

LAURIE RAMIREZ
Appalachian State University

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

Context

Sandy and Valerie, 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 student feedback as they attempted to create democratic classrooms. Both found value in opening their teaching practices to scrutiny of others. In this, their second year, they invited two other relatively new professors, Susan and Laurie, into their self-study project, selecting teacher educators working in different universities in the United States and Canada. 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.

Our goal was to cultivate further inquiry with others that were like-minded in their commitment to critical dialogue, transformational inquiry, and democratic classroom practices. We wanted our new colleagues to also be in the early stages of university teaching because of the unique nature of problems and issues we face. Many learning organizations intentionally and explicitly seek feedback and change but are somewhat bound by organizational context itself. According to Katz and Kahn (1978), "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).

Ideals of critical reflection and collaborative inquiry are central to this self-study. Positioning our interpretation of what it means to be critically reflective among the divergent meanings (e.g., Fisher, 2003; Gore, 1987; Kraft, 2002; Loughran, 2002; Rodgers, 2002; Wade, Fauske & Thompson, 2008; Zeichner & Liston, 1996), we have operationalized it to be distinguished by the desire to be more just and compassionate, not simply more effective and efficient (Brookfield, 1995). Critically reflective teachers strive to examine their beliefs, biases, and experiences for the purpose of transforming their practice to be more congruent with their ideals. However, influences of social and institutional milieus create a solid context where even honest reflections are often firmly contained. 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 (see Brookfield, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994), introducing new ways of thinking to help us recognize our own cognitive distortions and reinterpret our beliefs and practices.

Objectives

Three research questions framed our inquiry:

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 model democratic teaching and critical reflection for students?
3. How are individual efforts to be critically reflective practitioners and to enact democratic principles in our teaching perceived and evaluated by our students?

Methods/Data Sources

Our goal was to establish a mutually self-disclosing context with one another and our students, making us free to ask and answer questions, to discuss practice with others, and probe for deeper understanding of complex issues. Journal keeping over time allowed us to look back at practices, the "self in action" (Elliott, 1989) over the course of the year, and to monitor our own professional and personal development.

Reflective journals kept by the researchers served as the study's backbone. Content of journals included personal reflections, perceptions, and questions. Using Blackboard, an online conferencing tool, we shared journals biweekly. We read and responded to one another's journals, creating a four-way dialogue. Periodically, we shared selections from our own journals with students. These selections served as springboards for discussion with students concerning their suggestions for improving our practice and encouraged students' reflections on their own teaching and learning. Making public and transparent potential gaps between instructor goals and practices allowed us to re-view our work as collaborative researchers.

Final data sources for the study were anonymous mid-semester Course Feedback Questionnaires and end-of-course Evaluation Forms. Instrument items were adapted from Brookfield (1995) and utilized with permission. Informed consents outlining the study's scope and providing the option to not participate were distributed prior to soliciting students' feedback. Throughout the year, we engaged in an iterative process, reading and re-reading our journals and students' feedback. Emerging common and divergent themes were identified and discussed. Themes were analyzed as they related to our research questions. Near the study's end, we reflected on our valuing of the community created: How did we each appraise the experience and its influence on our aspirations to be critically reflective practitioners and enact democratic practices?

Outcomes

Through journaling, dialoguing online, and soliciting feedback from students, we gained insights into taken-for-granted assumptions, developed greater awareness of how our efforts were interpreted, and acquired increased understanding of how our thinking might be shaped by characteristics of our contexts and relationships. The community we developed with one another also served to strengthen our resolve to maintain efforts to be critically reflective and enact democratic principles in our teaching. Finally, it provided an important arena for exploring vulnerabilities in our fledgling professorships, alleviating some of the anxiety inherent to beginning new careers in new communities.

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.

Democratic classroom: Expectations 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, as seen by the following comments:

- 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 meant 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. 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 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 criticize us or present 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 "in":

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.

Significance

The significance of this study was threefold. (a) There was substantive benefit for us as novice assistant professors—working together to better understand challenges and questioning our practice so we may ultimately improve and better meet the needs of students and communities. (b) We believe there was significant value in modeling provided to students, in collaboration across contexts and in critical reflection. Research overwhelmingly suggests critical reflection does not typically occur without sustained support and modeling from mentors/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 explicitly demonstrated “navigating the public and private” as we explored diverse landscapes of teacher education. (c) Our research and collaboration from an ‘emerging scholarship’ perspective offers opportunities to initiate shared discourse with others in the broader self-study community.

We have learned much about interrogating our own practices, reframing, and sharing findings. Ultimately, we believe our initiation of transparent practices, ongoing questioning, and reciprocal and dynamic reflection has undoubtedly influenced our evolution as teacher educators. Additionally we have demonstrated “teaching as research” can be conducted by novice professors alongside pre-service teachers with the goal of modeling and inspiring collaborative relationships and reflective practice.

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