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Using a Tuning Protocol: A Journey of Creating and Sustaining Professional Conversations Among Teacher Educators

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the challenges of creating and sustaining on-going conversations about faculty teaching practices encountered by one Department of Teacher Education. The research indicates that higher education is experimenting with many forms of collegial discourse, yet remains instructionally isolated. This three-year journey includes gathering faculty support for increased talk about teaching, overcoming time constraints to meet together and experimenting with two discourse formats to increase conversation. A non-evaluative peer observation process was found to be helpful but not sustainable. Using a modified turning protocol produced three benefits: 1) kept the group on task, 2) stimulated collective inquiry, and 3) placed the emphasis on learning.

INTRODUCTION

After 32 years as a high school English teacher and school district coordinator I accepted a position as assistant professor of education at a local university. I looked forward to increased time with students, additional time to read and reflect and more opportunities to discuss my teaching practices with colleagues. Surprisingly, I discovered many professors in higher education were even more pedagogically isolated than teachers in the K-12 system. Increased discretionary time did not translate into increased discussions about instruction. I knew my colleagues as friends but not as teachers. My department of eight faculty was personal and polite but not instructionally collaborative. Yet, I knew that my peers were committed professional educators—valuable resources of encouragement, insight and knowledge. I asked myself, how could I tap into their years of expertise? How could we help each other become better teachers? How could we increase our talk about teaching? I began to wonder if Richard DuFore (2004) was correct when he said, speaking of the K-12 system, “Despite compelling evidence indicating that working collaboratively represents best practice, teachers in many schools continue to work in isolation. Even in schools that endorse the idea of collaboration...willingness to collaborate often stops at the classroom door...equating the term collaboration with congeniality and building group camaraderie” (p. 9). Other researchers have found faculty collaboration in higher education to be competitive, fragmented, isolating and institutionally unsupported as well (Kezar, 2005; Rowland, 2001; Wildman, et al., 2000; Carlson-Drakes & Sanders, 1998). My initial desire for increased departmental conversation about improved practice and the department’s subsequent three-year journey on how to engage in such collaboration is the subject of this article. Specifically, I intend to discuss my observations and the observations and experiences of my colleagues as we struggled together to find time to talk about teaching.

TALKING ABOUT TEACHING: A DEPARTMENTAL EXPERIMENT

In the hope of increasing departmental discussion about teaching, I informally assessed six months of department meeting minutes. My analysis indicated that substantive professional conversations about teaching practices were unlikely to occur without concerted effort and a change in department meeting priorities. My informal assessment revealed the following relationship between meeting topics and time allocations: communicating and clarifying administrative tasks—22%, teacher certification—17%, departmental curriculum—13%, advisement issues—13%, field experience/student teaching—11%, NCATE accreditation—10%, personnel—5%, external professional obligations—4%, staff and faculty evaluation—3%, and miscellaneous—2%. Essentially no time was allocated for collegial discussions about teaching practices.

Our departmental time allocations suggested an organization more focused on maintaining administrative efficiency than assisting professors to improve their teaching, this despite an impressive departmental mission statement, a portion of which states: "As learners, faculty in the Department of Teacher Education are engaged in the conversation of profession practice. This dialogue encourages an interchange of roles, where each person is both a teacher and a learner, and all learn from each other." While our mission statement said one thing, our actions said another, agreeing with Kezar (2004) when she stated, "As most faculty, staff, and administrators are aware, simply having a mission statement does not ensure that it is lived" (p. 50). We were a collection of very good teachers who were for all practical purposes, silent about a portion of our core mission—the conversation of professional practice.

The research on how higher education faculty improve their teaching is not yet fully developed (Menges & Austin, 2001). Nevertheless, Paulsen and Feldman (1995) and Lennning & Ebbers (1998) support a collaborative teaching culture where faculty can discuss their instructional decision-making. Many collaborative structures have materialized in recent years, including "instructional consultations," "collaboratively-reflective cultures," "practice-centered inquiry groups" (Menges & Austin, 2001), "professional learning communities" (DuFore, 2004), "departmental peer collaborations" (Quinlan & Akerlind, 2000), "lesson study groups" (Lewis, et al., 2006), "global partners project" (Marino, 2002), "faculty study groups" and "discourse communities" (Wildman, et al., 2000).

