

Self-Study Through Collaborative Conference Protocol: Studying Self Through the Eyes of Colleagues

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This paper portrays the yearlong process six teacher educators used to study their individual and collective practice. The authors documented their actions, intentions, and beliefs regularly and openly through the use of multiple data sources including their personal histories, the puzzles they face as they prepare teachers, analyses of each others' histories and puzzles, and records of their bimonthly collaborative conferences. Specifically, the authors adapted Seidel et al.'s (1997) collaborative assessment conference protocol as a framework for viewing, interpreting, and challenging each others' work. This paper presents the common themes that represent the authors' work collectively as well as synopses of their individual self-studies, which describe their growth beginning with their personal histories and concluding with descriptions of how the self-study has impacted their current teaching. Finally, the paper makes the case for using their adaptation of Seidel et al.'s collaborative assessment conference protocol as a model for critical examination of self-study data in order to derive applicable knowledge from and for practice.

Introduction

A remarkable journey began when six teacher educators agreed to travel an unknown path together, using self-study to walk through doors of discovery about themselves, each other, and the practice of teacher education. Self-study holds great, yet largely unrealized, potential to help teacher educators better understand and impact their practice. Owing its roots to Dewey's (1938) theory of reflective thinking and Schön's (1983) concept of "reflection in action," self-study, though growing respect in the education community as a mechanism for improving practice and increasing the knowledge base on teaching, is an emergent research design in need of new perspectives and strategies (Zeichner, 2007). Much has been written in the last decade about the components necessary for self-study to serve as a viable research design that integrates theory and practice (Loughran, 2004). It is widely held that self-study, like other scholarly endeavors, needs to be "public, open to critique and evaluation, and in a form others can build on" (Shulman, 2004, p. 149).

Loughran (2004) warned that the title itself, *self-study*, connotes a research method centering on isolated introspection absent of public critique and dissemination; however, self-study is much more than merely reflection on one's practice as originated by Schön (1983). Different from reflection, which "largely resides within the individual" (p. 25), self-study challenges the interpretations we make of our own experiences. We record our episodes through the lenses of our prior knowledge and beliefs, and the implications of our thoughts and experiences can be clarified and validated through open, broad, and critical review by our colleagues (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). It is this aspect of external critical review that separates self-study from autoethnography, where the researcher does her own interpretation (Anderson, 2006)

Beyond reflection on and in the action of teaching, self-study as a research method entails systematically framing problems and collecting data to test hypotheses (Dinkelmann, 2003). In self-study, our actions and reactions serve as the data, information, and evidence commensurate with traditional research; the interpretation and analysis of those data require multiple points of view. This peer review serves as the catalyst to personal growth and to advancement in one's scholarly community.

Furthermore, when conducting research, validity is enhanced and bias is reduced when the data are corroborated by using triangulation. Triangulation can involve multiple sources of data collection, often from different times, as well as multiple interpreters of the data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

This study portrays the self-study methods six teacher educators at one university used to examine our practices, individually and collectively. In addition to anchoring our study on Shulman's (2004) three pillars of the scholarship of teaching, we implemented both layers of effective triangulation methodology: collection of different sources of data at multiple times and analysis of data based on multiple interpretations. Throughout our yearlong self-study, we documented our actions, intentions, and beliefs regularly and openly. We used a variety of data sources including our personal histories, reflections on each other's histories, records of our bimonthly structured conversations, analyses of the puzzles each of us face as we prepare teachers, as well as multiple other forms of reflection including e-mails and hallway conversations. Most importantly, all of our writing was viewed, interpreted, and challenged by six sets of eyes. What follows is the description of how our process integrated a number of aspects of effective self-study research yet added a component not yet discussed in the self-study literature—a protocol for a collaborative assessment conference (Seidel et al., 1997).

Context

The six participants in this self-study represent multiple points across both an elementary and a secondary undergraduate teacher education program and are all colleagues at a primarily undergraduate regional state university that is located in the Upper Midwest of the United States. Our group includes one adjunct instructor, one assistant professor, one associate professor, and three full professors representing over 64 years of K-12 classroom experience, 63 years of teacher education experience, and 12 years of administrative experience.

