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Learning to See Beyond the Self: Accelerating Pre-Service Teacher Development through Collaboration



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ABSTRACT

A culture of isolation pervades the practice and preparation of teachers. Consequently, the development of teachers can be delayed and result in a focus on self-concerns rather than promoting student learning. Teacher educators have a unique opportunity to address this problem by creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration amongst pre-service teachers, supervisors, and faculty. The purpose of this article is to describe our experiences with an on-going collaborative teacher development project aimed at helping pre-service teachers to see beyond their personal concerns and work collaboratively toward promoting their own, their colleagues, and their students' learning. The body of the article is devoted to a description of the genesis of the project and an overview of the project's activities. We close the article with a description of our own and our students' experiences with the first attempt at integrating this project into our graduate elementary teacher education program.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional organizational structures, norms, and practices of teaching have fostered a culture of isolation within the profession (Hough, Smithey, and Evertson, 2004; Labaree, 2000). For example, many teachers work in the "silo" of their own classroom, cut-off from frequent and meaningful collaboration with their colleagues. And the organization of schools and structure of teachers' work within those schools affords few opportunities for teachers to meet, plan, and discuss their practice. When teachers are afforded opportunities to interact, the meet-

ings are typically agenda-driven and leave little room for the kind of collaboration and discourse aimed at fostering professional development and teacher learning.

With little opportunity to test out their conceptions, reflect, and collaborate with colleagues teachers can become ensconced in their own private realities and concerns of teaching. Not surprisingly, limited and restrictive opportunities for collegial collaboration severely impede teacher learning and development. As a result, it may take many years for teachers to work through their private concerns of professional adequacy and focus their full attention on sup-

porting student learning (Fuller, 1969).

Because preparation programs inculcate novices into the professional culture of teaching, teacher educators have an opportunity and responsibility to help transform the profession's culture of isolation into a culture of collaboration. Given that efforts aimed at developing a culture of collaboration for in-service teachers is fraught with much difficulty (Garmston, 1997; Lieberman, 1996), the pre-service years may serve as the critical window of time for cultivating a collaborative ethos amongst teachers. Indeed, as Kluth and Straut (2003) report, scholars are increasingly calling upon teacher preparation programs to model and foster collaboration amongst pre-service teachers.

Unfortunately, traditional activities of teacher-preparation often represent vertical collaboration between pre-service teachers, supervisors, and teacher educators. This form of collaboration represents a concerns-of-self focus. Such a focus is individualized and inward – aimed at uncovering and addressing the personalized agenda of pre-service teachers (Buchmann, 1993). Focusing on the unique concerns of pre-service teachers individuates the experience of teaching and serves to reinforce the culture isolation. For example, Zeichner and Teitelbaum (1982) argue that a focus on personalized concerns perpetuates personalized pedagogy based on past experiences rather than a critical inquiry-focused professional pedagogy. Conversely, by restructuring teacher-preparation to include meaningful, collaborative planning and reflection teacher educators can work towards eliminating the culture of personalized pedagogy (isolation) and its debilitating impact on teacher development. In doing so, teacher-preparation can move from a concerns-of-self focus to a collaborative, critical inquiry-based pedagogy focused on promoting student and teacher learning.

The purpose of this article is to describe an on going collaborative teacher development project aimed at helping pre-service teachers to see beyond their personal concerns and work collaboratively toward promoting their own, their colleagues, and their students' learning. The body of the article is devoted to a descrip-

tion of the genesis of the project and an overview of the project's activities. We close the article with a description of our own and our students' experiences with the first attempt at integrating this project into our graduate elementary teacher education program.

THE EARLY SEEDS OF COLLABORATION

In spring of 2003, we met with our colleagues (faculty and field supervisors) to reflect on the development and progress of our graduate elementary teacher education students. Our teacher-preparation program is housed in a college of education at a large university in the Pacific Northwest. The program is an intensive full year program that leads to a M.Ed. degree with a major in Teaching and Learning, and an initial teaching license in early childhood-elementary education. Students in the program already hold a bachelor's degree (in any area) and complete coursework preparing them to become elementary school teachers. Students are required to complete a work-sample of their pedagogy at the culmination of their student teaching experience.

The focus of our year-end meeting was to discuss student teachers' work samples and, in particular, their reflection and analysis of student learning data. To our dismay we noted that many of our students were unable to evaluate, interpret, or speak to student learning. It was as if our student teachers were unable to "see" or describe the assessment information of their individual students. For example, when interpreting assessment data many student teachers made vague statements about student learning explaining that they and their students really enjoyed the instructional unit and activities. In other cases, minimal gains in learning were explained away by describing factors external to their pedagogy (e.g., time of day, student behavior problems) or simply stating that they did not know why students didn't learn.

