

Cartography of Leadership in Teacher Education

Papertending as a Reflective Response

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This arts-based self-study documents the navigational process two tenured teacher education faculty members undertook to better understand our experiences as program coordinators at the same institution in the southwestern U.S. The period under investigation includes how we became program coordinators, what the experience of being coordinator was like, and an exploration of our joint resignation. Through our self-study, we have come to understand the experience as a navigation of multiple constraints and limitations. Others have discussed similar constraints and demands elsewhere (Berry, 2007; Berry & Forgasz, 2018; Clift, 2011; Craig, 2010; Rice, et al., 2015).

In particular, Berry and Forgasz (2018) challenged teacher educators to “publicly participate in articulating and sharing their professional knowledge of practice through self-study” in order to push back against the reform movements in teacher education that make our work “more akin to those of service providers than professional educators” (p. 236). Our research is a direct response to this call.

As faculty members in a neoliberal context at a public university in the U.S. during the Trump administration, we seek to further excavate how this ideology has had a chilling effect on colleges of education (Zeichner, 2010). Because we served as coordinators of our programs, we also sought to understand how leaders are positioned and regarded (Allison & Ramirez, 2016, 2019). In an attempt to break free from the neoliberal agenda, we looked to scholarly work on new methodologies, particularly arts-based (Weber & Mitchell, 2004) to more deeply divest from a culture of commodification and production (Giroux, 2016).

Rebecca is a Chicana social studies teacher educator. She became the program coordinator of elementary education when the position was vacated unexpectedly. Laura is a white female who became program coordinator of secondary education both through default (there were no other tenured faculty available) and with the support of the faculty.

Aims

The central aim of this self-study is to understand our experience as program coordinators using an arts-based methodology we developed called papertending. As program coordinators, we received reams of paper in the form of agendas, policies, standards, assessments, etc. The volume of these documents was overwhelming and contributed to our challenges. To actually and metaphorically turn negative experiences into something more positive, we transformed these documents into new paper through the artistic process of papertending. Through this work, we discovered we needed to map

our experiences. As a result, we created a large-scale cartographic art installation documenting our experiences as program coordinators. In this paper, we detail what we learned about ourselves and about leadership in teacher education through our self-study artistic process.

Literature Review

Neoliberalism

Like many other universities, our university has been increasingly plagued with neoliberal policies and practices focusing on outputs, productivity measured in quantifiable units, and dehumanizing elements that view students as consumers and faculty as employees of production rather than as intellectuals (Giroux, 2016). Though we position ourselves as scholars, public intellectuals (Giroux, 2016) and educators, the neoliberal conception frames university leaders as “middle managers within our audit culture” (Madeloni, 2014, p.80). In teacher education programs this has manifested in a fixation with data and mandates to direct teacher education practice, even if contradictory to the research of our field (Lynch, et al., 2012; Madeloni, 2014). Additionally, Lynch, Grummell, and Devine (2012) document the ways “new managerialism” as an offshoot of neoliberal policies serves to deprofessionalize educators and constrains what counts as knowledge.

Given the dehumanizing and deprofessionalizing context of teacher education at this moment in history, initially, we had difficulty unpacking our experiences in a way that helped us move beyond anger and frustration. Fortunately, papermaking became a way to step outside our negative experiences and reflect in ways that led to new understandings.

Arts-Based Research

Arts-based research has been used by those within the art community for decades (e.g., Barone, 1995; Bresler, 2006; Eisner, 2006; Irwin et.al, 2006). For those outside this community, the decision to turn to the arts is a conscious one; made due to the unique ability of the arts to help us interpret our experiences and the world. Because the arts have the ability to “sufficiently resonant to cause us to call into question the fundamental value premises and ideological bases upon which educational decisions are made” (Barone, 1995, p. 174), they also offer opportunities for inquiry and for making “connections that may not have been noticed through the phenomenon itself” (Irwin et.al, 2006, p. 71). In the neoliberal work environment, decisions about what counts as knowledge and evidence of learning are often taken for granted, even when they are erroneous. Using art to process this experience enables us as the creators to re-examine these values, and allows those who view the art to re-evaluate them as well.

