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Using Self-Study to Navigate the Changing Seas of Standards-Based Education

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Context

Educational reform continues to be steady work (Cohen, 2011; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Ravitch, 2013). Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, changing classroom instruction through state and federal policies has been a rocky road for a number of reasons (Standerford, 1997). One often overlooked reason has been the lack of learning opportunities that make the expected changes clear and meaningful for teachers (Cohen & Hill, 2001). A recent standards policy in the United States, the Common Core State Standards, expects students to be college and career ready when they complete high school. Such laudable intentions are likely to fall short without focused efforts on teacher learning that provide vision and guidance on the types of teaching and learning expected. As some teachers attempt yet another change in their instruction with few opportunities to experience and construct clear understandings of what those changes mean, the outcomes could be dismal.

Within an educational and political context of competitive, market-based reform measures, and a one-size fits all approach (Ravitch, 2013), we consciously built our study upon the alternate values of collaboration, support and constructivism (Paul, 2005). Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) describe places where people construct knowledge and learn together as “public homeplaces” or spaces where “people support each other’s development and where everyone is expected to participate in developing the homeplace” (p. 13). In public homeplaces, people feel safe to express their thoughts and to envision possibilities beyond their current situations. They listen to others’ ideas carefully and speak about their own emerging ideas, knowing that dialogue allows ideas to grow, change, and become clarified.

We framed our collective inquiry within two complementary epistemological perspectives: feminist communication theory (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997; Colflesh, 1996) and transactional reading and learning theory (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994; Rosenblatt, 2005). These epistemologies recognize the ecological relationship between a knower and his or her environment, both in what they know and how they communicate that knowledge. From a feminist perspective, care and understanding are at the center of teaching and learning (Noddings, 1984); they are essential components of knowers seeing knowledge as actively constructed by all human beings (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Transactional theory also suggests that learning occurs when people consider, discuss, and inquire into problems and issues of significance to them (Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994; Rosenblatt, 2005). Educators work in an environment influenced by policy-driven reform; in order for educators to use their knowledge to create educative experiences for others, they—we—must first understand new standards as learners.

As researchers, we are three members from a group of eight female educators—six teacher educators within literacy, special education, elementary education, secondary education, and educational leadership programs, the director of field experiences, and a literacy leader at a K-5 elementary school. Our group shared a collegial connection through a teacher preparation program at a mid-sized university in the mid-western United States. Each year this group engages in a year-long self-study, inviting new colleagues to join the research family. In 2011, we—Christi, Abby and Bethney—were new faculty members who were invited to join the self-study group as we transitioned from our work as K-12 educators and into the academy as new assistant professors. By the end of our first self-study, we too had come to view the conference room where we met as our public homeplace; seated at a table, we were colleagues who acted as critical friends and gradually became a collegiate family.

Goals

Research interests emerge from the personal and professional puzzles we ponder (Anderson, Imdieke, Lubig, Reissner, Sabin, & Standerford, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Loughran, 2004). Together, we puzzled about how we could critically consider the challenge of preparing prospective and practicing teachers, administrators, parents and students to navigate the current policy initiatives driven by the Common Core State Standards. To know this, we needed to understand it as learners.

Guided by one member’s extensive knowledge and abiding interest in policy, we first looked back at policy patterns in the state of Michigan as a broader context for our work as Michigan educators. Next, inspired by another member’s recent (2013) work as the chair of the Caldecott committee that recognizes excellence in illustrations, we decided to focus on visuals as a specific standard that flowed through the various grade levels of the Common Core State Standards. Finally, drawing from our previous self-study research (Cameron-Standerford, Bergh, Edge, Standerford, Reissner, Sabin, & Standerford, 2013) in which we “textualized” (Edge, 2011, p. 330) our teacher education practices, we decided to examine our individual practice in order to critically read our work in light of the Common Core State Standards for visual literacy.

Out of this “sociology of knowledge” (Noddings, 2005, p. 58), we sought to understand how we use and learn through visual literacy in order to better help others—students, prospective teachers, practicing teachers, administrators, parents, policy makers and the general public—to understand how visuals communicate and how viewers construct meaning (Eisner, 1998; Langer, 2011). Together, we aimed to describe and to share the process we used, the way the study impacted us as professionals, and implications for teacher education practices. Along the way, we newer members of the self-study family became aware that this self-study experience was different from any of our policy-related experiences as K-12 educators. To share our discovery with other educators, we began discussing and making notes about the self-study process in relationship to our desire to consciously navigate the seas of standards-based education.