In reflection on our students' work samples, we came to realize that our students' inability to interpret and discuss the learning of their students was more than an issue of assessment lit-

eracy. As we turned our attention from the work samples to an open discussion of our own pedagogy and our work with the student teachers we began to realize that not only did our students seem distant from their pedagogy and their students, but that perhaps we as teacher educators were also distancing ourselves from the teaching, learning, and development of our student teachers. We recognized that the way we had been working with our student teachers had served to isolate us from each other and from our students. Consequently, we were reproducing this culture of isolation in our student teachers. We therefore recognized that we needed to find a way to transform our independent efforts into a collaborative process of critical reflection. A process that would support both the development and learning of our students and our own development and learning as teacher educators.

STUMBLING UPON LESSON STUDY

In our search for collaborative processes to support student and teacher learning we came across *lesson study*. We learned that lesson study was popularized in the United States by James Stigler (UCLA) and James Hiebert (U of Delaware) in their 1999 publication *The Teaching Gap: Best Ideas from the World's Teachers for Improving Education in the Classroom*. While it is beyond the scope of this article to adequately discuss the lesson study process, suffice it to say that the key elements of lesson study involve recursive collaboration amongst teachers in an effort to promote student and teacher learning. In Japan and in the U.S., lesson study is being used as a method for improving instruction by replacing "solo practice" with collaborative planning, reflection, and evaluation (Kelly, 2002).

In lesson study the focus is on the lesson rather than the teacher. A group of teachers come together to collaborate on a model lesson. Then one teacher volunteers to teach the lesson to a group of students. The other teachers observe the lesson. The group then critically reflects on and reexamines the plan for the lesson. Next the teachers refine the lesson plan using data from the initial teaching of the lesson. The revised lesson is then taught by a second member

of the group to another group of students. The process is repeated until a 'model' lesson is developed. In Japan, there is a market for these 'model' lessons, and they are published and for sale in bookstores.

Lesson study is used extensively by groups of in-service classroom teachers to develop model lessons that explain difficult concepts. The process serves as a powerful form of professional development because teachers work collaboratively to design the lesson and then take turns teaching it. We recognized that while we did not necessarily want to replicate the lesson study process in our teacher-preparation program, we could perhaps draw from key elements of the process in an effort to support the learning and development of our students, our supervisors, and ourselves.

PILOTING OUR PROCESS

Program faculty met several times over the summer discussing what elements and aspects of lesson study might be most appropriate and beneficial for our teacher preparation program. Our primary goal was to increase horizontal collaboration amongst program faculty and our teacher education students. We had identified the isolation endemic to our program and practices and we now were ready to take action to replace that isolation with meaningful collaboration. We recognized that while we couldn't restructure the entire program, we could transform our supervision activities to be much more collaborative. We intended to replace the vertical supervision model of program faculty working with supervisors who in turn work with individual students with a more horizontal and collaborative model in which groups of faculty, supervisors, and students were seated at the same table, reflecting, planning, and learning.

With only a few weeks before the start of the fall 2003 academic term, we met with university supervisors and faculty. We explained that we had a germ of an idea aimed at increasing our collaboration and fostering collaborative planning and reflection in our students. Not surprisingly, the supervisors and faculty were a bit overwhelmed with the inherent uncertainty of

the process we were describing. The only thing we could be certain about was there would be a lot of learning going on – perhaps learning from mistakes and stumbles along the way – but we would all be learning how to work with each other. To everyone’s credit, they all embraced the uncertainty of the process and plunged headlong into the project.

COMPOSITION AND PHASES OF THE PROCESS

Our collaborative lesson study groups were comprised of four to six students, a university supervisor (who also visited the students each week at their school sites), and a faculty member. During the initial cycle, the field supervisors and faculty also met prior to each student group meeting. These meetings were essential for making formative adjustments to the process and maintaining collaborative support for the participants. We envisioned one cycle of the process to include four phases: *Planning; Teaching and Videotaping; Reflecting; and Refining & Re-teaching.*

THE CYCLE IN ACTION

Phase 1: Planning. In the planning phase we had our students start the process by discussing their individual classroom placements (e.g., grade level, unique contextual issues, and so on). We then discussed common and shared issues across the classroom settings. To reach this goal we asked the students to describe an ‘ideal’ classroom and a ‘real’ classroom. A common concern for our student teachers involved how to best teach and support pro-social student behavior in their elementary classroom. In each case, the group agreed to focus on teaching a social skill. The first session culminated with the student teachers generating a list of social skills all children would need in an ideal learning environment.