Using art as a methodological tool is also not new in self-study. Weber and Mitchell (2004) identify some “key features” of arts-based research that align powerfully with self-study methodologies. While they list 10 features, we focus on five:

- 1) Reflexivity: Connects to the Self Yet Distances us From Ourselves, Acting as a Mirror;
- 2) Can Be Used to Capture the Ineffable, the Hard-To-Put-Into-Words,
- 3) Can Be Used to Communicate More Holistically, Simultaneously Keeping the Whole and the Part in View,
- 4) Through Metaphor and Symbol, Can Carry Theory Elegantly and Eloquently;
- and, 5) Makes the Ordinary Seem Extraordinary--Provokes, Innovates, and Breaks

Through Common Resistance, Forcing Us to Consider New Ways of Seeing or Doing Things. (p. 984-985)

For us, papertending served as both a methodological tool and as a further source of textual data. We used the process of papermaking as a metaphor for our experiences as “reluctant leaders” (Allison & Ramirez, 2016, p. 8) and intentionally probed how the process allowed us to individually and collectively come to new understandings of our experiences. Additionally, because of the materiality of paper, we designed our paper to serve as a testament to an experience. Through this process we could “consider what an understanding of art materials as living matter might contribute to a sense of inquiry relevant to both teaching and research practices” (Pindyck, 2018, p.14).

Leadership in Teacher Education

Allison and Ramirez (2019) highlight the need for clarity of terminology when discussing leadership roles. We follow their lead by distinguishing between “management” and “leadership.” However, different from their descriptions, we found our positions as program coordinators to consist entirely of managerial tasks. In an earlier article, Allison and Ramirez (2016) define managerial tasks “as assigned administrative tasks functionary in nature” (p. 4).

They contrast these expectations with “leadership enactments” which were responsibilities “that were ill-defined and grew out of changing institutional and departmental circumstances brought about by broader political, economic, or social factors” (p. 5). Our time was so consumed by managerial tasks, there was little space for leadership enactments. This is in part due to the increasing demands of assessment and accountability.

In the current sociopolitical context of higher education within the U.S., workers are expected to do more with less support. As Allison and Ramirez (2019) highlight, midlevel administrative positions are often ill defined and untenable:

...it is not simply a matter of particular individuals being ill-suited for their positions’ requirements, but rather that many positions’ expectations have become (or perhaps always were) so demanding that no one individual could carry them out in a way that feels successful and satisfying. (p. 12)

This mirrors our experience and one of the reasons we left our positions. Ultimately, we felt that there was no way to be successful in our roles without significant changes to support structures and expectations.

