

Re-connecting to the Classroom Teacher Within Us

The Implications of Site-Based Teacher Preparation for Teacher Educators

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Teaching without having an audience is unrealistic to me. It was in my internship and seventeen years as an educator that I figured out how to teach. (Erin)

I learned that teaching in theory and teaching in reality are different things. There was no amount of training that would have prepared me to be aware of my emotional reactions while dealing with the students during events like presidential impeachments, 9/11, and the subsequent wars. (Scott)

I quickly developed a flexibility, driven by students' interests and desires to learn about things that were important to them in the moment. This required a deep awareness of the lives of students beyond the classroom walls, resulting from meaningful relationships that have continued to last. (Scott)

Yet, not all things can be learned in practice with students, there must be some fundamental teachings. But if methods is about doing, then where must the doing happen? (Erin)

The transition from K-12 teacher to a methodology instructor can be both challenging and transformative. This move requires the willingness to reflect on our own experiences while simultaneously acknowledging that, in educating future teachers, our own conceptions of teaching are also changing in the ever-changing contexts we find ourselves. This is what has led us to self-study. Below we explore the impact of two *site-based* methods course assemblages, and the people, places, and things that are included therein. By site-based, we mean that our social studies methods courses were taught *within* one middle and one high school, paired with one university instructor and one mentor teacher whose classroom we engaged with all year.

Unlike other secondary methods courses at our midwestern university, all of our instruction and learning occurred *at* the school building. Through the use of self-study, we, as researchers, were able to examine tensions and growth associated with the complex assemblages of students, instructors, content, and place that *uniquely* impacts our understanding of teacher education.

We draw on the Deluzian notion that a unique coming together of moments, people, and places form an assemblage. For both of us, our teaching careers resulted in understandings that led us to appreciate the power of space, context, and community in our own development. In these site-based courses, we also recognized that the most human aspects of teaching- flexibility, relationship building, respect for the community/context - develop more deeply in authentic learning environments and spaces. Just as self-study research relies on relationships "between individual and collective cognition" (Samaras, 2011, p. 5), we too investigate how our experiences as K-12 teachers and then university methods instructors were informed by and through the relationships between

ourselves, our students, our partner mentors, and even the space in which we practiced.

As we seek to accomplish the goals of teacher education, namely the development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000), Demmon-Berger (1986) suggests that can be done through a wide-ranging list of characteristics that illuminate these three categories, specifically identifying caring, use of a democratic approach, comfortable interactions with others, accessibility to students/colleagues, and flexibility/imagination as dispositions that we too would hope our students would grow into and exhibit as teachers. We suggest that these site-based methods courses, because of the caring and supportive environment this type of structure precisely enables, develop both pedagogically skilled and caring teachers in profound ways.

Objectives

During this study, we developed and took part in a community of learners that included middle/high school students, mentor teachers, and pre-service teachers (PSTs). This year-long experience placed students from a large midwestern university in local schools for both their clinical and academic methods instruction. This site-based approach involves a close working relationship between the mentors and the instructors as well as between the university and the field. The opportunity to engage in both clinical and classroom experiences in the same space allows for deep conversations that illuminate these experiences in ways that are only made possible by this collaborative approach. Through self-study, we seek to understand how this approach bridges the divide between K-12 practice and academia, seeking to answer the following: 1) How does participation in site-based methods courses allow for the development of dispositions we see as important to teaching, such as authenticity and caring? and; 2) How does the inclusion of university instructors within the clinical setting contribute to a reorienting of academic and K-12 educational spaces toward a nurturing partnership across diverse spaces?

Framework

We place this study in the theoretical context of a Deleuzian assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 22). An assemblage in this sense contains all aspects of effect and affect that impact the actants (mentors, students, instructors), including material, nonhuman forces/objects that contour the experience within a specific space. Our classrooms were both “a *machinic assemblage* of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another” as well as “a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations” (p. 88). The assemblage then develops on “semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows” (p. 23) both at the individual and collective levels. It is precisely the specific collections of people, things, and activities and the subsequent results from this intermingling that makes an assemblage in this sense so lively and vibrant. The viewing of our sites as assemblages allows us to consider the many facets of individual experiences as part of a greater collective one. Therefore, all that might contribute to a site-based methodology course - the students, the instructor, the location, the content, the tools - are part of its ultimate impact.

The assemblages investigated here are separated from a traditional academic setting by both distance and disposition. It is the process of becoming a teacher, instructor, and colleague in *that* space, with *these* people that is of interest. This type of becoming does not occur on the surface, but deep below. It resembles a great river: it is not the eddies and banks that tell us what is occurring

within it, but rather the deep current below. “The middle is by no means average;” write Deleuze and Guattari (1987), “on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed...going from one thing to the other and back again...without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle” (p. 25).

