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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a self-study research collaborative involving college faculty members. It began when members of a dissertation writing group decided to continue working together, focusing on self-study as a way of teaching and learning. In 1999, the group experimented with using teaching portfolios in their graduate education classes to engage students in self-study. While this process was fraught with tension and anxiety, students constructed creative teaching portfolios over one semester that allowed them to examine dissonances in their teaching practice. The project involved using teaching portfolios to scaffold self-study, then re-analyzing the issue of self-study and its impact on teacher development over time. The participants learned that small shifts of awareness, made visible through the self-study process, changed their sense of self as teachers, and those shifts had significant but subtle impacts on how they taught. Participants had shifting awareness of: what it means to own creativity, their own anxiety, process-centered learning, owning one's self in the classroom, and how collaboration empowers personal voice. The participants conclude that self-study is a methodology for invigorating and improving teaching practice; an emergent process that supports creative exploration and expression. (SM)

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Self-Study as a Way of Teaching and Learning: Tuning into Creativity

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Jerry Allender, Temple University, PA

Introduction

I am passionate about bringing creative exploration and expression back into the classroom. As a child, I experienced my creativity as something separate from school. I began learning the piano at five and engaged in numerous creative extracurricular activities that served as important outlets for my emotional expression and development. My experiences are consistent with the research literature that indicates creativity goes underground when we go to school. Torrance (1968) identified a "fourth grade creativity slump" in student's that never rebounds in school and I predict that 33 years later this slump occurs earlier as the curriculum demands press into first and second grade.

Self-study led me back to my creative outlets, in particular playing the piano after an 8-year hiatus. Furthermore, self-study allows me to express my creativity, experiment with new ideas, and improve my skills as a teacher-researcher. There is no single prescribed manner for engaging in self-study rather a unique process unfolds for each individual that allows for creative exploration. In this process, I am learning how to face my shortcomings and in doing so to become a more effective, empathetic and creative educator. This paper describes my experiences as part of a self-study research collaborative.

Background

Lis and I began our collaboration as members of a dissertation-writing group, with Jerry Allender as our chairperson, in 1997. Lis was one of the teachers I interviewed in my narrative dissertation study. After completing our dissertations, we have continued to work together with Jerry although the focus of our work has shifted to self-study as a way of teaching and learning. In 1999, we experimented with using teaching portfolios in our graduate education classes to engage our students in self-study. While this process was fraught with tension and anxiety, students constructed creative teaching portfolios over a single semester that allowed them to examine dissonances in their teaching practice. We presented these experiences and data in a paper at the Castle Conference, Herstmonceux, England (Anderson-Patton, & Bass 2000). As a research collaborative, we are currently conducting a re-analysis of this experiment and more broadly, reviewing all our self-study work.

First Level of Work: Using Teaching Portfolios to Scaffold Self-study

Lis and I both experienced transformation in our teaching practice through self-study (Bass, Anderson-Patton, Rayer, & Baney, 1999) so we decided to share this methodology with our graduate students who are also teachers. Traditionally individuals personally select self-study and it is not usually bound by the time constraints of a 15-week semester (Hamilton, 1998; Loughran & Northfield, 1998). To make this process more manageable we used teaching portfolios (Lyons, 1998) as a tool to structure and engage students in self-study. We gave students an overall guiding question for their portfolio and asked them to develop a sub-question to personalize and focus their

portfolio (Grant &Huebner, 1998). The overall guiding question I gave my students was "how do I teach for creativity?" My goal was for students to think reflexively about where creativity fits into their teaching practice and lives.

The teaching portfolio structure requires students to gather artifacts and reflect on them in small collaborative groups. To facilitate this process I provided numerous writing and experiential activities that required students to reflect on their teaching and creativity – for example, writing a personal narrative, articulating their teaching values, responding to weekly journal starters, drawing and visualization activities, interviewing a teacher they identified as creative, and other individual and group activities. Throughout the semester students brought in teaching artifacts such as their students' work, lesson plans, examples of personal creative expression etc., for discussion. At the end of the semester, students presented their teaching portfolios through a variety of media.

Throughout this semester (Fall1999) Lis, Jerry and I met regularly as critical friends to explore how we modeled and structured our classrooms for self-study. We examined student artifacts, kept journals, and discussed the process. Ultimately Lis and I developed self-study teaching portfolios that we presented at the Castle Conference, July 2000. This work included: (1) a dialogue that represented the process students went through while creating their teaching portfolios (based on our teaching journals, student comments, and pieces of students writing); (2) student artifacts – selections from their teaching portfolios and meta–narratives (our version of their stories); (3) visual images we made as alternative representations of our self-studies; and (4) the paper entitled, "How Well Did We Structure and Model a Self-Study Stance? Two Self-Studies of

Imposing Self-Studies using Teaching Portfolios (in *Exploring Myths and Legends of Teacher Education*, Loughran and Russell, Eds. 10-15, 2000).