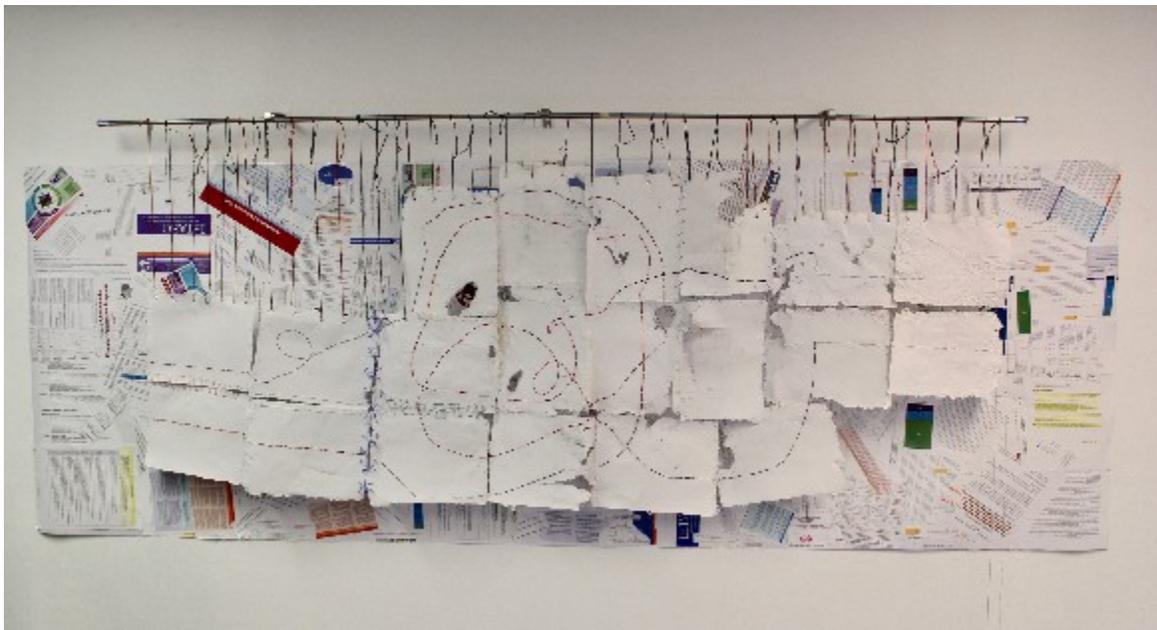
Methodology

After our term as program coordinators, we felt demoralized and marginalized. This self-study began through written reflective journals and professional dialogue (Guilfoyle, et al., 2004). However, we found it difficult to process the experience using traditional research methodologies alone. At this point we turned to the arts, seeking to transform our “practical experiences...into aesthetic ones” (Eisner, 2006, p. 13). Based on the role of paper in defining our experiences as coordinators, we developed an arts-based methodology called papertending. At its core, papertending is the repurposing of paper into artistic representations of experience.

Each step in the creation of this piece was intentional. One key aspect of papertending was selecting the documents we shredded to make new paper. We chose pages that had constrained our ability to act as leaders as opposed to managers. For example, Laura chose an internal policy document mandating how we assess our teacher candidates and a training she received as program coordinator on “data literacy.” We then sorted the remaining paper from our time as coordinators into categories to better understand what had been distributed to us and used this to determine the priorities of college administration. We used representative samples from these categories to create a collage of policy documents, standards, state and federal mandates, data reports, and assessment documents. This collage represents the context within which we worked as coordinators. We then took the paper we created to craft a map of our experiences. Creating a map seemed an apt representation to choose because as Irwin et.al (2006) point out, “maps have only middles, with no beginnings and endings--they are always becoming” (p. 71). We studied each piece of paper and discussed how it fit into a metaphorical map. We recorded this discussion to document our thinking about how the new cartography visually and metaphorically represented our experiences.

Figure 1

The Cartography of Our Experiences as Program Coordinators in Teacher Education Programs



Drawing on the artwork of Kelly O’Brien (O’Brien, n.d.), we stitched the map together. Again, each choice we made was discussed in terms of its representation of our experiences. We used different types of thread and stitches to anchor the pages to one another. Next, we each stitched our individual journeys as coordinators onto the map. When we finished the piece, we hung it in an office and wrote responses to what the completed exhibit made us think about our experiences as program coordinators. We shared these reflections with each other and responded with questions for clarification and further thinking. We coded these documents for themes, using constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to examine the relationships between these codes and previously identified codes.

In order to establish trustworthiness (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009), we made public our cartography in an art installation. Because our leadership and resignation impacted our programs in significant ways, we invited faculty members from our programs to view the exhibit and provide anonymous feedback to gauge how well our representation matched the understandings of our colleagues. Additionally, because our time as coordinators impacted our family lives, we also asked our closest family members (Rebecca's daughter and Laura's husband) to view the exhibit. We audio-recorded their feedback and transcribed it. We read through all feedback, coding for themes, and we compared the responses we received from others with both our written intentions and our own reflections on the process and what we learned. For this paper, we paid particular attention to feedback relating to leadership within teacher education.

Outcomes

Ultimately, we view our efforts to remake the paperwork (Müller, 2014) into a metaphorical map of our experiences as program coordinators as a way to study our "not so secret story knowledge" and as "a form of resistance that may be enacted by teacher educators (such as ourselves) who are being stripped of professional voice in their teaching work" (Berry & Forgasz, 2018, p. 241). As described above, we felt at a loss for words to accurately and adequately describe our experiences as program coordinators. Through creating our cartographic installation, we were able to process and understand our experiences in new ways.

What We Learned about Leadership in Teacher Education

Initially, when we each became program coordinators, we thought we were taking positions as middle managers. That in and of itself was a bitter pill to swallow. But we were willing to step into these positions because we felt that individually and together we could resist some of the more troubling initiatives being pushed down from upper administration, the state, and accrediting agencies. We found this resistance to be futile. Upon reflection, this felt intentional. As Rebecca wrote:

It seems like the strategy is to fill people's days with mindless tasks to prevent the real thinking from occurring. If the group thinks too much we might be able to reveal the false claims of leaders. How do you answer the millions of emails? Who will answer the phone when we are spending hours in meetings we get called to without an agenda? How do we build quality programs when we repeatedly have to fight for quality? Why do we have to spend our time fighting small fights when there are so many more significant needs that we should focus on? The small fights and minutiae are the fuel of the beast. They are distractions from focusing on substance. (Reflection, 8/14/18)

In the process of making the art piece, we were able to identify a model of how decision making, responsibilities, and power are operating in this neoliberal, new managerial environment. In place of a leadership, structure is what we call a hierarchical control/power model.