We also draw on the concept of new materialism as an additional lens through which to reveal deeper aspects of the assemblage. New materialism is by nature an interdisciplinary lens (Barad, 2007) that, much like the site-based methods course itself, seeks to dismantle the boundaries and artificial borders that separate important aspects of our learning assemblages.

With new materialism, we are able to bring into discourse, human and nonhuman actants, especially investigating the impact of space in educational experiences. In particular, our study acutely pays attention to how the space wherein we practice changes our teaching and research dispositions. Wherever teaching and learning takes place, the process is no doubt entangled with the *stuff* of the world (Bennett, 2010). In this case, the chairs, the chalk, the bells, the smells - all make *this* space unique in the process of becoming a teacher. Helmsing (2016) writes that curriculum can be “revivified...[by] perceiving the world rather than merely viewing it and memorizing it in a passive state of spectatorship” (p. 137). Being attuned to and aware of the material vibrancy encapsulated in any school, a site-based methods course moves beyond spectatorship, beyond observation, to a deeper experience. Strom et al, (2018) have included materiality in their posthuman self-study work as well, stating that these aspects of our experience “helps us bring our...environments back into our analysis,” contributing to the production of “new selves” and “new ways of doing things” (p. 4). We suggest site-based methods instruction, therefore, is ripe for this type of investigation.

Methods

This study includes two sections of a site-based methods course at a midwestern university during the 2019-2020 school year. This study includes data through part of the second semester. Each section included a university instructor, a mentor who was a full-time social studies teacher at the school site, and 35 PSTs evenly split between the two sections. While at the site, the teacher educators taught methods seminars and oversaw micro-teaching by PSTs. As is consistent with self-study research, this study is an interactive process interested in how our practice has wider implications for both of us as teacher educators and teacher preparation more broadly (Hamilton, et al., 2008). As Kitchen and Parker (2009) noted, self-study has been incorporated into research in teacher education to challenge accepted practices as is the intent of this work.

The instructors/researchers are both Ph.D. candidates at a large midwestern public university. Scott has taught high school social studies for twenty-four years and has continued to teach high school online part-time during his studies and university methods instruction. Erin taught middle and high school social studies for seventeen years and has since taught methods as well as a professional responsibilities course. We recognize that our individual experiences of teaching impact this study.

Data for the study were generated during two semesters through weekly reflections by the instructors and university students. The instructor reflections were kept in a joint document and were followed up on every few weeks with a process that resembled Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy’s (1997) interactive interviewing to deepen our understanding of our own experiences. These reflections allowed the researchers to consider the “space between self and practice” (Starr, 2010, p. 2) as we journaled separately but then drew on these reflections in our conversations. The excerpts

juxtaposed in the findings were chosen for how our experiences aligned with one another from the journaling process. Canagarajah (2012) explains that this type of research allows for the use of a trove of personal views and recollections that are as easy to access in more traditional research work. Self-study uniquely positions the researcher to engage with self-understandings, experience, and knowledge, although we were also able to draw on weekly PST reflections to verify our data. These additional perspectives enabled us to better understand the ways in which others grew *with us*. Self-study enables the reader to experience these shifts in a more engaging manner (Gwyther & Possamai-Inesedy, 2009). While Coffey (1999) argues that this type of research can be self-indulgent, in this case, the researchers are able to provide a unique set of perspectives that would otherwise be difficult to access.

Findings

As we reflect upon our ongoing experience, we cannot help but notice the ways in which the site-based methods courses impact both our students and ourselves as teachers and learners. Not without the challenges of navigating these sites, we found that a site-based methods course: 1. encouraged the development of meaningful teaching dispositions; 2. offered greater opportunities for pedagogical and methodological growth; 3. allowed for a greater sense of community.

Authentic Development

Because our courses are situated within K-12 settings, our ability to encourage the development of teaching dispositions seemed less artificial than in university settings. University instruction at large institutions is often characterized by impersonal spaces where students and instructors rarely get to know each other in the ways that K-12 teachers and students do. K-12 classrooms benefit from sustained contact (e.g., meeting daily over the course of a full academic year) that college classes may not. In other university courses we have taught, we met less frequently and for shorter lengths of time. While we had stimulating conversations, they seemed more removed and sterile than the courses that are studied here. In our site-based methods courses, we met eight hours over two sessions per week, which allowed us to know our students and how they developed dispositions of caring, flexibility and comfort with others that would be essential to the profession of teaching (Demmon-Berger, 1986).

