Uneasy is the Teacher Educator

Examining Taken-for-Granted Pedagogical Expertise

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I have always considered myself a good teacher. While continuing to ask questions of my practice and support the development of my instruction (Boche & Shoffner, 2016; Shoffner, 2019; 2018; 2016; 2014; 2012), I felt pedagogically adept in the classroom, confident that I possessed the knowledge and skills necessary to teach preservice teachers at the college level. In the last year, however, my pedagogical confidence has begun to fray at the edges. Changes in my professional life, as well as certain classroom interactions and recent student evaluations, combined to unravel my assessment of my pedagogical abilities and educative goals.

These experiences contributed to my discomfort with a seeming disconnect between my pedagogical intentions and actions. As Russell (2002) explains,

> most teacher educators are aware that their students can read every teaching move we make for an implicit message about how to teach. Those of us who are acutely aware of the potential for contradiction between the context and the process of our teaching and who wish to minimize such contradictions seem to be drawn to the self-study of teacher education practices. (p. 3)

In considering what it meant to question my taken-for-granted expertise as a teacher educator, I decided to create a self-study. I wondered: What did it mean for experienced teacher educators – like myself – to pick apart their pedagogical seams and piece together new understandings of their practice?

Framing Pedagogical Expertise

The work of ELA teacher educators is grounded in the teaching and learning of English language arts (ELA). As teachers who also educate teachers, our pedagogy consists of research-informed practices that incorporate understandings of justice, equity and diversity while supporting critical thinking and developing reflective consideration (Shoffner et al., 2017). Understanding the field of ELA education as responsive to context, inclusive of diversity and constantly changing, teacher educators must approach their pedagogy likewise: capable of change in order to meet the needs of students while addressing current issues and concerns.

The demands of such pedagogical expertise mean teacher educators must consider not only the content they teach but the way in which they teach (Loughran, 2006), bringing together knowledge and action to create an instructional praxis. They must "be able to theorize the practice in such a way as to know and be able to articulate the what, how, and why of teaching and to do so through the very experiences of teaching *and* [sic] learning about teaching" (Loughran, 2006, p. 14). In creating their pedagogical expertise, then, teacher educators' knowledge, skills, and dispositions rest in and respond to a range of contexts, both personal and professional.

Not surprisingly, this is difficult work: "Clearly, then, teacher educators carry a heavy responsibility in what they do, how they do it and the manner in which they come to know and develop their own professional knowledge and practice" (Loughran, 2006. p. 14). Often,

this is also uncomfortable work. As Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) explain, managing the emotions engendered by the questioning and revision of pedagogy is a form of emotional labor. Moreover, the "emotions we experience, and the unconscious appraisal process of evaluating these emotions, cannot be 'separated from the relational, social, cultural, and political contexts in which they occur' (Forgasz, et al., 2014, p. 82)'" (as cited in Stolle et al., 2018, p. 100).

While creating pedagogical expertise is difficult, emotional work, disturbing taken-for-granted pedagogical expertise is equally uncomfortable. It is a productive discomfort, however, since teacher educators "need to look beyond the ability to perform particular skills and procedures…to critique and analyze the nature of practice" (Loughran, 2006, p. 29).

Context of the Study

Three years ago, I chose to move from a research-intensive doctoral-granting university to a master's level university that emphasized undergraduate education. Within that time, I have taught several new-to-me courses, most notably the middle grades (6-8) English Language Arts (ELA) methods course. While I have the necessary knowledge and skills to teach this course, I was surprised to find it held less interest to me than expected, influenced perhaps by my previous positionality as a high school (grades 9-12) ELA teacher and my experiences teaching different methods courses at my former university.

Having always considered myself a "difficult" professor (Shoffner, 2014, 2012), now I felt my teaching did not truly challenge students. My pedagogical practice was still grounded in individual development and collaborative learning, but I was troubled, feeling that my instruction did not critically engage students with the complexity of teaching and learning. Informal and formal student feedback on the course was generally positive, indicating that the students did not share my concerns. However, specific comments on end-of-course

evaluations indicated an increasing disinterest in and/or frustration with certain readings and specific assignments, feeding my concerns about my pedagogical effectiveness.

In an effort to "shake up" my pedagogical thinking, I applied to participate in a Summer 2019 university-sponsored week-long institute focused on instructional (re)design. Run more like a workshop, the institute addressed a range of pedagogical concepts (such as backward design, learner-centered teaching, and aligned assessment) while providing time for participants to apply these concepts to the (re)design of a chosen syllabus. Additionally, participants were organized into small groups of five to six faculty that served as learning communities for the whole week. While each day included brief pedagogical presentations and facilitated discussions on different pedagogical concerns, the majority of time was given over to syllabus work, either independently or collaboratively within our small groups.