We came to see that the top of the structure is the neoliberal agenda; this was articulated to us in the form of mandates, compliance documents, and ever-changing dictates. While we used quite a bit of paper to make both the collage and the new paper, the piles of paperwork we received never seemed to diminish. That speaks to just how powerful the deluge of external mandates is for teacher educators. In support of our impressions, a colleague who viewed the art installation recognized that "little value is placed on leadership and data seems to be imposed as a framework for decisions"

(Respondent 7). Respondent 14 noted, “It’s a colonized approach. Beyond neoliberal.” Another viewer expressed that the art installation conveyed many of our same frustrations and wondered at “The amount of time and energy wasted on filling a technocratic, multi-billion-dollar education-accountability industry instead of creating liberating, democratic learning spaces for teachers and students” (Respondent 17).

Mandates created as part of the neoliberal agenda were accepted by upper administration with little or no scholarly discussion or debate. Our perception is that upper administrators in our college functioned as the middle-level managers. Rather than providing vision-based leadership, they were passing the mandates down and checking the boxes. Respondent 1, also a former coordinator of a different educator preparation program framed it similarly, “The strings hanging the tapestry are like upper administration and we are the puppets on their strings.” As coordinators, we did not have many opportunities to exert leadership. Instead, we found ourselves hanging by threads, beholden to administrators unwilling to lead.

During our tenures as coordinators, we often felt confused and frustrated without being able to articulate where these emotions were coming from. Crafting the cartography, we came to understand our place in the structure was as compliance bots, simply responsible for feeding the hierarchical machine with ever-increasing amounts of meaningless data. Through self-study as artist/researchers, we examined the materials with a different lens. We came to understand that we were simply expected to comply with all mandates. The sheer volume of mandates led to a constant sense of confusion and being unable to exert any influence or leadership left us feeling frustrated and angry.

What We Learned about Ourselves

Papertending offered us an alternative pathway to excavate and represent a significant journey. As faculty members in a neoliberal environment, we face tremendous pressure to produce. In repurposing materials from our experience, the creative process itself became an alternative to university-sanctioned production and a way to resist the dehumanizing structures of the academy. The decision to make paper as part of our self-study was intentionally inefficient. We sought to make meaning, rather than simply produce a final product. Through partaking, we have come to realize that it is not enough to write about the hegemony of neo-liberal policies. We must consciously resist in our everyday lives. By freeing ourselves from the limiting constraints of traditional forms of research, we have found renewed passion in our scholarship.

Leadership in the Academy. While we wanted to understand the larger structures of leadership in the current environment of teacher education, we also craved a better understanding of our roles as leaders in our own institution. Through the process of papertending, we were able to view our experiences in new ways. For example, Laura learned she is better able to enact her vision of leadership outside a formal administrative role, as she described in a journal reflection:

What’s the difference between leadership and coordination? I feel like I’m still providing leadership, and maybe even more so than when I was coordinator. Because I am currently not bound by all the administrivia that flows downhill from upper administration (Reflection, 12/19/19).

Because her time is not taken up with all the tasks assigned her by others, she is able to devote more time to program design, vision, and revision.

Rebecca has come to the realization that in some ways who we are did not matter. During her time as coordinator, she took personally the ways administrators treated us, talked to us, and failed to listen to us. But ultimately, it actually was not about us. Anyone in that position who did not immediately comply with mandates would have been (and have been) treated the same way. Laura also noticed this when reflecting on the finished artwork:

I worry that the installation of new paper and our paths through the wilderness is overshadowed by the background. But that is kind of how it felt during the experience as well. That who we are, what we were experiencing, our perspectives didn't matter. The only time they were even considered is when we did not comply.

Coming to this realization has been helpful for both of us in that it has helped us reclaim our space as scholars, teacher educators, and as leaders in the academy. Within the neoliberal leadership model our artwork illuminated for us, individual people do not matter. One must step outside the framework in order to authentically engage as human beings.

A Return to Our Creative Selves. Papertending also offered us a way to return to our creative selves. The process of engaging with the documents in a new way reminded us of the intellectual and innovative aspects of teacher education that we missed during coordinatorship. Working with the documents revealed the obvious dissonance between knowledge from the field of teacher education and what we were expected to enforce. Working through the arts and developing papertending as a response to stepping down from coordinationship, we were able to create a cartography of the feeling in terms of the feeling of the experience, and as we acknowledged the emotional response we could engage with the scholarly significance in new ways. The emotional impact was felt by a colleague, who also served as a coordinator of an educator preparation program in our college. Upon viewing the art he stated, "Matches the emotional turmoil of the experience. The coordinators become a misrepresented group in the process" (Respondent 1). In the act of mapping the journey on a representational level, we better understood the mechanisms and market forces at play in the role.