During this initial meeting we also developed the lesson goals. One pro-social skill was selected as the goal of the common lesson (e.g., elementary students would be taught how to attempt to self-manage an interpersonal dispute

using “I statements” prior to asking for help from the classroom teacher). During the second meeting we asked the student teachers to describe what they would see and hear if their students were demonstrating the social skill. Each student completed a *Looks Like/Sounds Like* page that was used to determine an objective for the lesson. During this meeting it was also decided which of the pre-service teachers would actually teach the lesson in his or her classroom. A lesson plan template was provided, and the student teachers began brainstorming ways to execute the lesson.

During the final planning meeting we focused the student teachers’ attention on “seeing” the students. We prompted them to anticipate student responses and common student misconceptions. With encouragement and prompts from knowledgeable others (i.e., university faculty and supervisors), the student teachers were able to think of ways to strengthen the lesson by capitalizing on student responses and considering the way different students learn and seeing the lesson through the students’ eyes.

The majority of our students came to the planning phase with limited teaching experiences. However, the collaborative nature of the planning along with the distributed experience and expertise represented by their peers, supervisors, and faculty allowed for an engaging and productive experience. In reflecting on this experience, one of our students explained:

When I started the program in the summer of 2003, the only real experience I had was reading to kids in the SMART program and one PE practicum assignment. At the time the lesson study project began, I had one summer of classes under my belt and one month in the classroom. I still felt very new to all of it and did not have much confidence in my ability to create a lesson plan. I found our discussion and planning meetings to be very useful and successful. We were very focused and on task. I related this success to several factors. First, we were all capable and comfortable in taking charge and advocating for our point of view. Second, we were all just as willing to hear everyone else’s ideas and sit back and let others drive

when necessary (Khoury, written reflection, fall 2003).

In addition to and perhaps as a result of the distributed learning and sharing of ideas within the groups, several students reported that they took more ownership of lessons they were planning and were meaningfully engaged in the process:

STUDENT A

What made lesson study such a positive experience was the great collaboration between the members of the group. We were not there just to “get it done.” We were there because we were beginning to see the benefits of the process. We also all had a personal connection to the process and the product. Although we ultimately decided to have “J” teach the lesson with her class, we really could have taught the lesson in any of the classroom or slightly altered it to fit across grade levels. I believe that is the major reason that we all put in a great effort toward the finished product — all of us knew that it was more than likely that we would use the same lesson in our own classrooms someday (Summer, written reflection, fall 2003).

STUDENT B

We had generated some really quality ideas, and even though only one of us would teach it, we felt we were developing something that any of us could use. I think there was a lot of enthusiasm in the air and that propelled us. We felt we were developing a universal lesson, one that could be used in any elementary school classroom in the country effectively and that we were taking a wide range of issues into account to make it successful in other environments (Khoury, written reflection, fall 2003).

In addition to cultivating deeper levels of engagement and collective ownership, the planning phase also helped several of our student teachers test out and restructure their conceptions and beliefs about planning and collaboration:

I also thought that once we had decided on a topic that the lesson would be easy to plan and implement because instead of having one person planning we had four. Same amount of work, more people helping, logically that means that the process should take less time and be of higher quality. The actual process of lesson planning took much longer than I originally anticipated and was much richer. Our group had several small discussions outside of our two supervised meetings to pull our ideas together. When we finally sat down to write our lesson the process took us several hours, [two] to three times as long as it usually takes me to write out a lesson, especially a rough draft. The four of us felt it was very important that we create a lesson that with minor modifications could work in any of our classrooms ranging from K to 3. Each of us had our own ideas about how that would best work. In the beginning that meant that almost everything that was written into the lesson was debated by four individuals. As the process went on and our focus became clearer, the planning was easier and faster. The process itself took a lot of patience, determination, compromise, and communication on all of our parts (Allie, written reflection, fall 2003).

Phase 2: Teaching and Videotaping. In between the third and fourth meetings the student teachers met to finalize the lesson plan and arrange to videotape the model lesson in one of the group members classrooms. (We ran into several challenges with videotaping, including lack of familiarity with video taping equipment and quality sound. We found that a brief training session on video taping with our media faculty and the use of floor and wireless lapel microphones helped address these issues.)

Phase 3: Reflecting. Unedited videotapes of the taught lesson were brought to the reflection meeting. The student who taught the lesson was given an opportunity to discuss the “unseen” of the lesson (e.g., what factors influenced decisions made during the lesson). Then each observer was asked to watch the lesson and record specific information. For example, one

observer recorded the student responses, while another checked for fidelity between the lesson plan and the actual lesson. Afterwards there was an opportunity for the student teachers to share the data they had collected and make recommendations for revising the lesson. They were also asked to reflect on the lesson study process and its effect on their development as a teacher.