NON-EVALUATIVE PEER OBSERVATIONS

Faced with the challenge of overcoming years of established departmental norms, our department began to discuss how to increase our talking about teaching. Carving out time for additional meetings required creative scheduling and a faculty commitment to meet. Our administrative demands were real and time consuming: institutional reports had to be written, student concerns addressed, committee activities shared, policies created and maintained, information disseminated and consensus formed. After several months of wrestling with what talking about teaching would look like—one professor suggested we form a study group on active engagement practices, another proposed we discuss each professor's course syllabi, and a third suggestion included group analysis of video-taped lessons—we decided to begin with a modest time investment of non-evaluative peer observations. Following structures suggested from Cosh (1998) and Martin & Double (1998), each professor selected a colleague for a partnered observation process. Our pre-observation meeting, observation, and post-observation meeting format asked the observed faculty to provide specific "look-fors" for the observing colleague. This prompted written feedback and provided a

focus for post-lesson discussion. We modified an observation form developed by Cosh (p. 174) and created a departmental rubric of six traits for effective practice across three performance levels (exemplary, sufficient, inadequate): 1) course organization and planning, 2) pedagogy/ instruction, 3) learning environment, 4) assessment, 5) content knowledge and 6) policies/procedure practices. These traits provided the content focus for our observations and gave us a common vocabulary to use.

What we discovered was that talking about teaching with colleagues was professionally rewarding. After a year and a half we realized that collegial observations provided a more collaborative spirit—we saw each other in action and that produced paired conversations on teaching. One professor stated, referring to an observed colleague, “I realized first hand what my students meant—he really challenges his students to think. I was both uncomfortable and energized by his questioning techniques. His ability to play devil’s advocate got to a level of understanding I rarely get to. I was so impressed.”

SEARCHING FOR OTHER DISCOURSE FORMATS

Our peer observations were beneficial, but we lacked a broader purpose beyond building trust and increasing morale. The deep metacognitive work that would initiate and sustain instructional change was unlikely to occur with an observation-only format. As one faculty member noted, “Observing a colleague is much different than your typical supervisory relationship. I work along side this person. It’s difficult to share anything but positive comments. It’s one competent professional friend talking to another.” Overall, faculty were hesitant to criticize or offer substantive suggestions to their partner out of professional respect or personal timidity. On the whole, our feedback was deemed helpful and positive, building departmental relationships along the way, but new formats would be needed to sustain professional conversations that would

lead to a deeper reviewing and reflective renewing of teaching practices.

Our initial experiences of talking about teaching, being favorable, encouraged us to pursue other discourse formats. In the fall of 2005 our department of eight committed to meet once a month for two hours to continue the talking process. We modeled Clark & Florio-Ruane’s (2001) definition of a professional inquiry group—“six to ten teachers who meet regularly (weekly, bimonthly, monthly) to pose and pursue teaching problems together, and to provide intellectual and moral support for one another” (p. 6). Sustaining our efforts was the common philosophical belief that knowledge is socially constructed (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Creamer, 2004). We recognized the potential of collegial discourse as a means to improved instructional decision-making. Cindy O’Donnell-Allen (2005) supports this view with her concept of instructional recycling, where “colleagues support one another as they mindfully recycle practices and ideas...to not only reduce waste but to extend use” (p. 64).

SELECTING A TUNING PROTOCOL

Concurrent to our professional development work, NCATE accreditation was demanding a great deal of departmental time as we worked to understand and implement a portion of Standard #2: Assessment—the requirement of an aligned sequence of key assessments throughout our teacher certification programs. In subsequent discussions we discovered that this NCATE requirement could provide a potential subject for extended professional conversation on how we assess our students. Knowing that we needed a structured meeting format, several faculty recommended using structured protocols to organize our discourse. The *Power of Protocols* (McDonald, et al., 2003) provided an array of structured formats to choose from and a description of the role of facilitator, termed “facilitative leadership” (p. 11-33).

