

Multiple views of self-as-teacher: Integrated teacher education course and self-study

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Introduction

In this paper we present three narratives that have generated a form of professional development evolving from a post-modern perspective on pedagogy. As Lather (1991) defines, post-modern pedagogy focuses upon a "transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies - the teacher, the student and the knowledge they together produce" (p. 15). For teaching this consciousness can best be realized within a relational place where these three agencies come together, namely the school. A post-modern perspective critiques the certainty that is promised by the grand narratives of modernist perspectives; instead it offers what Gergen (1991) has described as a "sense of validity from a particular community of interpretation" (p. 104). Such a community in a school is constructed and reconstructed by the teachers' biographies and intents within the constraints of the surrounding culture and socio-economic milieu.

Drawing on the concept of self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001), we are concerned with the interaction of the self-as-teacher educator, in a context, over time, with others who also have an expressed commitment to the education of students. Self-study, in isolation, has the potential for only limited impact on self or community, but in connection with others in the community has the potential for powerful and ultimately far-reaching influence. This focus has led to the development of integrated campus/field-based courses whose designs have been significantly influenced by the findings of an action research project and subsequent self-study. The three-year action research project adopted a practical orientation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). One researcher acted as a critical friend to the other researcher who taught the course.

Three Narratives within a study of self-as-teacher educator

The first narrative represents the story leading up to the action research project. The project attempted to develop what Cochran-Smith (1999) has termed knowledge-of-teaching by relocating teacher education courses in the space between the school culture and the university culture, a space that shifted from one place to other. This shifting created multiple perspectives for student teachers, principals, teacher and university instructors as they experienced the roles of student, teacher, and teacher-assistant, mentor, observer and teacher educator within the boundaries of a teacher education course. The second narrative offers data from the study that shows a shift in student teacher mindset to a sense of self-as-teacher. The final narrative captures the shift in a schoolteacher's perspective on his understanding of self-as-teacher.

Teacher Educator's story of self-as-teacher

In 1994, I began coordinating a course that included the Education students' first practicum experience; in my previous two years' experience in teaching the course, I had had many concerns regarding the separation between the campus experience and the school-based practicum experience. Over several years, I made attempts to integrate the two experiences in a meaningful way for the students. More consistent efforts were made to develop connections with the school personnel who were hosting these fledgling student teachers, through phone calls and personal visits. Partly as a result of these connections and partly because of my continuing belief in the need for integrated experiences, the course content evolved. The "curriculum" of the course began to develop in response to the students' own needs and interests, incorporating assignments that required the students

to research, collaboratively plan and teach, explicitly recognize their learning through observing and acting, and sharing their knowledge in public forums.

As I reflected on the course experiences and possibilities, I also incorporated more opportunities for active reflection on the part of the students themselves, through dialogue journals, class listservs, and self-evaluation, and attempted to connect the reflective element of activities with the participatory element. I often found it difficult to “sell” the idea of reflection to the students, in the face of dismissal from teachers in schools who did not reflect or see value in reflection. I found this dismissal troubling, but wanted to encourage reflection that students engaged in willingly, rather than imposed “reflective” assignments. Another critical development of this course was the move from a graded course to a pass/fail course. This enabled students to consider reflection as a meaningful aspect of learning rather than one intended to help improve their grade; it enabled me to gain ongoing feedback from the students about all aspects of the course and to incorporate that into my own understandings of their development as teachers and into ongoing changes to the course structure and content.

As the course evolved, I came to recognize the need for the students to see themselves as change agents, as teacher researchers, and as learners if there was going to be any chance of them seeing teaching as an intellectual pursuit rather than a training ground. The evolution of this course and field experience continued as I collaborated with other university instructors, but it was two critical incidents that enabled the further growth of this course and of my development as a teacher educator. The first was an invitation from a teacher acting as a student teacher liaison between his staff and the university personnel. He suggested that I bring my class of university students to his school and teach the course at the school site. This move of learning sites was viewed positively by the students and facilitated guest speakers from the school to address them throughout the term. It also enabled the university students to develop a sense of comfort in a school setting, and to feel as if they were moving toward their goal of becoming a teacher. This change of learning sites worked very well, and I wanted to involve more schools in these experiences.

When I approached another school liaison to visit his school, he was very welcoming but wanted to know why we would want to change locations. He asked “Why would it make a difference if you were conducting your class in a room at the university or at my school?” This question challenged me to consider my purposes in teaching this class and to consider how to best use a school site for teaching about teaching (see Fig 1). This reflection was the impetus for the evolution of this course development to a formalized research project that has engaged Tim and me for the past four years, focused on the following questions: 1) How does an integrated field/campus-based course develop?, and 2) How does an integrated field/campus-based course affect student teachers’ learning?