The aims of our study were multilayered. We were committed to studying our own individual teaching practices, and we were committed to studying our education program collectively. Certainly, it would be impossible to separate the individual layer from the programmatic one. Though we teach individually, we operate in a comprehensive context whose sum is greater than its parts. What's more, the six of us represent one third of our undergraduate school of education faculty. At our university, we take pride in providing our preservice teachers with a systematic, field-based progression through the phases of our program. Whitehead (2004) suggested that at its core, self-study stems from the query, "How do I improve what I am doing?" (p. 872). While we were each deeply concerned with improving our individual practices, we expanded Whitehead's fundamental question to include: How do we improve what we are doing? How can my practices contribute to program improvement?

Methods

Histories and Puzzles

We began by each identifying specific problems or puzzles we faced in our attempts to educate future teachers. These problems were not meant to conjure blatant weaknesses, but rather were "linked to the notion of a curious or puzzling situation or dilemma, tension, issue, or concern" (Loughran, 2004, p. 25). Specifically, we asked ourselves: What puzzles each of us about helping preservice teachers apply what they are learning in our program to particular contexts?

The metaphor of puzzling enhances our conceptualization of how self-study is both individual and socially contextualized. The action of building a puzzle is a multistep and complex phenomenon where a picture is constructed in nonlinear fashion using pieces of varied shapes and patterns. We each face our own puzzles, yet those individual puzzles are but multiple and diverse pieces that contribute in unique ways to larger puzzles. To carry the metaphor further, the puzzles from our school of education might represent pieces in the grand puzzles of the teacher education community. Zeichner (2007) charged self-study researchers to consider how their findings might contribute to a broader knowledge base. The puzzle metaphor can help self-study researchers piece their work together to form larger pictures.

In addition to articulating our present-day puzzles, we rooted them in our personal histories on learning and teaching. We each chronicled our paths from our early learning experiences through our decisions to become teachers, into our years teaching in K-12 classrooms, and finally our forays as teacher educators. Our collegiate teaching cannot be separated from our K-12 teaching experiences nor from our experiences as students. Samaras, Hicks, and Garvey Berger (2004) remind us that unlike other professionals,

[T]eachers begin their work with vast amounts of personal history in their future workplaces. These past experiences create hidden personal narratives about education, school, and schooling that have profound and sometimes intractable impact on the way teachers teach their students. (p. 908)

For our puzzles to have served as data to be analyzed and critiqued by each other in order to push the boundaries of our teaching, we needed to root our puzzles in historical, cultural, and social contexts (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras et al., 2004). Our specific puzzles are extensions of our comprehensive teaching and learning selves. Through deep reflections and descriptions of our personal histories, we were able to frame our present-day puzzles in ways that led to open examination of our actions, intentions, and beliefs on preparing teachers. As Samaras et al., stated, "Personal history self-study entails the opportunity to disrobe, unveil, and engage in a soul-searching truth about the self while also engaging in critical conversations, and most importantly, continuing to discover the alternative viewpoints of others" (p. 910). It is this emphasis on looking beyond the stories to challenge one's motives and assumptions that leads to the production of knowledge from personal and collective perspectives in order to meet both the needs of teacher educators and the expectations of academia (Loughran, 2008).

Collaborative Assessment Conference Protocol

Armed with our histories and puzzles, we acknowledged that we needed a framework through which to subject our work to open and honest critique. We knew that effective self-study requires open and critical review, yet we recognized that critical review can be uncomfortably challenging (Loughran & Northfield, 1998; Schuck & Segal, 2002). We wanted to be pushed to consider new perspectives and interpretations but in a safe manner based on trust.

Several of our group members had experience using collaborative assessment conference protocols with students, so when Jan suggested that we adapt Seidel et al.'s (1997) protocol for our study we embraced the idea. Collaborative assessment conferences provide a systematic way to look at students' work. Seidel et al.'s protocol provides a structure to examine, through students' work, not only who they are and what they care about but also what they are seeking to understand (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999; Graham & Fahey, 1999).

