

# Enacting a Personal Pedagogy of Facilitating Professional Learning for Teachers

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This research is focused on the facilitation of professional learning (PL) experiences for teachers who were learning to use a novel approach to physical education (PE). The Meaningful PE approach is designed to guide teachers in prioritizing meaningful experiences through an explicit focus on six pedagogical features (social interaction, fun, challenge, motor competence, personally relevant learning, and delight; Beni et al., 2017) and the incorporation of autonomy-supportive strategies that support student goal-setting and reflection. Following five years of development in teacher education programs and two pilot studies in elementary classes in Ireland and Canada, the purpose of the overarching project was to expand implementation by introducing it to a sample of 12 elementary PE teachers over two years.

PE teachers are typically willing to change their pedagogical practice, however, innovations are rarely sustained beyond initial implementation (Goodyear & Casey, 2015). This has raised questions over the common format and quality of PL opportunities that support the implementation of innovations (i.e., off-site, one-time workshops in contexts removed from teachers' lived experiences). The use of a 'professional learning community' (PLC) has been identified as a way to provide teachers with a sense of growth and empowerment in their teaching practice (Tannehill & MacPhail, 2017). However, little is known about the *processes* of facilitating a PLC from the facilitator's perspective, whose role and practices appear crucial in shaping positive PL experiences for teachers.

As part of Stephanie's doctoral research, she facilitated a PLC whose members were learning to implement the Meaningful PE approach. Although the overarching research has several aims, the aim of this particular self-study was to document Stephanie's experience of facilitating this process and understand how these experiences informed the enactment of her personal pedagogy of facilitating PL experiences for teachers.

Identity theory offers a helpful lens to help make sense of Stephanie's experiences of becoming a facilitator of PL. Identity is both a complex and contested concept (Jenkins, 2008), with its multifaceted nature making it difficult to define. Identity is often viewed as a dynamic process rather than a stable entity (Beijaard et al. 2004) given that individuals tend to have distinct identities within different contexts and roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Despite identity having clear links to one's concept of self, identity theorists have long acknowledged the social dimension of the process of identification and the formation of self-concept; for example, Cooley's (1902/1964) concept of the looking-glass self, suggesting an individual's perception of self is dependent upon the image they imagine they portray to others; Mead's (1934) notion of self as a conglomeration of me (attitudes of others) and I (response to the attitudes of others); and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor suggesting identification is a process involving a self-as-actor performing for an audience. As Jenkins (2008) contends, these theoretical perspectives suggest "that we can't see ourselves at all without also seeing ourselves as other people see us" (p. 41).

This is not to suggest that the process of identification is passive but rather that it is influenced by external factors (Giddens, 1991). Given the highly relational nature of this process, identification thus becomes:

the human capacity - rooted in language - to know "who's who" (and hence "what's what"). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on: a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities. (Jenkins, 2008, p. 5)

It is through this lens that we have developed the research questions: What are Stephanie's experiences of becoming a facilitator of professional learning? And: How do these experiences inform the enactment of Stephanie's personal pedagogy of facilitation?

## **Methodology and Methods**

Self-study of teacher education practice (S-STEP) methodology has been used to conduct research into the processes and outcomes of facilitating PLCs for teacher educators (e.g., Kitchen et al., 2008; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016), however, there are few examples of its use to study facilitation of PL for teachers. Further, where it *has* been used this way (e.g. Hamilton, 2019; Peeters & Robinson, 2015; Vozzo, 2011), we are not aware of any such studies in which the focus has been facilitating a PLC. LaBoskey's (2004) characteristics of S-STEP were used to guide the research design, in that it was: self-initiated; improvement-oriented; interactive; used multiple qualitative methods, and; is shared with the S-STEP community to establish resonance and trustworthiness.

The primary data source was a reflective journal (RJ) written by Stephanie over two years. Following interactions with PLC members, Stephanie wrote detailed reflections of her experiences as a facilitator. Stephanie's doctoral supervisor, Tim, acted as a critical friend throughout the study, helping her question her decisions and actions, and work through the process of learning to facilitate PL opportunities for teachers. We met frequently to discuss the challenges Stephanie was facing as she reflected upon her role in the process. Tim was present for all of the PL sessions with teachers and helped with data collection.