We decided to experiment with a tuning

protocol given its organizational emphasis on listening, talking, reflecting and providing collaborative feedback. In addition, we recorded and transcribed our group meetings, more for the purpose of understanding the process than for systematic research inquiry. For our first gathering, two professors volunteered to submit one of their NCATE-designated key assessments for input. They were specifically asked to describe the assessment and bring written copies of the assessment's goal(s), context, and scoring criteria. We modified McDonald's tuning protocol model on p. 64-5 in an attempt to facilitate one-hour sessions per faculty member and align our discussion feedback to better suit our departmental needs. We labeled our instrument the Assessment Tuning Protocol (outlined below).

ASSESSMENT TUNING PROTOCOL

I. Introduction [5/10 minutes]: Facilitator briefly introduces the protocol structure of eight specific, time-constrained steps, participant and presenter expectations, addressing any questions or misunderstandings. Copies of the protocol were handed out for easy reference. (After several meetings this step only required a review of the process.)

II. Teacher Presentation/Guiding Question(s) [10 minutes]: Presenting professor shares written materials that describe the targeted assessment (context, goal(s) and scoring criteria). Participants remain quiet and take notes while the presenter poses one or two guiding questions about the assessment he or she would like the group to review.

III. Clarifying Questions to the Presenter [5 minutes]: Participants ask non-evaluative, clarifying questions about the assessment or the guiding question(s), such as "What happened before X?" "What did you do next?" "Did you want us to specifically discuss Y?" Facilitator should guide participants away from evaluative questions, such as "Didn't you try Z?" "Wouldn't it have better if..."

IV. Individual Writing [5/10 minutes]: Facilitator oversees a time of participant reflection and writing, focusing specifically on the presenter question(s). Feedback balance between areas of strength and concern is encouraged.

V. Participant Discussion [15 minutes]: Participants share responses, striving to increase their understanding of the assessment particulars and lend insight to the guiding question(s). Presenter takes notes during the discussion but remains silent during the conversation. Facilitator may lend focus by reminding participants of the guiding question(s) and the balance of feedback.

VI. Presenter Reflection/Response [5 minutes]: Presenter reflects aloud on the participants' feedback and responds to those comments or questions he or she chooses. Presenter may ask for further clarification. Participants are silent unless called on to share. Presenter concludes by acknowledging one or two changes or alterations he/she expect to make as a result of group input.

VII. Debriefing the Protocol Process [5 minutes]: Facilitator leads a review of the protocol process. The group discusses any positive/negative reactions, frustrations, suggestions or personal feelings to the experience. This may lead to a more general discussion of the assessment tuning protocol process and to potential changes for the next meeting.

VIII. Compelling Issues (Optional) [10 minutes]: This time is reserved for compelling issues that may have been raised during the protocol, and allows for an airing of engaging lines of inquiry that could not be pursued during the protocol.

After meeting for five, two-hour sessions over the 2005-2006 school year our department gained an understanding and appreciation for systematic collegial discourse. Experiencing protocols in action, numerous anecdotal conversations and an informal analysis of tape recorded meeting transcriptions produced three potential benefits of using protocols to structure professional conversations about teaching.

BENEFITS OF USING A PROTOCOL

1. *Kept the group on task:* Making sense

of the complex challenges of our instructional decision-making within the context of collegial discourse is a challenging proposition given the disjointed and fragmented nature of our thinking and speaking. By organizing discussion within time-limited stages we were able to curb verbal wandering. This observation is supported by a study conducted by Conca, et al. (2004) where using a structured protocol led to a 99% rate of on-task discourse. Lieberman and Wood's (2002) examination of the National Writing Project (NWP) format, practiced throughout the country, supports the structuring of feedback in collegial settings as a necessary step to productive collegial conversations.

Initially, our exchanges required numerous facilitator reminders of off-task sharing. Focused attentiveness was a skill that needed to be modeled, practiced and reinforced, but we got better as we became more experienced. After several meetings the group seemed to develop an unwritten "code of ethics" that monitored interactions—a norming process that led faculty to self-regulate conversation and hold the presenter's purpose at the center of the protocol.

Another corollary benefit of reduced chatter was an increase in thoughtful response. Participants were less likely to share indiscriminately. Comments over time became more deliberate and intentional, where several of our "talkers" became active listeners. Keeping the group on task led to what Little (2003) described as deeply meaningful conversations about teaching.

