and strove to make her practice transparent:
    ☐ regularly.
    ☐ occasionally.
    ☐ infrequently.

    What do you believe to be indicators/markers of educational practices that are built on democratic principles?

    What does it mean to you to be a reflective practitioner as an educator?

    What should an instructor do to make his/her practice transparent to students?

*Items 1-4 and 6-9 have been taken directly from an evaluation form created by Brookfield (1995, pp.268-269) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. The form and purpose of the instrument are modeled largely on Brookfield's.