Schuck and Segal (2002) urged self-study critical friends to share equally and systematically, and the collaborative assessment conference protocol provided the perfect framework. We decided to meet every two weeks to conference on a different person's personal history and puzzles. Adapting Seidel et al.'s protocol slightly, we agreed to the following steps for our sessions:

Reading the piece. Our sessions began with the author reading his/her history and puzzles aloud to the group. Though we had e-mailed our work to each other to read prior to these sessions, hearing the authors' tone, inflection, and voice added richness to the piece.

Describing the piece (What do you see?). After the author read his/her work, we took turns making statements about what we noticed. We described without judgment what we saw, often with examples from their piece as evidence to support our claims (Graham & Fahey, 1999). We took turns explaining what we noticed while the author sat silently taking notes. It is important to note that this step, as well as the other steps, often took nearly an hour.

Speculating (What do you think this instructor is working on?). Next, we used turn-taking again to speculate on what we thought the author might be on the verge of recognizing or discovering. Often, we began our comments with: "I'm wondering if . . ." Once again, the author sat silently taking notes until each critical friend had exhausted his/her speculative comments and questions.

Hearing from the author. Finally, often after listening to one's critical friends' comments for over an hour, the author was able to respond, "adding details and teasing out comments or questions

posed during the conference” (Lubig et al., 2008, p. 42). The author would often identify questions and comments from group members that s/he had not previously considered. During this phase, which was recorded by a group member, we would answer the author’s clarifying questions and ask additional questions aimed at pushing the author to think more clearly, deeply, and critically about his/her actions, intentions, and beliefs about preparing teachers.

Take-aways. After each session, each member of our self-study group, including the featured author, would write a one to two-page reflection on the conference, particularly how any new insights might apply to our own practice. We gave ourselves a couple of days to complete these reflections, which we then e-mailed to each other. Though we had not planned for it, the exchange of our reflections often resulted in further critical-friend conversations via e-mail.

Looking for Themes

After months of intense self-study using our adaptation of the collaborative assessment conference protocol, we met several more times to explore how our personal histories and puzzles combined to create collective puzzles for our teacher education program. To search for themes, we combined hundreds of pages of text including our personal histories and puzzles, transcripts from each conference, and our take-away reflections. This triangulation, involving multiple data sources collected at different times and analyzed by all six of us collectively, increases our confidence that our themes represent the needs of our teacher education program.

Working together, we used a general coding process, searching for recurring regularities or emergent themes (Guba, 1978). After titling the themes, we tested the emergent themes recursively, repeatedly challenging and analyzing the centrality and usefulness of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Marshall and Rossman warned that while the process of coding qualitative data can be creative and fun, it is also difficult, complex, and ambiguous. In our study, this process was particularly complex because the six of us analyzed the data jointly. Though there were points of contention at times throughout the coding process, we were committed to the collaborative process and building consensus. Despite the extended time it took to ameliorate the challenges of using the constant comparison method with six people and so much data, we were able to identify some common themes that represented the six of us collectively.

What follows next are the collective themes that emerged from the collaborative coding of our personal educational histories and puzzles as well as our notes from and reflections on our collaborative conference sessions. These five themes represent our original goal: to conduct a formal self-study process through which to improve our individual teaching and our teacher education program.

Teaching and learning are context specific. When we think we have an “answer” to a puzzle, the questions shift, the answers evolve. We don’t have all the answers. There is much about teaching and learning we still have to discover and many contexts for teaching and learning that we still need to explore.

Walking through doors of opportunity often without knowing what lay beyond was a common experience in our group. Some of us have known we were going to be teachers since we were quite young. Others ambled into teaching during adulthood. Despite our different routes into teaching, each of us realized that stepping into the unknown future by recognizing opportunities was important to our development as professional teachers and lifelong learners. Our preservice teachers also represent an expansive range of readiness: some are ready, some have been ready for years, and some might not ever be ready. We reached consensus in recognizing that a large part of our role as teacher educators is opening doors of opportunity for our preservice teachers and supporting them in walking through those doors into unknown futures.