My goal in joining the institute was twofold: (1) to redesign the syllabus for the middle grades ELA methods course and (2) to engage in focused, directed consideration of my pedagogy. Given my background in education, I did not participate with the expectation of learning new material – and, indeed, the information covered was well-known to me as a teacher educator. However, over the course of the week, I did gain different perspectives on familiar pedagogical principles while interacting with others in a friendly, collaborative, learning space.

In Fall 2019, I started the semester with a redesigned middle grades ELA methods course syllabus. While some material remained the same – namely, information required by the university and certain course readings – the majority of readings and most of the assignments were now different. In consciously altering these two elements, I hoped I would counter the concerns voiced by previous students and address my own pedagogical frustration.

Situating the Self-Study

To consider how these efforts to revitalize my practice might influence my instructional thinking and classroom practice, I determined to engage in self-study to examine my pedagogical placement. Self-study supports the questioning of one's practice through the "critical examination of one's actions and the context of those actions in order to achieve a more conscious mode of professional activity, in contrast to action based on habit, tradition, and impulse" (Samaras & Freese, 2009, p. 1). Such questioning also requires engagement in reflective practice: "unless teachers engage in critical reflection and ongoing discovery they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations" (Larrivee, 2000, p. 294).

This self-study asks what experienced teacher educators learn by examining their pedagogical expertise. To explore this question, I collected data consisting of the syllabi, lesson plans, and final course evaluations from an ELA middle school methods courses taught in Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 as well as a teaching philosophy prepared in Fall 2018.

Although focused on the individual, self-study requires the "involvement of others so that the learning outcomes are much more than personal constructions of meaning" (Loughran, 2005, 6). By engaging with a critical friend, self-study allows the researcher to work with "a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend" (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 50) in order to support and extend understanding of the issue under study.

I am a member of two face-to-face Critical Friends groups offering the necessary and constructive support (Schuck & Russell, 2005) to engage in self-study. The groups' engagement with and perspective on issues of teaching and learning support the reflective consideration

needed to examine personal constructions of pedagogical understanding.

The first Critical Friends group – the Teaching & Learning Cohort (TLC) – consists of five professors who come together to examine issues of personal pedagogy. We represent the subjects of Communications, Computer Science, Mechanical Engineering, Peace Studies and Education; like our subject matter, our backgrounds, strengths, and interests are diverse in nature. This group developed after collaborating during the week-long syllabus (re)design institute in Summer 2019. Beginning in Fall 2019 and continuing in Spring 2020, the TLC meets monthly to reflect on course revisions, classroom practices and learning outcomes.

The second Critical Friends group – the Self-Study Study Group (SSSG) – consists of five education professors representing the subjects of differentiation, ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies. This group formed in Fall 2019 in response to a mutual interest in conducting self-study research. Beginning by reading and discussing chapters from Loughran and Russell's (2002) book, the SSSG continues to meet monthly for critical conversations about individually developed self-study projects.

Methods of the Study

In Fall 2019, I worked with a research assistant to analyze the data using qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002), looking for agreements and disagreements in the syllabi, lesson plans, teaching philosophy and course evaluations. Our initial coding identified eleven different categories: application of concepts, assessment, collaboration, discussion, instructional strategies, multimodality, personal perspective, reading, reflection, social justice, and writing.

For example, questions about teaching "tough texts" (O'Donnell-Allen, 2011), readings about gender, my belief in holding high expectations

of students, and students' frustration after viewing the film *The Hate U Give* were all coded as social justice. As a second example, collaboration was the designated code for a paired topic teaching assignment, group evaluation of different instructional technologies, my pedagogical grounding in constructivism (e.g., Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky) and students' appreciation of in-class interactions.

We then collapsed these codes into significant themes, with three emerging from our analysis: academic and personal challenge, active engagement in learning, and ELA curriculum. For example, data coded as social justice, reflection, and personal perspective created the theme of academic and personal challenge, while data coded as application of concepts, collaboration and discussion created the theme of active engagement in learning.

Throughout this analysis, I explored understandings of my course revisions and my instruction with my Critical Friends groups. While our discussions were sometimes general in nature – such as sharing different approaches to collaboration in the classroom – they also offered the opportunity to delve more deeply into specific issues – such as evaluating our efforts to incorporate different forms of assessment into our teaching. With each CF group, I was able to discuss my study, ask questions about my understandings, and gain different perspectives on the subjects under discussion.