We concluded that imposing self-study in our classrooms provided another lens for us to examine our own teaching practice. Furthermore, developing teaching portfolios was a manageable scaffold for helping students to reflect on their teaching practice during the course of one semester. Self-study with its emphasis on process, support, and personal learning provides a counterbalance to the typical curriculum driven busyness.

Bringing the self-study process into the classroom means modeling it and sharing our learning. We discovered that we needed to provide space and time, support the development of personal voice and group collaboration, give up traditional control and authority, and openly share our vulnerabilities balanced with our confidence in the process (confidence based on three years of self-study experience). Additionally, we believe that self-study benefits from creative representations, as demonstrated in our students' teaching portfolios. The creativity supports personally meaningful learning and allows the complexity of teaching and self to emerge.

Second Level of Work: A Research Collaborative Re-analysis of our Self-studies

After formally presenting our self-studies, (Lis and I at the Castle Conference, July 2000 and Jerry in his new book *Teacher Self: The Practice of Humanistic Education*, 2001), we have met regularly to discuss the impact on our teaching practice and more generally self-study as a field of authentic research. I have used self-study teaching portfolios four times since the original study, and Jerry spent a semester observing Lis'

teaching. This added data was grist for our discussion of how self-study impacts teaching development over time.

Our Current Thesis

We learned that small shifts of awareness, made visible through the self-study process, changed our sense of ourselves as teachers. These shifts had significant though subtle impacts on how we taught. Throughout this process, we noted how working with critical friends was essential to mediate solipsism and to facilitate this change.

Reflective Shifts

The following reflections note shifts of awareness that were significant for me as a teacher-researcher. These shifts resonated as meaningful learning as they led to subtle changes in my teaching and constitute the current results of my self-study.

My Shifting Awareness of What it Means to Own Creativity

When I wrote my dissertation about creative teachers, one of the primary things I discovered was how important it is to nurture one's personal creative outlet. The teachers I interviewed all had organized ways of expressing their creativity that they practiced throughout their lives. Self-study alerted me to the fact I had stopped playing the piano when I came to the States. So I began to take lessons again and had to struggle with my confidence. I realized that I have incredibly high standards because I was classically trained and hear every uneven passage. I also feel exposed when I play because for me music is about emotion; I feel people can hear straight to my heart and that is a little unnerving. Plus I never get enough time to practice so I never feel truly competent, the

expert I "should" be. I get frustrated when I cannot play things as I used to. Yet, as I master each new passage I feel joy, a sense of accomplishment, and inner peace. I think playing improves my life in many ways.

Self-study has made me walk my talk. I cannot ask students to attend to their creative voices and to foster creativity in their teaching if I am ignoring my internal creative voice. Owning my creativity makes me more authentic with my students. I have also discovered that for me meaningful learning requires integration and transformation of both our personal and professional selves. I want to know my students as "whole" beings and I am most interested in facilitating real life learning that goes beyond the walls of our classroom. Utilizing teaching portfolios was an excellent tool for me to invite students to explore and connect their personal creativity with their teaching. Self-study allows me to integrate my personal and professional selves and examine how they influence each other – I'm doing what I require of my students.

My Shifting Awareness of Anxiety:

Acknowledging it, Mining it, and Accepting What I Cannot Change

Through self-study, I have learned to pay attention differently to anxiety in my teaching. I have moved from either minimizing or trying to take care of students' anxiety, to acknowledging and examining it directly. Anxiety is an important clue that underlying issues and insecurities are being tapped and that I am feeling vulnerable. Now I try to tell my students and myself, that being aware of anxiety signals an opportunity to take a risk, to use the energy, and to try something new.

The first semester I implemented teaching portfolios I was filled with anxiety because the process was new. Undoubtedly the students' and I fuelled each other's

anxiety although I resisted the temptation to tell them exactly what to do, as they demanded. Instead, I acknowledged the anxiety and reassured students that developing their self-study teaching portfolios was an emergent process. Four semesters later, I am more confident implementing the self-study teaching portfolios and this counterbalances some of the anxiety inherent in the process. Self-study forces me to monitor my anxiety and student's anxiety and to consider how they interplay.