Figure 1: University class shifting from campus to school site.

Integrated field-based teacher education: Scholarly voices

Both student teachers and practicing teachers often view with scepticism university courses that attempt to prepare “students” to become effective “teachers”. As teacher educators we are aware of the gulf that can exist between the two types of experience and the institutions vying for prominent position in offering knowledge to these fledgling teachers. Our challenge as teacher educators, course instructors, and researchers has been to examine our own assumptions about the value of the knowledge we offer and the ways in which we offer this knowledge to student teachers. Through this research project and in ongoing teaching and research experiences, we have sought opportunities to re-view our practices, assumptions, and values as teacher educators in an attempt to broaden the pool of resources and understandings from which student teachers might draw, valuing what Carr (1989) has called the personal, professional, and contextual knowledge of teaching.

Integrated teacher education course: Key components

The following are key components within this teacher education course: 1) reflective journals; 2) integrated campus-based classes with field experience; 3) electronic e-mail listserv; 4) colleague and school teacher involvement in course planning, re-planning, teaching and evaluation; 5) use of digital video and digital images to capture situations and experiences for future reflection and conversation. A key characteristic of the integrated course was the credit/non-credit assignments. These assignments, set at a high professional standard, had to be completed at a satisfactory level for the student teacher to progress. It is our experience that such assignments, based on inquiry, and tailored to the needs of the student teachers, create an incredibly rich learning environment (Sanford & Hopper, 2002).

1. The course enabled student teachers feel like teachers by teaching content they knew well. And, observations in the school helped them see, without stress, classroom environments as prospective teachers (see Fig 2).



Figure 2: Student teachers teaching what they know and seeing classrooms in schools

2. As the course was shifted to school sites knowledge-of-teaching developed related to experiences with children (see Fig 3).



Student teacher helping a student

Student teacher playing with children at recess

Figure 3: University classes taught on campus and in a school, with course material informed by experiences with children in a teacher role.

3. In the final year of the project, supported by analysis of data from the previous years of the project, the university instructor was able to share control of teacher education, allowing the voices of experienced teachers to lead the class (see Fig 4).



Principal leading a guided tour of the school

Principal telling his story

Figure 4: School principal welcoming and mentoring the student teachers into the profession

The words of student teachers show the value of the integrated course.

Student teachers' narrative of self-as-teacher

The integration of the school with the university course created a recursive process whereby the school context caused a "cognizant effect" that stimulated the student teachers into a sense of dissonance with previous assumptions. This confused state was then mediated by the course instructor and teachers situated within the school culture; through reflective tasks (including journal and listserv) student teachers recognized how they were becoming teachers and looked for more experiences within the school to support their learning. This process cycled throughout the course with visits to classrooms followed by a course meeting, then reflection by the student teachers. A key focus of the course was to enable the student teachers to create a foundational sense of "teacher".

The following extracts from student teachers' journals in the second year of the study informed us of the developing narratives of self-as-teacher. As one student teacher said, "*You further your own understanding of yourself and what you are going to end up like,*" which they came to recognize and articulate in their reflective writings and discussions. They were able to make connections in their learning, and as one student teacher commented, "*I see a lot more how the pieces (classroom management, and evaluation, etc.) play together and that the whole course brought that in with all the types of assignments that we are doing with everything we did ... it just jump-started my brain into thinking. It was really exciting.*" Another student teacher said about the course, "*This is linking ideas and you remember it.*" A third student teacher reported, "*I have never before had a class where I felt that I would keep what I had learned ... even when I was just lying in bed and thinking, I was learning more even though the class was over.*" However, some student teachers did not share this understanding as the following extracts highlight. One student teacher's comment, "*I didn't really understand why we were at the school that much,*" suggested that connections and possibilities were not as readily recognized by her, and the comment "*I put in a lot of work and I like to be rewarded with a grade*" suggests that this student teacher still holds a stronger connection to "student" thinking than "teacher" thinking. These disconfirming threads encouraged further developments to try to include all prospective teachers into the sense of knowledge-of-teaching being generated by many in the course.