While we operated in separate schools with different students and mentors, there were commonalities between our experiences. We recognized the dynamics of both classes shifted during one class field trip. We visited a part of a neighboring city that is undergoing a renaissance. The intention of the field trip was for our students to learn to read communities so that they could transfer those skills to our school sites. During this experience, PSTs explored the area, talked to merchants and visitors to get a sense of the community, and thought about issues of gentrification and community identity. This informal environment allowed PSTs to interact more comfortably with each other. We reflected on the playfulness of the interactions within the groups and noted that trust and communication between the PSTs was growing. These dispositions and skills (of reading the community) translated into how the PSTs treated our sites and each other.

Erin

Scott

After the field trip, the students are really a unified group. They support each other, treat each other like family and they are bonded in this journey of becoming teachers. Sometimes I feel as though my job is to facilitate the family...herd the cats...and they make it fun to do that. I do wonder how all of that goes with learning to teach. I really like the idea that a profession that so often is something done as individuals is being transferred as a group activity. I also appreciate that they are growing in their understanding of being in front of the room as caring individuals look out for each other and their students.

I think the thing that I noticed more from my PSTs during this experience was laughter. They seemed to be enjoying each other and the activity they were supposed to be doing more than I expected. Their conversations revealed aspects of their character I had not known. In this new environment, they seemed more authentic and open. I think by offering a space to be themselves outside of the classroom allowed them, when returning to the classroom, to be more relaxed with each other and more open too as they struggled together in their joint endeavor.

Through the sustained opportunities to learn with the PSTs, we could see their comfortable interactions with and caring for each other expanding. PSTs themselves began to recognize the openness both the community we visited encouraged, but also the importance of building community in the classroom setting. One student commented in his reflection that the trip “really helped me get a sense of community. I really liked how inclusive the town was for EVERYONE.” Another stated that she now recognizes she is “most passionate about...building a strong community environment for kids to grow up in.” This dispositional development became increasingly evident in how the PSTs engaged with middle/high school students and became clearer in ways that a traditional course would not have enabled us to develop or identify.

Pedagogical and Methodological Growth

Often in secondary methods classes at our university, PSTs have placements that are independent of the methods classes. This limits how PSTs discuss their experience and limits the quality of feedback they give to one another. Because our clinical observations overlap with our methods instruction by design, the PSTs feedback is part of a continuous cycle of learning in a K-12 classroom assemblage, experienced together through cooperation and collaboration.

The vibrancy of these conversations is critical to how the PSTs learn about how to teach (pedagogy) and what to teach (content). As our PSTs started to take more active roles in the mentors’ classes, PSTs practiced their teaching both in front of each other through micro-teaches as well as working with the respective middle/high school mentors as assistant teachers and then as co-teachers. There is a natural tension between mentors and PSTs when mentors are asked to turn over their classes for a PST to practice. As each iteration brought different pressures and learning opportunities, they also helped to alleviate those tensions, and allowed the shifts in dispositional development to be laid bare.

Erin

Scott

We had our first teacher assistants on Tuesday. It changed how the PSTs thought about the room...they talked about how difficult it was to walk and read, to hand out papers efficiently. I felt really good about this as the goal was to get the PSTs to experience the front of the room. They did and they commented on how different it was from working with individual students. This was great to hear them reflect upon and talk to their classmates about...it shows to me a progression in their understanding of the classroom.

Today was a great day. It was the first day of co-teaching when our PSTs were in front of a classroom, engaging content with students. We could see how nervous some were, even noticing a quiver in one of their voices. The quiver was self-identified by the co-teacher himself, allowing the critique and analysis that followed to be much richer. I also noticed during the critique that our PSTs used specific students' names as a point of reference. We had spent weeks working with these students already, understanding their strengths and challenges as individual students we all could relate to.

We *knew* these students, not as subjects, not as students, but as a part of a community that recognized that we all have strengths and weaknesses that could be used towards a collective sense of growth and progress. The debrief sessions we led after each co-teaching experience also relied heavily on the students' vulnerability and feedback with each other, inviting and positively responding to criticism and descriptions. The defined roles that each of us would have assumed in a more traditional university-based course were blurred or erased. *All* of us talked to and interacted with the middle/high school students in the classes. The curriculum we developed as university instructors related to the content and activities of the mentor teachers' classes and every debrief was conducted through the mentors' practice. The deep sense of collaboration lessened the distance between academia and K-12 schools. There was no disconnect between the methods course or field work, instead, an even footing between mentor and university instructor was established, one that did not occur in other university-based methods courses. This resulted in what one PST said was "GREAT" feedback. Another mentioned that the community made "critiquing easier since we have more of a level of comfortability."

Community Involvement

While the physical spaces were different, the connection these spaces fostered was immense. This was most evident during the interactions with the middle/high school students. Our PSTs, because of the space we were in, had an immediate connection to the students they taught. In other words, this form of fieldwork was not simply a random observation or one-time tutoring experience. This was a shared experience, built upon week after week of relationship building, housed in a space that itself provided opportunities for connection and allegiance.