Preservice teachers need time and opportunities to construct meaning through deep reflection and analysis of their particular teaching experiences. Description, rather than prescription, provides preservice teachers with opportunities to explore the complexities of teaching and learning. We need to be patient with our preservice teachers. We tend to forget that it took years of experience and reflection for us to gain the knowledge and insights we ourselves hold.

External mandates and timelines can constrain our teaching, limiting our ability to differentiate learning experiences. Our faculty spent several years completing documents and assessments to maintain national accreditation. The process of changing our teaching to meet the needs of evaluators who knew little about our unique contexts was a negative influence on the culture of teaching and learning. Although we did not resolve this tension to our satisfaction, we explored our frustrations and supported each other in adjusting to mandates while remaining true to our own beliefs in the important work that we share.

Partnerships and collaboration are challenging, but well worth it. Collaborating and developing ongoing relationships emerged as the heart of our work with our preservice teachers, our K-12 colleagues, and our university colleagues. Whether during our work in the field or with each other, the foundation of our program involves the quality and quantity of collaborative experience. Establishing and maintaining these relationships requires a substantial amount of our time; however, we recognized the importance of slowing down the fast pace of lives as teacher educators to provide time for the people with whom we work. Self-study serves as an excellent method to structure our collaboration in order to improve our practice and increase our knowledge base on teaching.

Applying Our New Learning

With Loughran's (2008) mantra to "go beyond the story" imbedded in our minds, coupled with Whitehead's (2004) central question of self-study (How do I improve what I am doing?), we viewed our self-study process as recursive rather than completed. Though our self-study design met the tenets of valid research (systematic, open to critique, multiple data sources, triangulation of data, presented in a form from which others can build upon), we sought to extend our learning from the previous year into our current practice. We wanted to apply each of the five emergent themes to roles as teacher educators.

What follows are synopses of how our self-study impacted each of us individually. These summaries represent what we learned from the self-study process and how we applied that new learning into our particular roles. Our individual synopses are reflective in nature, yet were the result of frequent and critical review from each other. As Shulman (2004) advised, we made our experience and interpretations open to evaluation by and for members of our community.

Individual Synopses

Derek, Assistant Professor - Social Studies Methods, Classroom Management, and Student Teaching Seminar

Since my days as a student, both in K-12 and in teacher education, I have struggled with the discrepancy between teacher-centered, noninteractive instruction and student-centered, constructivist teaching. I liked asking and answering big questions. I liked discussion. I liked having time to connect my past and recent experience with theoretical ideals.

These learning experiences and preferences influenced how I taught my middle school students and, subsequently, how I am teaching my preservice teachers to teach. Certainly, I have made and continue to make a number of assumptions about effective teaching. My bias is apparent. At times when I have taken an assertive approach, often impatiently insisting that preservice teachers use constructivist principles, I've received comments like: "He wants us to teach his way." Clearly, however, student-centered teaching is not "my way," but rather what leaders in the field suggest is best (Fosnot, 1996).

Through the self-study process we've used over the past year, I have come to an epiphany of sorts—if I want to hold true to the principles of constructivism, then I must be patient with my preservice teachers and provide them with numerous and diverse activities from which they can make their own meaning. Moreover, I must provide them with time for reflective activities which serve as a "necessary catalyst in the active process of reconciling new and potentially dissonant experiences with the prior beliefs and understandings of the learner" (Dangel & Guyton, 2003, p. 4). My directing the preservice teachers to use constructivist methods was antithetical to the very ideals of constructivism.