As a result of engaging in this process, several of our students came to see the value in collaborative planning and reflection. For example,

The lesson study process has definitely had an impact on my thinking this term. Lesson study has made me realize that the most useful and easy to access tool that I possess as a teacher is collaboration with peers and experienced professionals. Above all, lesson study has shown me that the value of a second opinion reaches beyond the medical profession (Khoury, written reflection, fall 2003).

Phase 4: Refining & Re-teaching. In the piloting of our process, we did not have enough time during the term to fully engage in refining or re-teaching. Because we operate under a ten week term, we simply ran out of time. We did, during week ten, bring the various lesson study groups together into a large end-of-the-term meeting. The last meeting served as an opportunity for all the lesson study groups to come together and share their model lessons. We discussed the strengths of the various lessons and how, in general, the lessons might be refined and re-taught in different classrooms and grade levels. We are currently in the process of restructuring our yearlong supervision model to make room for sustained collaborative planning, reflection, and study of student lessons. Still, as a result of engaging in this process, our students seemed to develop a greater sense of efficacy with their teaching, came to value and seek out more collaboration, and more thoughtfully considered how their lessons were impacting students and how they might make a greater impact as teachers:

STUDENT A

Having been part of the creation of such a

solid lesson and getting to watch it be taught has made me much more confident in my abilities. It has made me a much more thoughtful lesson plan writer (Khoury, written reflection, fall 2003).

STUDENT B

It takes me longer to write a lesson now than it did before this process because I think more deeply about each aspect of the lesson and the possible ways my students could react to the question. I seek more peer and mentor feedback because I realize how invaluable that input can be... Success in this process is due to a small group of highly committed people. I believe Margaret Mead was the woman who said that only that kind of group could change the world. "Lesson study" in my mind has made me a better teacher, more prepared to change the world. (Jenna, written reflection, fall 2003).

At the end of our first cycle of lesson study we identified several themes. The first was that we all grew as teachers. Faculty, supervisors, and student teachers spent more time listening to and learning from each other. Also, as a faculty, we recognized that we could turn much of the lesson planning process over to our students. By providing our student teachers with more autonomy – while still offering support as needed – our students seemed to develop a greater sense of empowerment and were more confident in assuming their developing identity as professional teachers.

In addition, several of our students reported feelings of self-efficacy stemming from the collaborative planning of the lesson. As documented in student reflections, the planning sessions seemed to afford them an opportunity to exchange ideas in a safe, supportive environment, and they came to see the benefits of working together as professionals. When they did focus on developing lesson plans, they were able to bring multiple voices and insights into their planning. This in turn allowed them to see their students from multiple perspectives and to anticipate challenges beyond their own personal concerns.

Finally, in our observations and follow-up discussions with students we noted that group size seemed to have an important impact on the perceived value and ultimate success of the process. Groups of four and five students seemed to work much more effectively and collaboratively than did larger groups. Given that all the work could not be completed during scheduled meetings, group members had to find time to finish tasks outside of regularly scheduled meetings. The larger the group, the more difficult it was for students to find common times to collaborate. In a few groups this resulted in one or two students taking on the majority of follow-up planning and work. When this happened, students within those groups seemed to develop a more fractured understanding of their group's lesson and were less likely to see the value of investing extra time and effort in collaborative planning.

In summary, we feel that the most effective groups were those that had smaller numbers (four to five students) and were better able to manage and share the responsibilities of the lesson study cycle. When work was more evenly shared we noted higher levels of commitment, ownership, and perceived value for the process.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

So, where do we go from here? We began the lesson study cycle by attempting to replace the culture of isolation being reproduced in our supervision activities with a more collaborative model of planning, reflection, and teacher learning. We feel encouraged by the early signs of success and the energy that this project has generated for supervisors, faculty, and students. It seems our project is moving our program in the right direction by offering all of us a way to see beyond ourselves through meaningful collaboration.

Although our initial results are promising, the next iterations of the project need to focus more on collecting a wide array of student learning data (academic, behavioral, and motivational) to better determine how this project is impacting the learning of our pre-service teachers as well as their own K-6 students. In addition,

we want to examine alternative avenues of participation and collaboration (Breghetto, 2001). Specifically, examining how the use of on-line communication (such as threaded discussion boards) might help create greater opportunities for collaboration and address the challenge of busy students trying to find common times to follow-up on work they started in their regularly scheduled meetings. Finally, we will need to collect information on how well this collaborative ethos is sustained during the time our students spend in the program and, most importantly, once they leave their pre-service "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and become legitimate full participants of the teaching profession. Our hope is that the importance and necessity of collegial collaboration is woven deeply into their professional identity. As our student teachers continue to develop their identity as professional teachers we hope they are at the same time re-developing the identity of the profession of teaching. Perhaps in this way, teachers will find ways to work together, see beyond their individual concerns, and focus more directly on promoting meaningful learning in themselves and their students.

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