Early in this semester, my imposter anxiety was ignited by a student's innocent inquiry "were you an elementary school teacher?" My internal voice clicks on – oh no I have been found out now I will lose all credibility! The truth is I have done many different things with children but no, I have never taught an elementary class every day for a year. But then again, I have never considered myself an expert. I am teaching about ways to stimulate creative thinking and expression in the classroom, but the reality is I do not really know the curriculums the students are teaching, but they do. I offer different perspectives and help teachers to problem solve, to understand their own teaching, and to consider where creativity fits into their own curriculums. Through my self-study I see how my anxieties shift as my experiences change and ideas transform.

My Shifting Awareness of Process-Centered Learning

Self-study requires me to trust the emergent learning process. Four semesters later, it is much easier to trust the process because I have successfully implemented teaching portfolios. Both the creative process and the self-study process are emergent. In our research collaborative, we do some work, discuss it in our weekly meetings, reflect more and then write, discuss and reflect further; all the while our teaching is being affected. My teaching then is also an emergent changing process. As much as I plan,

prepare and know my content, I cannot control the learning process that will unfold for my students. I can make predictions based on previous experience about what I think will happen in class and where the content will take us in a 3 hour period, but as I strive to be authentic and responsive to students' needs I have to be open to what emerges. Through the constant self-monitoring and reflection of self-study I have learned that the more I give up the illusion of control, the smoother and more effective I can be. The students and I enjoy class more when I step back and guide rather than control and direct. Additionally, this facilitator position is more consonant with the notion of fostering creative expression and exploration in the classroom.

Self-study keeps me honest and growing as I reflect on what I do and try to understand how I influence my students. While I gain confidence in my teaching over time, I will be continually energized as I acknowledge and approach it as an emergent process.

My Shifting Awareness of Owning My Self in the Classroom

In the beginning of this semester, I had an older white male student who quickly let his skepticism of creativity be known. He declared that "creativity is subjective" and not relevant in his inner city classroom of poor minority students. In an instant, I felt and owned my defensive response. Instead of ignoring this student's responses or becoming directive and imposing the research and my ideals upon him, I acknowledged his position and tried to empathize with his teaching struggles. I invited him to talk about his experiences more and tried to find a way to join pieces of the content with his experiences.

The more I know myself through self-study, the more available and open I can be with students. The biggest shift in awareness and change in practice has been in my response to "challenging" students. The process of reflecting with Lis and Jerry each week has helped me to develop a capacity to listen carefully and to embrace differences more comfortably. It's not easy to recognize and own my biases, isms, and entitlements; however, in struggling with these issues I become a more authentic educator and my classrooms a rich microcosm for real-life learning.

My Shifting Awareness of Ways Collaboration Empowers Personal Voice

Like therapy (with a good therapist), self-study (with good critical friends–who are authentic, have strong egos, and different lens than mine) forces me to peel away the layers of my self and figure out how they color my teaching. I am uncomfortable focusing on self – my personal history and culture have taught me that this is indulgent. The research group, however, is a legitimate place to explore my self in the context of teaching. I feel pulled in many directions (mother, wife, teacher, friend, daughter etc.) but our work is a space for me, and my growth ripples out and affects others. In fact, I think my self is reappearing through self-study. Because self-study is a process that occurs over time and with others, it supports this unfolding and examining.

As I am exploring self, I am encouraging my students to do the same through their teaching portfolios and small group collaboratives. I am providing more time for students to discuss how the content fits with their personal and professional experiences. I require more personal writing through the personal narrative, struggles, and creative process papers. I think I have shifted my focus in class from the group as figural and the self as ground, to the self as figural and the group as ground (although there remains

fluidity in the relationship and balance). I am finding a stronger and more confident personal voice through our collaboration as a teacher, researcher, and human being.

Conclusions: Self-Study as a Way of Teaching and Learning

Self-study is part of a wave, a sea change in the world of research, which no longer rises with positivist assumptions, no longer accepts that truth is the result of careful statistical analysis of precise experimental conditions. We no longer trust the numbers associated with learning or best teaching practices instead we ask what is the nature of the learning that the numbers say has been accomplished. And, when force-fed "best practices," we ask: In whose hands? In what context? In whose interest are those glowing numbers really?

This re-analysis has deepened our conception of self-study. Our research collaborative concludes that self-study is a methodology for invigorating and improving teaching practice. Self-study is an emergent process that supports creative exploration and expression. Collaboration with critical friends is necessary for integrating change in self, which leads to change in practice. Such collaboration is rare in the academy's competitive environment; however, we experienced it as emotionally supportive and intellectually challenging. Critical friends provide multiple perspectives which move reflective thinking to reflexive thinking. Self-study teacher-researchers offer a version of professional growth that challenges traditional definitions of teaching and learning about teaching.

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