As a result of our self study, I adopted some basic, yet profound, differences to my teaching this year. Primarily, I have become much more patient with my preservice teachers, particularly with regard to design and delivery of their lesson plans. Since authentic field experiences are at the core of our program, I have vowed to allow reflection on their teaching episodes to take a bigger role in their learning. Where I used to make copious direct comments on their lesson plans prior to their teaching, I now ask more questions, give more reflection prompts, and create opportunities for peer dialogue. Additionally, I require more extensive post lesson reflections and facilitate collegial discourse. Conversations about instruction (Rainer & Guyton, 2001; Steele, 1994) coupled with self-reflection (Fosnot, 1996; Rainer & Guyton; Schön, 1983) are at the core of why constructivist teacher education programs are thought to be more influential than traditional programs (Dangel & Guyton, 2003).

In hindsight, my epiphany seems obvious, but I doubt I would have come to it as quickly and clearly had I not participated in our self-study. I now understand my puzzle more clearly and with greater insinuation. My passion for teaching is apparent, yet patience is often the enemy of passion. Through the exploration and analysis of each of our personal histories and puzzles we learned that although we took varied paths in our journeys to become effective teacher educators, discourse and reflection played large roles in how each of us constructed meaning about the characteristics of effective teaching. Therefore, it is imperative that we provide our preservice teachers not only authentic field experiences, but also ample time for reflection and discourse so that they can take ownership in creating a “personal theory of teaching and learning” (Dangel & Guyton, 2003, p. 12).

Sandy, Professor – Children’s Literature and Literacy Methods

As I listened to our teaching histories, I realized that choosing to become a teacher was less of an epiphany for me than it was for some of my colleagues. As I reexamined my impetus for becoming a teacher, I began to think about our preservice teachers. In the past, I assumed they were sure of who they were and who they wanted to become, but my self-study caused me to question that assumption. I became more aware of the range of motivating factors that may be embodied in our preservice teachers and I began to think about ways in which I could learn more about them as future educators, but in a way that was grounded within the content and context of my children’s literature course. I wondered: (a) Can I get to know my preservice teachers well enough to recommend a particular piece of literature to them based on their interests, needs, etc.?, (b) What tools/methods will I employ to gather the information I need to make that recommendation?, and (c) Will this exercise help me gain knowledge about teaching?

I began the semester with an assignment in which preservice teachers write about remembered children’s books. I wove other activities into the course that would give me additional information: writing prompts about places they have traveled and their description of what a perfect book would be like, a checklist of book titles they have read, and a presentation of their cultural backpack (Tongel & Wyble, 2007). These were all activities I have used before for different purposes, but in this case the activities generated candidate preferences and interests that would help me select literature for them.

A few weeks into the course I told the preservice teachers what I was trying to do and the questions I was trying to answer. It was at this point that my exercise in getting to know the preservice teachers turned into something more. In sharing with them my puzzle and my methods for solving it, I began to explicitly model my role as a reflective practitioner (Cochran-Smith, 2005).

I found two primary ways in which I gained knowledge about my own teaching. As I read the first remembered books assignments, I noticed within myself a renewed interest in the content of their essays since I was reading them not simply to assign a grade but also to mine for details about them. As preservice teachers participated in class discussions or shared personal anecdotes, I was listening with multiple purposes, and I believe that strengthened me as a teacher. The assignments themselves had become examples of authentic assessment (Valencia, Hiebert, & Afflerbach, 1994) that would lead me to a better understanding of the preservice teachers.

The second way in which I gained knowledge about my own teaching was by seeing the benefits of sharing with preservice teachers, through my thinking aloud about my puzzle, my modeling of a

reflective practitioner in the process of solving a problem. As Kosminsky, Berry, Russell, and Kane (2008) summarized, “[A]ccess to teacher educators’ thinking may prompt student teachers to consider teaching as a decision-making process rather than a set of routines” (p. 197).

Joe, Associate Professor – Secondary Reading Methods, Student Teaching Seminar

My university teaching has developed around engaging preservice teachers with an authentic audience. It is a direct reflection of those insightful teachers I had in my own parochial and public school education who demonstrated the flexibility to adapt their teaching to the needs of their students (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). In hindsight, these teachers were clearly cognizant of the need not only to reflect on their practice but also to consciously act upon those reflections as an extension of their practice.