Methods

Through self-study, we consciously placed ourselves and our teacher education practices in the context of policy reform. Because self-study is rooted in post-modern and feminist thinking (LaBoskey, 2004), the very nature of self-study methodology “positions the researcher to examine the self as an integral part of the context for learning, whereby the framing and reframing of lived experiences results in a cumulative and altered understanding of practice” (Tidwell, Farrell, Brown, Taylor, Coia, Abihanna, Abrams, Dacey, Dauplaise, & Strom, 2012, p. 15). Self-study methodology intends to both inform the researchers and to generate knowledge that can be shared both within and beyond the professional discourse community. Self-study research does not prove answers, but instead helps the researchers to explore and challenge their assumptions and beliefs with the purpose of improving their understanding and practice of teaching (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

Guided by the question of: *How do we use visuals as texts to re-see our worlds and to help others to construct meaning in theirs?* our group of eight met over the course of one year—every two weeks during academic semesters and once monthly during the summer—in order to examine our ongoing work with visuals. Early in our study, we each identified a way in which we had or could use visual texts (e.g. illustrations, symbols, photographs) in our teaching practice. From this initial point, we examined artifacts from our teacher education practices

in order to understand how the visuals facilitated the construction or communication of meaning. Data included written stories of teaching experiences and critical teaching events, visual artifacts such as teaching materials and work our students produced in response to our teaching, documented observations, notes from discussions about readings, and field notes from our self-study meetings composed by multiple members.

Data analysis was multifaceted and guided by our agreed upon epistemological stance, articulated in the theoretical frames of feminist communication theory and transactional theory of learning. We viewed ourselves as active meaning makers who could learn from our teacher education practices by textualizing them, critically reading them, and discussing them with “critical friends” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 819) in the safe space of a public homeplace.

Independently, each of us read her data, interpreting meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), looking for connections, and composing (Richardson, 2000) an initial understanding of what she thought was happening through the use of visuals in her practice. After someone composed an initial understanding of the data, she orally shared the teaching event with her critical friends and presented visual artifacts related to it.

Collectively, we used a modified collaborative conference protocol (Anderson, et al., 2010; Cameron-Standerford, et al., 2013; Sidel, Walters, Kirby, Olf, Powell, Scripp, & Veenama, 1997) to help one another re-frame an understanding of practice (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). This protocol included: listening to each individual’s initial analysis of the teaching event and subsequent learning; taking turns saying what we heard or noticed while the individual who had shared quietly took notes; taking turns offering speculative comments, connections, and wonderings; inviting the individual back into the conversation to respond to comments or questions offered by the group or to offer additional details or insights sparked by listening to the group; and writing take-away reflections that we shared with the group through email. Individual take-away statements became a way to attend to the themes developing from our collective work. Finally, we “crystallized” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) our data analysis by considering each emerging theme through multiple data sources and from multiple perspectives.

Outcomes

As the result of our self-study, we re-framed our understanding of visuals from objects to mediums through which we can purposefully create and communicate meaning. We came to realize that our previous use of visuals in our teacher education practice was not as purposeful or as strategic as we initially thought it to be. One of the most significant outcomes of our collective self-study was the realization that we would not have come to deeply understand and to re-see our practice had we not participated in collaborative self-study. Individually, we would have likely ignored the issues that led to meaningful understanding, but through collaborative self-study, we reframed our teacher education practices in ways that led to re-envisioning our practice and ourselves in relationship to that practice.

Looking back to examine the process of how we constructed our understandings, Christi, Abby, and Bethney identified that the space, procedures, and place of our collective self-study research guided our envisionment-building stances (Langer, 2011). In other words, our orientation to the textualized teaching experiences framed our reading and sense making. These three facets—space, procedures, and place of self-study facilitated our ability to reconsider textualized experiences from multiple vantage points. Second, we also identified that re-seeing our experiences happened through three distinct yet fluid phases. These three phases transitioned our attention and understanding from the known to the new—or from seeing to re-seeing our teacher education practices. Finally, these three facets and three phases seemed to work together to shift understanding.

Phase One: Seeing our Teacher Education Practice in the Self-Study Space.

Self-study provided an envisionment-building space in which we expected to discover a deeper understanding of our teacher education practices. Because we had spent the prior year exploring personal and professional tensions through self-study, we had built a foundation of mutual respect and safety. We trusted each other to be authentic, candid, and kind. We also knew that textualizing (Edge, 2011) our teacher education practice could help us to step back from events and to critically consider them within the broader context of our life histories (Cameron-Standerford, et al., 2013). As a result, we approached this new study with the expectation that self-study is a space in which we could explore, and over time, come to deepen understandings of our

teacher education practices. This expectation, while subtle, is significant; it reflected our stance—our position in relationship to our work as educators. Because of our stance, we were positioned to step into the self-study space and willingly explore our practice through an authentic, vulnerable, and potentially transformative process.

Outside of the self-study space, each of us was able to identify a way in which she already was or could demonstrate the Common Core State Standards for using visuals in our teaching. Matching existing practice to new standards, we made assumptions and generalizations. We assumed we were *doing* a standard. We assumed a relationship between using visual components in our teaching and student learning. We also generalized from cursory reflections about our students’ responses to visuals that our use of those visuals was either successful or unsuccessful. Had we stopped here, we would have allowed these surface-level generalizations and assumptions to steer our future practice and our sense of efficacy as educators.

Phase Two: Exploring Beneath the Surface through Collaborative Conference Protocol.