One important aspect of our methods instruction was the value and impact of establishing relationships, the cornerstone of classroom management (Toshalis, 2015). Sharing the same space almost automatically made these connections more meaningful.

Erin

Scott

Very early on the PSTs noticed a student in the class they observed who was isolated from other students. Even when the 8 or 9 PSTs were in the room other students would make hurtful comments toward her about her clothing. The PSTs brought up their concerns to the mentor during our debrief. The mentor checked on the student through school channels and was able to report to us that other staff appreciated and had similar concerns and had found assistance for the student. This made the PSTs feel part of the space and community of the school. They were not merely visitors but part of the fiber of the community.

This is the second week back after break and we found out that the principal of another school in the district died over the weekend. A special education teacher died over the previous holiday break too - both from cancer. My students were asked to watch out for any students who may be having difficulty in dealing with the news. And then our mentor teacher offered the same support to my students. He said something like if you think you need to talk to someone, we got people here who will listen - that you are part of our family too so we want to make sure you are ok too.

This type of placement did reveal additional tensions, however. We had to find our proper fit into this community, to become part of the whole. Initially, we felt like outsiders dropping in twice a week. But, through these common experiences, we and our PSTs began to see ourselves as part of the school community, developing within and through it. This marked a clear change from our experiences teaching methods courses at the university site. This was reflected in a material sense as well. For example, in most schools, a visitor must sign in and wear a visitor badge. In both of our schools, methods students were issued their own identification tags, the same as an employee, materially folding them into the community. In addition, each school offered a dedicated space to each of our classes, indicating a sense of importance to the work we and our students were doing. PSTs recognized this as well, stating that their community “was amazing,” helping to “shape my teacher identity for the best,” and that they “wish there were more opportunities with small communities like this.”

Discussion

The place a methodology class is taught impacts the development of skills and dispositions needed to manage and instruct in an actual classroom in natural and authentic ways. The implications of this study indicate some attention be paid to what we center in teacher preparation methods courses. Rather than distancing from classrooms, we suggest the process of learning to teach should take place in and through the context of teaching.

There was a sense that the success of the PSTs was a shared venture extending far beyond university classrooms and the university instructor. The obvious impact PSTs had on the middle/high school students they work with also made this form of teacher education unique. It embedded them within an assemblage in which the responsibility for the growth and development of us all - the instructors, mentors, PSTs, and middle/high school students - was a shared, collaborative endeavor.

The activities in these spaces became the terrain through which method was explored, not only referencing K-12 students and situations, but also experiencing *with* and *through* such things as homecomings, room temperature, and technology. It is in such assemblages when the “human being and thinghood overlap” recognizing the “dense web” (Bennett, 2004, p. 349) of the material and human, and their respective affectations in our lifeworld experiences.

Finally, we found that this experience changed our dispositions as education researchers as well. The energy of being within a school reinvigorated our work and returned us to our teaching careers. In this way, we translated the experiences of our prior teaching lives to aid our students in developing theirs and reinforced our commitment to students at all levels. We functioned within a flattened hierarchy that centered the field in our work. This was where our work as methods instructors was done - returning to the classroom space we thought we left to embark on our own academic journeys.

Conclusion

As teacher educators, our goal is to prepare students for their future classrooms, but so often, we do that separately from K-12 classrooms. In this study, we highlight how our experiences in site-based social studies methods courses enabled our PSTs to grow in their teaching dispositions and understanding of community partly by re-connecting to our *own* past teaching experiences. The sites reminded us as teacher educators that the values and dispositions of K-12 teaching *must* be developed and nurtured. That is best done in authentic environments. These particular assemblages offered this opportunity and created communities that integrated all its disparate factions - mentors, students, instructors, classrooms- into one powerful experience of becoming for us all.

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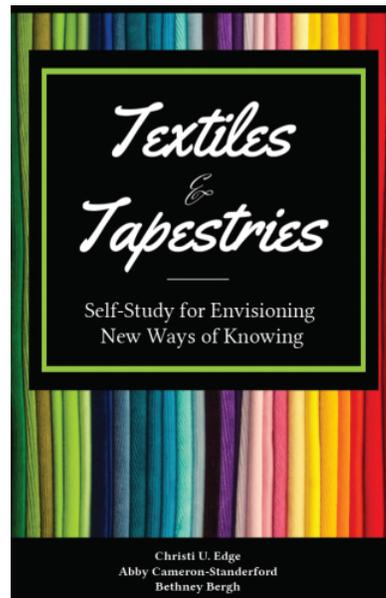
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