These experiences have influenced my expectations for teacher education. I expect preservice teachers to understand that it is their job to constantly reflect on their practice (Schön, 1983). I expect it is my obligation to help preservice teachers find “the intersection between their subject matter and the interests of their students” (Inrator, 2006, p. 237). “Good teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life” (Palmer, 1998, p. 11). It has been my puzzle throughout this self-study to facilitate teacher candidate reflection to lead preservice teachers to do just as Palmer suggests.

As I listened to and acted upon the collaborative conference protocol (Seidel et al., 1997) reflections of my colleagues, I began to think I had the answers as to how to structure reflection for preservice teachers to allow them to be “good teachers.” It turns out that I did have the answers. The problem was the answers lasted for fleeting moments as they applied to only one particular candidate’s reality in one particular context (Freire, 1985). In my quest to provide answers to seemingly ease their anxieties I temporarily let go of what was effectively modeled for me in the self-study process in which I was engaged. My tendency to have prepared answers organized for preservice teachers in response to their concerns to any classroom problem that arose (Dewey, 1963) conflicted with the personal value I found in self-study. Even though I was immersed in a divergent thinking process that energized me, I was quickly pulled back into a perceived need to parse out answers so I might be viewed as knowledgeable and therefore taken seriously as the teacher (Shor, 1992).

A significant impact of this self-study on my practice has been to apply a more focused process for teacher candidate reflection that promotes greater self-reliance. I have learned the significance of using the written and verbal feedback from cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and the preservice teachers themselves to facilitate candidate self-reflection. I have learned the importance of slowing down to allow time for each individual candidate conversation to occur during seminar reflections so I can point out to them the accumulation of their knowledge and the valuable resource that knowledge provides in seeking out possible solutions to the problems they incur in their own classroom practice.

This study confirmed for me the ease with which I can wrongly reduce teaching to a mere set of skills instead of honoring it as a profession that is intellectually demanding. I now realize that constructing teacher candidate reflection around prescribed benchmarks is dangerous because our preservice teachers will do for their students what we model for our preservice teachers. Instead, this self-study has reinforced the importance of an authentic connection to a professional community that should savor and model every opportunity to “provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm or settle” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20) on prescribed outcomes for teacher education.

Laura, Professor – Special Education Methods

I am the only special educator in the self-study group and the instructor of the solitary special education course general education preservice teachers take. When I was in school my teachers were attempting to meet the learning needs of all students by using self-paced instruction and homogeneous ability groups. Try as they did, their efforts were largely unsuccessful because there really was little unique in the instruction each student was provided. Only the location or time changed; everyone still did the same activity. At the collegiate level we feel similar pressure to take a group of disparate learners and teach them “everything they need to know” about our subject regardless of the background or

interest they bring to the task. At the minimum, I want preservice teachers to realize teachers have power to adapt the learning task to fit the student rather than trying to change the student to fit the task. Effective instructional procedures are necessary in order to reach diverse learners.

One of the goals of differentiated instruction is to create successful learners who are independent and motivated because they have had their individual needs met (Tomlinson, 2008).

Through the self-study process, I have come to realize one of the best concepts I can consciously model for my preservice teachers is that children, like themselves, do not start with the same knowledge and they will not all learn the same thing, but they will all learn something. Learners need to believe the content is important and they have the ability to achieve (Caine & Caine, 1997). Students not only need to learn content, they need to learn to take charge of their learning (Tomlinson, 2008). What we ask students to learn has to be something they care about and can get involved with or they will not invest in the task.

Rather than fitting preservice teachers into the same box, I have tried to create classroom activities that allow them to choose from different projects designed to demonstrate their knowledge and ability to apply concepts we are discussing. By getting to know their background, I can see where they are starting and the progress they are making with the content in meaningful ways (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Additionally, I have assigned projects requiring preservice teachers to turn in small pieces of their project as they work. This models an effective strategy to use with students with disabilities (Rief, 2008) and provides an opportunity for feedback and guidance.