Within the envisionment-building space of self-study, each shifted her attention in response to the procedure of the collaborative conference protocol we used to help crystalize our data. This shift empowered each member to step back from her initial, emotionally-charged responses to data and then reconsider data within the broader professional context in which it was situated.

We came to the group with strong emotional responses to our data—frustration, excitement, surprise, humility, pride, and disappointment. Our initial responses were narrow and focused on events or data related to one or two particular students. From these feelings, we navigated the teaching event from *within* as a part of the event. Had we maintained this personal, participatory, and emotionally-charged point of reference, we would have permitted ourselves to generalize what we thought was happening.

Nevertheless, our collaborative conference procedures provided an impetus for shifting our attention from a personally-oriented vantage point to a professional point of reference. Each time someone shared her story of a critical teaching event, visual artifacts, and thoughts about the event, her critical friends attentively listened and then acknowledged, not belittled, her emotionally-charged responses. Affirmed, we respected our critical friends’ observations, connections, and questions about what we shared. Our vision shifted from single facets to a crystallized depiction of events. From this distanced and more complex point of reference, we came to see our teaching events as icebergs. Unfettered from the emotional buoy that kept us bobbing at the surface, we were ready to explore what the data said rather than our response to a portion of it. We were ready to re-see the whole iceberg situated in the larger professional landscape.

Phase III: Re-Seeing Teacher Education Practices in Our Public Homeplace.

Our self-study public homeplace was more than a physical place to meet or even a sociocognitive space to understand our practice; it became a medium for making new meaning. The accountability of an authentic audience within our public homeplace motivated us to return to our data, to read professional literature, to consider the teaching event in the context of our personal histories and professional landscapes and to compose written and visual syntheses of our experience and understanding. Through our homeplace, we made montage.

Fluidity of the Phases.

Reflecting on how the three phases enabled us to re-see our experiences, we recognized that the three phases were distinct yet fluid. The phases were distinct in that they occurred for each of us and that they marked a turning point in the direction of our attention and depth of understanding. The phases were fluid in that each researcher moved from one phase to another on independent timelines. Naïvely, we newer members to the self-study team even tried to impose deadlines for completing our individual work; however, we came to realize and embrace that an authentic process for understanding did not start and stop in artificially-imposed external deadlines; it was ongoing. This fluidity complemented the complexity of our work; one researcher’s insights sparked new thoughts, questions, and connections that, in turn, led to another’s desire to further reflect on her work.

Conclusions

Public Homeplaces as Possible Sites for Authentic Reform.

True reform isn’t mandated. It is a process of transformation in which agents move from the known to the new through authentic inquiry. As

long as policy mandates for standards-based education are imposed upon classrooms from outside, policies have little chance to succeed at the classroom level (Cohen, 2011; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). Policy does not educate. Mandates do not make space for educators to first understand as learners; however, through the self-study process, we created a space to craft ownership of an outside mandate. Self-study begins within and radiates outward through ongoing active meaning-making. The self-study methodology situated within the social environment of a public homeplace has the potential to create space for authentic reform. The creation of a culture that allows for, expects, and supports its members through the envisionment-building process takes time, needs space, and benefits from distinct yet fluid procedures.

Textualizing lived experiences (Cameron-Standerford, et al., 2013; Edge, 2011) helps individuals to develop the tools that active meaning-makers need to learn from their experiences. Meaning-making is ever in motion. Textualizing one's experience positions individuals outside the present tense of their meaning-making; it facilitates the ability to critically read and make meaning from experience. Teachers who learn to textualize experiences and make sense of them are more likely to see their students as capable of thinking and constructing new ideas (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997; Edge, 2011). Such teachers enable themselves and their students to see learning as a dynamic, symbiotic, and transactional relationship—even in the context of policy driven curricular mandates. Teachers can be agents of change who transform

their teacher education practices into public homeplaces where individuals become empowered and challenged to critically construct deep understandings of the contexts to which they contribute.

As a result of this study, we can reflect back on our practices as former K-12 educators who now have had the opportunity to live, breathe, and learn in such a space. We see that we never went beyond surface-level compliance or had the opportunity to develop deep understandings of what we were asked to implement. As we work with teachers, administrators, and prospective teachers who are presently in schools, we continue to see and hear evidence of similar surface-level compliance. As one elementary teacher recently remarked, "We are encouraged to document where we are already meeting standards. I don't think I really even understand the standards" (A. Larkson, personal communication, January 14, 2014). At the surface-level of understanding, educators, administrators, and students in K-12 schools will likely continue to buoy at the surface of their work in fight, flight or freeze responses to those policy mandates. And, it is from this broader vantage point where our inquiry must now turn. Whitehead's (2004) query, "How can I improve what I am doing?" (p. 82) remains a fundamental question—a question educators need a safe place, space, and procedural tools in order to construct meaningful responses. We encourage teacher educators to consider how the use of self-study within a public homeplace could become an impetus for deeper understanding of their own teaching and learning.

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