2. Stimulated collective inquiry: The metaphor "tuning" originated in 1991 as a means to encourage educators to work together. This musical term, referring to the collective tuning of instruments, suggests that colleagues could gain insight and improve skills by "tuning together," i.e., listening, sharing and responding as feedback is given and received (McDonald, 2003).

Protocol guidelines allowed faculty to gather around a colleague and support them as they work through a challenging issue, a cur-

rent problem or a plan under development. By permitting participants to mull over a presented problem, a collective problem-solving mind was activated—a group of five to ten engaged colleagues working in concert to help another colleague. Collective inquiry has the potential to engender sustained inquiry through the process of externalized thinking. When exchanged information is structured around a protocol, the focus is on personalized observations, not judgment. Whether all members are in agreement about a subject does not matter. What does matter is allowing the interchange of multiple perspectives. This inquiry structure helped our department to function as a feedback team while still supporting the presenting professor. The presenting professor benefited from colleagues who became active listeners and thoughtful, reflective collaborators.

3. Placed the emphasis on learning: Protocols provided a structure where colleagues entered into professional conversations with the hope of learning more about their craft, similar to the processes that Senge (1993) suggested in describing a learning organization. Senge believes that the fundamental learning unit in any organization is the group or team, not the individual. This concept is endorsed by Lee Shulman in his short paper "Teaching as community property: Putting an end to pedagogical solitude" (1993), where professional discourse is the catalyst for renewed professional vitality and organizational change.

Pausing periodically to collectively reflect on our teaching practices with the goal of gaining new perspectives and insights, required our department to suspend their roles as managers, administrators and advisors and become trained observers and learners. "By specifying who speaks when and who listens when, protocols segment elements of a conversation whose boundaries otherwise blur. They make clear the crucial differences between talking and listening, between describing and judging, or between proposing and giving feedback. In the process, they call attention to the role and value of each of these in learning, and make the steps of our learning visible and replicable" (McDonald,

2005, p. 5).

We discovered that the practice of peer-assisted reflection, where faculty have the opportunity to co-construct knowledge, encourage and support one another in a community of “reflective practitioners” (Schon, 1983) - and to do so in a climate of mutual support and trust - facilitated deeper learning.

CONCLUSION

Westheimer (1992) identified five common characteristics of a healthy community of learners: shared beliefs, interaction and participation, interdependence, concern for individual and minority views and meaningful relationships. By observing and analyzing our departmental interactions over three years I believe we have initiated the community building process. The Assessment Tuning Protocol helped us develop and practice discourse patterns that have encouraged focused interactions, structured interdependence and regular talking about teaching. We also confronted the well-entrenched norm of isolation, which Mike Schmoker (2006) calls “the enemy of improvement” (p. 23-35). But, confronting isolation has not led to overcoming it. Our organizational structure, our curricular scope and sequence and our independent work habits are allied against interdependence. These systemic routines have and will challenge our best intentions to be collegial.

We met, shared, discussed and debriefed, over five months. We learned together how difficult it was to focus and support one another, where communal effort required organization and commitment, agreeing with Dufour (2004) when he says, “Building the collaborative culture of a professional learning community is a question of will. A group of staff members who are determined to work together will find a way” (p. 9).

Our departmental effort continues as we look to improve our practice. As in all studies, informal and formal, nearly as many questions remain

as were answered. Looking to the future we hope to continue investigating formats where we can help each other improve classroom practice. The following questions inform our research agenda: 1) How does conversation among peers assist the integration of theory and practice? 2) How does talk and the reflection on that talk lead to improved instructional decision-making? 3) What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of protocol-formatted conversations? 4) What are the factors that encourage and sustain professional learning communities? 5) How are regular, practice-based conversations related to professional development? Pursuing these questions will hopefully lead us closer to a workable form of “sustainable teacher learning” (Clark & Florio-Ruane, 2001).

There is no magic in talking about teaching practices. Open and honest conversations about real teaching with real students in real classrooms occur every day. These informal, anecdotal exchanges contribute to our practice, but lack the concentrated power of structured professional conversations. Just talking about our teaching with other colleagues can be beneficial or not, but the deep work of sustained and focused dialogue, where honest and probing questions are met with collective engagement cannot rise spontaneously. Using protocols led us to conclude that organized and sustained talking about teaching is worth the time and the effort.

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