While it does not seem like breaking down an assignment and submitting pieces should be an epiphany, for me to be able to help my preservice teachers identify key ideas, choose what is relevant, collaborate, learn something new, and reflect on it is exactly what I have been struggling to help them see as their responsibility for all children. I believe my colleagues and the self-study process have helped challenge me to identify a few key concepts I want preservice teachers to learn and to look at the way I am helping them approach the learning task. What I can model for my preservice teachers is the same thing I want them to understand: Education is messy and there is no “best way” to teach. Children are messy; they do not come with labels and instructions. Teaching is messy; it involves making choices, adapting the curriculum, modifying objectives, meeting children where they are. Helping the learner access the curriculum matters.

Do my preservice teachers know as much as I would like them to by the end of the semester? Possibly not, but many know a lot more than I expected and those who arrived with no knowledge of special education now know more than they did. Through my critical friends, I have learned to choose my battles and to step back and put more of the responsibility on my preservice teachers.

Jan, 4th/5th Grade Literacy Coach and Adjunct Instructor of Writing

Along with my adjunct professor responsibilities, I wear the title of Literacy Coach for my local K-12 school district. I am responsible for providing ongoing support and professional development to improve teaching practices and student achievement in a 4th and 5th grade building. My self-study puzzle grew out of a desire to guide teachers in shifting their focus from evaluating student products to using student data for gaining deeper knowledge about their own learning and teaching practices. As I developed a deeper understanding of myself as a learner, I started to question why certain experiences lead to personal learning while others may not.

Personal histories seem to color our ability to learn and grow. If the same events happen to another learner, the outcome looks different because their cultural context is different (LaBoskey, 2004). This fluidity of the learning process happens in many gradient hues. For growth or change in the behavior of an educator to occur, the gap that exists between their thinking and practice and that of their students and peers must be considered (Baron, 2007).

Closing this gap, which exists in all of us in some form at various times and places, requires sustained support and a nurturing environment. Educational coaches within professional learning communities help facilitate these positive conditions. Research suggests that partnerships with “another stakeholder” (Kristmanson, 2008) who possesses and shares professional experiences improves the

success of the learning community. Collective intentional learning encourages teachers to dig deeper to uncover hidden layers of knowledge, challenges assumptions, and develops alternative approaches to teaching (Baron, 2007; Hord, 2008). I want teachers and students to make connections and understand that learning is reciprocal (Hoban, Butler, & Leslie, 2007; Kristmanson). Shared experiences offer opportunities to grow. Reflection on such growth provides feedback and creates more meaningful experiences.

Since this self-study, I am more mindful of the experiences teachers bring with them to professional development workshops, university coursework, or grade level meetings. I ask focus questions to shed light on their developmental readiness to embrace different ways of teaching and personal learning. I look for opportunities for open sharing to build trust and mutual respect. When educators have difficulty describing a teaching strategy or struggle to reflect on their own teaching style or classroom lessons, I have begun to serve as the external source to validate the merit of their input and ideas while noting what they are on the verge of understanding (Honawar, 2008). Scaffolding new information to their current level of understanding is beginning to bridge our shared knowledge.

At school our collective conversations are starting to shift from the topic of what students can't do to describing what they notice students doing. We use specific protocols to look at student data (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999). I listen more. We celebrate our small successes.

My self-study puzzle was to shift the focus of teaching toward the study of our own practice in order to make our learning intentional and connected to student development. Now, I need to ask teachers what their puzzle is and how they would like to try and solve it. Together we can begin to narrow our gap and create a shared vision to improve future learning for our students and our colleagues.

Suzanne, Professor – Literacy Methods

Establishing supportive learning communities is crucial to effective teaching and learning (LaBoskey, 2004; Noddings, 1984; Paley, 1992; Perkins, 2009; Smith, 1998). Learning communities can be labeled clubs (Smith, 1988), teams (Perkins), or public homeplaces (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997) as long as they exhibit positive social organizations and authentic learning experiences. Learning community theory is rooted in John Dewey's (1938) ideas on traditional education (receiving already known information) versus progressive education (developing habits of thought from authentic experiences) and Vygotsky's theory that learning occurs in individual zones of proximal development within social situations (Dixon-Kraus, 1996).