Pedagogical Beliefs in Practice

Rather than assuming my teaching adhered to my educational beliefs, I used self-study to explore those beliefs in practice. Specifically, I explored two iterations of the ELA methods course (Fall 2018 and Fall 2019) to examine the mis/match between belief and action. For the purposes of this paper, I examine two of the identified themes – active engagement in learning and academic challenge – before considering their meaning for an experienced teacher educator.

Active Engagement in Learning

In my teaching philosophy, I address students' active engagement in learning through my pedagogical grounding in constructivism: Through facilitated learning, students are active in their own educational development, making them invested participants in the learning process. My syllabi and lesson plans from both semesters indicated students' active engagement in learning through the use of different instructional practices, such as open-ended prompts, collaborative assignments, group discussions and in-class activities. The the Fall 2019 methods course, however, I made an effort to provide more variety in sustained engagement, with students expected to take a more active role in their learning, in and out of class. Three examples illustrate this approach.

Assigned Papers. In the previous iteration of the course, students completed "pedagogical papers," brief papers examining the personal understandings and beliefs that support and guide classroom instruction and interactions with students. Each paper was completed on an assigned topic (e.g., assessment, thematic connection, curriculum review) with guiding questions provided to support students' inquiry. In the fall of 2019, students instead completed "public pedagogy papers," in which they were asked to choose two campus/community events that offered opportunities to learn from common social and cultural experiences. Some suggestions were offered (e.g., a public lecture, a university athletic event, an arts performance) but students were also able to suggest additional ones.

Summative Assessment. While each iteration of the course included a summative assessment focused on instructional planning, the Fall 2019 course altered the format of that assessment. Both assignments required students to develop instruction for middle grades students, focusing on a specific young adult text. In Fall 2018, students completed a traditional end-of-semester assessment, submitting a curriculum rationale, lesson plans, supplementary texts, and teacher

reflection as one complete project. In Fall 2019, students completed different summative assessments related to instructional planning throughout the semester: a book talk for their specific young adult text, a justification for using their text in three different grade levels, and a lesson plan demonstrating the integration of reading and writing. At the end of the semester, students submitted a reflection on their development as a teacher.

Workshop Approach. In both semesters, students had multiple opportunities to interact with each other and the material (e.g., think-pair-share, group completion of a task, full-class discussion) during class. In Fall 2019, students had more sustained involvement with their peers and the curriculum through "workshop" at the end of class. While class discussion and peer interaction continued each week, each class now finished with 25-40 minutes of workshop, providing students with sustained time to collaborate with others or work individually on specific assignments. In one workshop, students collaborated in small groups to create a scoring guide for a provided activity; in another, students individually drafted a writing assignment for their young adult novel that addressed specific criteria.

Academic Challenge

In my teaching philosophy, I connect my belief in academic challenge to my understanding of students as intelligent young people, capable of meeting high expectations while asking their own questions and exploring the answers. My syllabi and lesson plans reflect my intention to challenge students to think critically and reflectively through stated objectives, selected readings, focused discussions, and open-ended assignments. Still, I felt that the Fall 2018 course was not as intellectually challenging as my planning and instruction would indicate. So, for the Fall 2019 course, I reconsidered how I could better align my goal of intellectually challenging students with course assignments and expectations. Two examples illustrate this effort.

Addressing Equity and Diversity. While social justice concepts were addressed in earlier iterations of the course, the Fall 2019 course grounded issues of equity and diversity in the teaching of ELA clearly throughout the semester. On the first day of class, students were given time to read a brief chapter on enacting social justice in the ELA classroom (Boyd, 2017).

Students selected a young adult novel for semester-long study from a list of texts that focused on issues of equity and diversity (e.g., Alan Gratz's *Refugee*, Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*, George Takei's *They Called Us Enemy*). They created a visual rendition of their novel's theme and then considered how incorporating multimodality into instruction supported differentiated learning.

Issues of difference, equity and justice were addressed in each class, developed in response to specific readings (e.g., Christensen's (2011) "Finding voice: Learning about language and power"), students' questions (e.g., their concerns after reading Collins' "What is the 'alt-right'?") and students' experiences (e.g., teaching a lesson to middle grades students).

Requiring Reading Responses. In the Fall 2019 course, students completed brief written responses to readings prior to each class meeting. For each reading, they were asked to explain first what they learned and then what they questioned. While the previous iteration of the course frequently required students to reflect on or develop questions, this was the first time students were expected to respond to assigned readings before coming to class. Responses were evaluated only for completion, however; as the assignment stated, "There are no right or wrong responses, so write what you are thinking rather than what you believe you should think." Students' responses were then used to guide instruction. Whole-class discussion questions came directly from students' questions in their responses. Students worked in pairs to apply concepts in lessons planning since their responses demonstrated understanding. Short mini-lectures

clarified concerns or misunderstandings expressed in responses.