In the third year of the project the student teachers spent twelve days out of fourteen in classrooms. In these visits, student teachers observed, worked with, and talked to teachers. Four teachers came to speak to student teachers about their personal teaching journeys and their understanding of teaching curriculum. The teachers modeled how reflective they were of their practices and how they understood their practice in light of their biographies of being taught. The common pattern from these experiences, witnessed during teacher presentations, was the passion for teaching. As one student teacher voiced for the group, "*During my experience at the school I was inspired by the amount of passion that the teachers had for the children.*" Or as another student teacher wrote to the teachers at the school, "*I cannot believe how close you let us come into the arena of your lives. Thanks for sharing so candidly with us. You have set the bar high.*" The positive response from the student teachers energized the teachers and administrators in the school. They commented on how preparing, and then talking to student teachers about teaching, caused them to clarify their own intents, reflects on how they had learned and inspired them to achieve

even more. As one principal said, *"It is a thrill talking to student teachers because they bring such a new perspective to the school. They admire teachers who just teach as normal...they ask such good questions."*

Over the three years of conducting the course within the schools, a sense of trust and open dialogue had developed between the course instructor, researcher and school staff. This relationship resisted a judgmental attitude often formed by outsiders entering a new culture. Within reflective journals, course listserv and class discussions student teachers were encouraged to examine themselves for reasons why they found fault in what they observed and to notice detail. Student teachers learned to ask questions that allowed teachers to explain what was happening. These questions released them from their naïve and unrealistic sense of what teaching was about. For example, one principal gave a talk on assessment with the focus on grading what students know about curriculum, not assessing inappropriate behaviours as part of the grade. This enabled student teachers to question previously unchallenged notions of assessment; as one student teacher said, *"It opened my eyes to assessment issues that were so ingrained in my mind that I never would have challenged them if he had not nudged me in the right direction."*

Teacher's narrative of self-as-teacher

The following example from the study highlights how situated knowledge became valued within student teachers' growing understanding of teaching. Fig 5 shows one of the participating teachers offering a story to the student teachers about his past and how that had influenced his flexible style of teaching. As a researcher I recorded the following: *As a failing student he admired a grade five teacher who was his inspiration to be a teacher; a teacher who was able to change plans effortlessly to reflect the mood of the students. I had experienced first-hand the difficulty of teaching his particular class of grade five students, and was able to support his claim that flexibility was important. The student teachers heard the teacher describe a particular activity that was happening in his class, and share his joy for the amazing expressive work that was being completed. The project involved the grade five students learning about poetic imagery, expression, flow, and narrative through song lyrics, which they interpreted through visuals, words, and spoken language. They then used the internet to research the "facts" of the story/ballad presented in the lyrics. Following that, the students listened to the song and used paint, with their fingers, to express visually the emotionality of the song.*



Teacher presenting to student teachers



Creativity mess made by grade 5 students

Figure 5: Teacher presenting his story of becoming a teacher and his take on curricular and the mess in his classroom.

The project worked wonderfully in the morning, but when the student teachers visited to observe in the afternoon, the students refused to continue. They had had enough of the activity and wanted to pack it up. Disappointed and chagrined, the teacher decided to discontinue the activity and assumed that the student teachers would interpret the interaction as a failure on his part. However, talking to me about the event the student teachers described with pleasure how they were able to see his strong, flexible classroom management skills, dealing effectively with the situation. The teacher, in a later conversation with me, expressed his disappointment, but as I shared the student teachers excitement his perception changed. He was able to come to see his actions as the best solution to the students' needs; he had unconsciously demonstrated how his inspirational grade five teacher lived on in his own practice.



Children's finger paint artwork



Art display of emotionality of the song

Figure 6: Students work drying and completed masterpieces with research completed later on in the week.

The articulation of teachers' professional knowledge, rooted in their autobiographical experience of being taught, clarified aspects of teaching for the student teachers, but powerfully enabled the teachers to develop a clearer sense of their own professional knowledge. Teachers were able to recognize the sources of their previously unarticulated teaching practices, i.e., previous experience, personal beliefs and values, societal assumptions, intuition. As they articulated their own professional knowledge, they were able to respond to questions that enabled further questions to be asked regarding teaching practices.

Concluding reflections

This use of multiple voices from teachers in the position of teacher educator caused a form of professional development. As a school principal commented, "it caused 'teacherly conversations' not normally shared amongst teachers." These conversations were brought to the surface by the eagerness and interest of student teachers. The student teachers created a space for teachers to articulate and share their knowledge, a form of knowledge so powerful that it educated those who want to hear it as it structures the thoughts of those who spoke it.

It was noted that the student teachers' journals and listserv entries were far less negative in judgments made of teachers. Student teachers learned to see situations as teachers within a culture, rather than outsiders. Discipline problems were still a concern

but not a problem, they were a part of helping students grow, not indicators of success and failure of a teacher.

The course represents a radical move from more traditional, content based learning that student teachers expressed as their general experience in university education. With a rigorous pass/fail standard in the course, many of the student teachers reported feeling that they worked more, learned more and felt more confident of their learning than other classes in the university. Some student teachers even said that until this course they had never realized what “real” learning was about, “this was learning for life.” The collaborative aspects of the research builds a process of accountability in which ideas and theories are continually under review by all participants, where multiple voices share a passion for a more educative environment.

References

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