My puzzle is situated within a climate of reductionist educational reform where standardized assessments are required at all levels of the system to assure accountability. Standardized tests decide teacher certification and student success. Despite protests against such practices by noted researchers in the field of literacy instruction (Graves, 2002; Kohn, 2002; Rose, 1989), teachers and students live in a world where human interactions count less than numerical scores.

I felt a need to balance these opposing world views within my own practice and decided to study my use of rubrics to enhance preservice teachers' learning to teach early literacy. Preservice teachers considered the purposes of rubrics, used models I created, and developed rubrics in each of their lesson plans. They used rubrics to assess student learning and provided anecdotal information through "kid-watching" (Goodman, 1989) to support their assessments.

Rubrics shifted the focus of teaching and learning off the students they taught and placed it on the lesson plan requirements. I controlled preservice teachers' decisions rather than letting their own developing understandings and experiences guide them. I gradually realized this as I witnessed a growing distance between the children and the preservice teachers, making both less willing to learn (Fox, 1993; Graves as quoted in Calkins, 1983). Lessons consisted of transmitting information rather than exploring and constructing meaning together (Graves, 2002).

As my self-study continued, I felt that requiring preservice teachers to develop and use rubrics in every plan was both successful and unsuccessful. The preservice teachers created well-aligned lesson plans and analyzed student work carefully, important aspects of teaching and learning. However, a result I had not expected emerged as teaching episodes became dry, as if preservice teachers were simply

going through the motions to complete assignments. Worksheets dominated lessons as preservice teachers searched for objective data to assess. The spark and creativity of earlier years was lacking. As the self-study continued through a second semester with different preservice teachers, I became convinced I had a problem.

At this point, the story circles back to the beginning. I believe teaching is based on caring relationships among people. Introducing the requirement of rubrics for every lesson took me away from this foundational belief in an attempt to simplify a complex process. Learning is messy; teaching is unpredictable. A teacher begins a journey with the students. The teacher acts as tour guide pointing out interesting sights, but memories that matter are created as the group veers off the beaten path to explore new places in ways unique to that group, that time, that place. Learning does not mean simply adding “new bits to stores of knowledge, but extensions or elaborations of the experience and beliefs that make us what we are” (Smith, 1998, p. 13). Reducing lessons to imparting and assessing the objectives of others robbed my preservice teachers and their students of the joy and adventure of learning.

My self-study continues. Each conversation with my critical friends takes me farther from simple answers. I believe assessment is critical to good teaching. I also believe good teaching cannot be confined by those outside the classroom. My puzzle continues as I trust myself and my students to find powerful ways to teach, assess, and learn as we journey together.

Conclusion

Though the title itself insinuates an individual pursuit, effective self-study must enlist honest, critical, and constructive review of others. Multiple points of view expose the naïveté of our work and help to advance our work into forms others in the field might apply and build upon. It is this production of new knowledge that allows other teacher educators to consider “what they do, how and why, so that they might bring their own professional judgment to bear on their practice in their context” (Loughran, 2008, p. 220).

Through looking beyond our stories, we created applicable generalizations from our specific histories and puzzles and made some of the tacit elements of our practice explicit (Loughran, 2008). Furthermore, beyond deriving applicable knowledge from and for practice, we presented our adaptation of Seidel et al.’s (1997) collaborative assessment conference protocol as a framework for examining self-study reflections and interpretations in a critical, yet nonjudgmental manner.

Self-study is a powerful tool to help teacher educators “investigate question[s] of practice . . . that are individually important and also of broader interest to the teacher education community” (Pinnegar & Russell, 1995, p. 6). Rooted in the exploration of individual difficulties, dilemmas, tensions, and demands, self-study advocates aim to create models of and for practice (Loughran, 2004). It is also essential that we aim to create models of conducting self-studies so that researchers might better transfer their individual discoveries into knowledge for use by others.

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