Learning from Pedagogical Examination

As noted previously, the questioning of my pedagogy was driven more by an internal disquiet than external feedback, although student evaluations of the Fall 2018 course did indicate that many of the readings "were redundant" or "extremely boring" and that the class focused more on "thought process" than the application of material. While most feedback about the course was positive – addressing responses to specific texts, involvement in class discussions, and engagement in instructional planning – I agreed with the underlying indication that the course was not fully engaging students.

By the conclusion of the Fall 2019 methods course, I felt positive in my efforts to address my pedagogical concerns. Course evaluations gave me some insight into specific issues: While students noted that the reading load was heavy, they also indicated the readings were "helpful" and liked "bringing the reading into our own lives." Students saw the assignments requiring them to address and create curriculum as "beneficial" and enjoyed "engaging and effective" class activities. One student specifically referenced the benefits of completing the reading responses: "Although it was sometimes tedious, having us complete the reading responses a day before class really helped me absorb the information and come to class prepared."

Involvement in the summer curriculum design institute certainly helped to rejuvenate my pedagogical thinking. The sustained time and focus on specific instructional elements required me to reconsider my "normal" approaches to the course, while collaboration with peers (who then became Critical Friends) offered different perspectives and encouraged questioning.

However, the study of my own pedagogical expertise allowed me to identify the importance of engaging more consciously with my content

and my instruction. While I clearly expressed beliefs in active learning, student engagement, and intellectual challenge, my classroom practice had gradually moved away from incorporating those beliefs in specific ways. Knowing what I valued, pedagogically, did not automatically translate into what I did, in either course design or weekly instruction.

Just as learning, motivation, and engagement are interconnected elements in the classroom for students (Bundick, et al., 2014), they are so for teachers. Approaching the teaching of ELA through the study of meaningful issues and concerns (e.g., learning ELA to empower students, responding to issues of equity, incorporating diverse texts) rather than only the content itself (e.g., the use of rubrics, the teaching of grammar, the development of lessons) energized me while engaging students in relevant curriculum. The course still addressed needed content, but now did so through direct instruction and application in class, providing time for students to digest more complex issues through readings, assignments, and discussions.

In my teaching philosophy, I state the importance of continuing to develop an understanding of subject matter and pedagogy in order to improve as an educator. This study reminded me of the need to frequently question the match between intention and outcome. While I possessed "the pedagogical skills necessary to help students see the relevance and importance of the material to their lives, interests, and future goals" (Bundick et al, 2014, p. 23), I had gradually moved away from applying those skills. Students were busy and the course addressed necessary material but, overall, the course was not offering enough active engagement or useful challenge to make it meaningful to the students – or to me.

Conclusion

By engaging in self-study, "we have the ability to develop as teachers by identifying elements of our practice to change, improve or maintain" (Shoffner, 2014, p. 189). By examining my taken-for-granted pedagogical expertise, I not only identified ways in which I was developing as a teacher but considered the importance of doing so. My students benefitted as learners and developing teachers – which was the impetus for my initial pedagogical interrogation – but I benefitted, as well, enjoying the Fall 2019 iteration of the ELA methods course more than those taught previously. As Taylor and Newberry (2018) note, positive emotions are important in education, supporting and strengthening teachers' motivation, thinking and happiness. Moreover, "when a classroom is filled with students who are paying attention, focused, participating, mentally stimulated, and having fun, the teacher is much more likely to enjoy being there and, in turn, likely to be more invested (and less likely to burn out)" (Bundick et al., 2014, p. 5).

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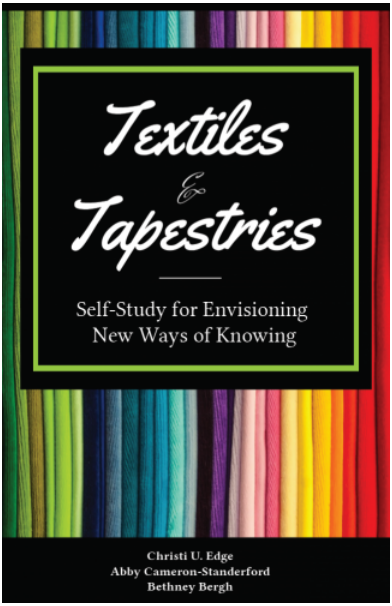

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