Connecting to a Compass. In making the cartography, our own internal compasses were reactivated. First, we were able to rely on our artistic compasses to make artistic decisions. Working within an artistic realm offered a new palette to express and explore our experience of coordinating. The process and elements of art offered substantive avenues to understand experience. Line, shape, space, value, form, texture, and color were key to communicating in new ways. As we chose which sheets of paper would contribute to the cartographic tapestry, we had to examine the qualities and fragilities of each sheet. The strong, competent, and sturdy sheets were selected for the beginning because that is how we felt when we began as coordinators. The fragile sheets with uneven texture and holes were placed in the middle of the journey when we felt things were falling apart with our programs. In stitching, we could see where our journeys were parallel, where there were points of solidarity, and where we felt like we were moving in circles. Making these artistic decisions was based on tuning in to our own creative compasses and facilitated a new kind of trust in ourselves.

As the creative compass guided us in the artmaking, we were also able to see how our teacher education compass was also accurate. In coordination, there was a feeling of isolation and alienation, and we often didn't know how our colleagues were making meaning of all of the neoliberal policies. We knew many mandates were in conflict with the aims of our profession but based on the volume of documents describing this situation it was easy to lose course. There were times it was difficult to

trust our own instincts and professional knowledge. In creating the cartography, sharing it with colleagues, and collecting feedback, we could better understand that our compasses were accurate and we could trust our own decisions to step away from coordinatorship. In collecting feedback many expressed that the cartography was an accurate mapping of the current moment, “a path leads to nowhere” (Respondent 4), and “This looks like a map to nowhere. Many paths leading to nowhere” (respondent 16). Sharing the cartography, and receiving feedback reinforced our solidarity with colleagues. It created a sense of togetherness, a stitching back together with our colleagues, who share a common commitment to meaningful teacher education.

Significance

Through using an arts-based methodology, we consciously positioned ourselves in opposition to neoliberal, dehumanizing approaches to research and teacher education. “When we examine, curiously follow and re/search matter in sensory ways, we allow ourselves to disrupt conventional limitations and preexisting ideas about matter and self, and we make room for unexpected combinations to arise” (Pindyck, 2018, p. 14). A significant aspect of this work has been the reactions we received from our colleagues. They unanimously responded to our art installation in ways suggesting that our representation resonated with them and that they too see the power hierarchies in teacher education and the burden of coordination.

While it was powerful to see colleagues identify with the work and to make meaning of the current state of teacher education in our context by analyzing and engaging with the art installation, we were left wondering about the long-term resonance of the art installation on our colleagues and our institution. Unfortunately, we have a long history of communicating our concerns with college administration about the challenges, subjugation, and deprofessionalization of teacher education, but they have failed to hear us. This is echoed by Respondent 11 who says, “The lost pathway of circles and returns is reminiscent of the hard road we have traveled and the total lack of concern for how TE [teacher education] operates.” Upon viewing the art installation, another colleague stated, “College of Ed, please hear us. Please believe us. Please stand by us.” Though our colleagues hear us, we wonder if they will join in more vocal solidarity to reject neoliberal approaches to teacher education that do not serve our diverse communities in meaningful ways. Reading the comments of one colleague leaves us hopeful, “Teacher educators are under tremendous pressure and leadership will require organizing collectively and resisting and coming up with new visions and models for teacher ed” (Respondent 17). Whether or not department and college leadership are up to this collective revisioning remains to be seen.

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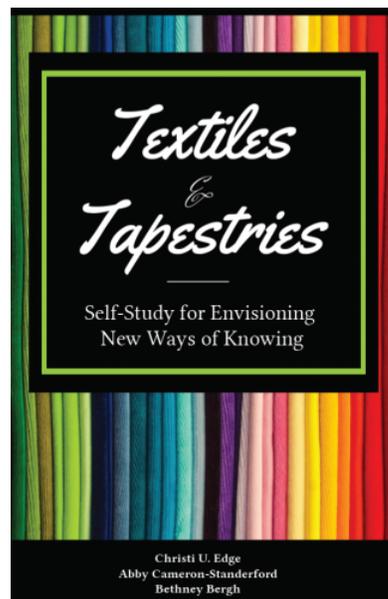
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