As a teacher of physical education herself, Stephanie came to the study with a belief in the importance of involving teachers in the research process. Tim had introduced Stephanie to the Meaningful PE approach, and she had previously studied her implementation of the approach in her own teaching practice and was eager to share her insights with others. A total of 12 PE teachers from the same school district participated in the PLC, offering a different source of interactivity (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2010). Five teachers from three schools participated in Year One - all of whom were PE specialists with varying levels of teaching experience. Three of these teachers continued their participation into Year Two, along with seven new participants (five specialists and two classroom teachers) within the same school district. Many of the teachers had pre-existing relationships with one another, as they had worked together, co-taught, or attended school board-mandated PL initiatives together in the past.

Participants gave consent for one or more forms of data collection, thus the data sources varied by participant but included: a) teacher interviews, b) non-participant observations in teachers' classrooms, c) PLC meeting transcripts, and/or d) teacher-generated artifacts (e.g. lesson plans, written reflections).

The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach. In order to promote trustworthiness, teacher-generated data were compared and contrasted with Stephanie's written reflections and interpretations of the process of facilitating teachers' PL (Craig, 2009).

## **Results**

Stephanie's reflections revealed several sources of tension as she enacted her personal pedagogy for facilitating PL for other teachers, however, we discuss only the following two themes here: (1) *developing an identity as a facilitator of PL* and (2) *aligning a personal pedagogical philosophy with practice*.

### ***Developing an Identity as a Facilitator of Professional Learning***

As a doctoral student, Stephanie came to the study feeling very much like a novice, having limited experience as a researcher and none as a facilitator of PL. Though she had been a school teacher for several years, her experience of PL as a teacher was largely informal and self-initiated; her work in a private school meant she had never experienced the type of school board-wide PL her participants had. Consequently, Stephanie had little sense of what a 'facilitator of PL' or 'researcher of facilitation' might look like or do, or how she might identify with either of these roles.

Stephanie conceived of her experiences and identity in terms of 'becoming', rather than 'being', a facilitator of PL. She struggled at times with feelings of inadequacy based on her age and lack of teaching experience relative to many of the teacher participants. For example, in Year One of the study, upon meeting with one of the teachers for the first time, Stephanie wrote: "It's obvious to me that she's a veteran teacher...[The teacher] said, 'I'm very excited to learn from you,' and I thought, 'I can't imagine having anything to offer to a teacher like you!'" (RJ- 25-Jan-19). This self-consciousness in relation to her age and experience came up repeatedly, with Stephanie suggesting, for example, "Some of these teachers were teaching since the time of my birth" (RJ-25-Sept-19).

However, as Stephanie began to reflect upon these feelings of inadequacy, particularly in relation to the external aspect of identification (i.e., her thoughts about how others identify her), she began to

reconceptualize her identity as a facilitator of PL:

[I'm] realizing that I don't feel inadequate as a facilitator of PL because of my lack of teaching experience relative to participants, or because of my age, or because I perceive that I don't have anything to offer them. I feel inadequate because I imagine that they might potentially perceive me that way - too inexperienced, too young, too detached from the context to have anything of value to share...The problem, I have no doubt, is in my perception of myself not in terms of how I see me, but in terms of how I imagine others see me. (RJ-18-Oct-19)

In addition, Stephanie regularly experienced a tension between being a facilitator of PL and a researcher of facilitation. She wrote of feeling 'caught' between these two seemingly conflicting identities of being both "the researcher (who should just be collecting data and not telling anyone what to do), but also the facilitator of professional development" (RJ-25-Sept-19). This tension was particularly profound when teachers' PE practice came into conflict with Stephanie's personal philosophy for PE in relation to meaningfulness and the MPE approach. For example, when one teacher advocated for offering students a wide variety of activities, opting to rarely repeat the same activity twice, Stephanie felt unsure of how to respond: "I struggle with knowing when I should share my differing perspectives and when I should just be quiet...I want to be cautious not to make myself sound like the 'expert'" (RJ-25-Sept-19). In a follow-up meeting with the group, Stephanie decided to raise the teacher's idea again by asking PLC members to share their perspectives on the topic. Though many group members held views that were somewhat contradictory to her own, she shared her viewpoint and facilitated a discussion around how varying perspectives might fit with the MPE approach. Reflecting on this, she wrote:

[It was] a 'stepping out' in the sense of saying, 'I see this differently,' because I've been hesitant to do so given my uncertainty around when I should be a facilitator of PL and a researcher of the facilitation of PL - when I should just listen and when I should share my own thoughts/perspectives. (RJ-8-Oct-19)

While this was challenging for Stephanie, it was something she became more comfortable with over time, learning to evaluate the context and the moment, at times sharing alternative perspectives, and at others choosing just to listen, and thus becoming comfortable identifying herself in two ways at once - as facilitator and researcher-of-facilitation.

Another source of tension between these two roles sprung from a desire to do what Stephanie felt was best for the teachers' learning while also feeling a need to ensure she was able to collect the data she needed to progress with her doctoral research. Toward the end of the first year of data collection, Stephanie expressed disappointment with how little data she had been able to collect. This anxiety over being able to progress with her own data collection led to a tension between wanting to 'push' teachers to have things prepared for her and wanting to prioritize their own learning, even at the expense of her data collection:

I know this is stressing [the teachers] out and they're very busy, but it's also been a bit disappointing for me...What if I don't get the data I need next year either?...Have I been

too lenient with the teachers in terms of letting them do whatever works for them in relation to data collection?...I'm having a hard time striking that balance. I need data, but I also want this to be about their learning. (RJ-14-May-19)

Some of the teachers' failure to provide data in the first year was related to time constraints. However, in other cases, it seemed to be related to their wanting to present a 'polished' picture to Stephanie, underscoring how they identified her as a researcher. Given that the approach was new for them, they seemed apprehensive to share their struggles. This was challenging for Stephanie: "As a researcher, I'm interested in the process, the experience - including all of their struggles, but they don't want me to see those struggles" (RJ-14-May-19). Thus, these sources of tension - particularly in relation to her identity formation - featured prominently in Stephanie's enactment of a personal pedagogy of facilitating PL for teachers.

### ***Aligning a Personal Pedagogical Philosophy with Practice***

Stephanie came to the study with theoretical understandings of what might make for effective PL experiences for teachers based on current literature. In particular, she was interested in using a PLC that would support teachers with ongoing, continuous PL through a social constructivist lens, positioning herself as a learner - a fellow member of the PLC - as opposed to an external 'expert' (Parker et al., 2012). However, she found that aligning practices with her philosophy for PL was easier planned-for than done.

Before initiating the PLC, Stephanie began to discuss her ideas with a group of teachers who were her peers in a graduate course. She was shocked to hear descriptions of teachers' viewpoints, which were largely negative. In many cases, the 'PLCs' they described were grossly disconnected from the type of community advocated for in the literature. Instead, they seemed to take the form of 'one-off workshops rebranded as a PLC' (RJ-22-Feb-19). In addition, many of these teachers expressed the notion that researchers tended to ignore teachers' experience and expertise when conducting research in schools. This led Stephanie to consider how she was setting up her own study:

This really has me thinking about how important it is to actually listen to teachers. You hear [this] and you read that, but actually doing it is an entirely different thing. I think the fact that I'm currently teaching while also coming at this from the perspective of researcher gives me a sort of a unique position/perspective (compared to many academics). I really want to listen to the teachers and be sensitive to what does/doesn't work for them. (RJ-6-Feb-19)

Early in the study, Stephanie's noble intentions seemed fairly easy to maintain. She wrote:

I am determined to resist [the] notion [that teachers are not experts in teaching], and I really don't find it difficult to do so. I believe these teachers have so much to offer, and although they have their preferences and ideas about teaching, they are also quite open to testing some boundaries and trying new things. (21-Mar-19)

However, as the study progressed, she began to feel less confident in her ability to hold to her social

constructivist perspective. For instance, while she worked hard to create a shared, social learning space without hierarchy and to position herself as a facilitator rather than transmitter of knowledge, there were instances when this left her struggling to release 'control'. This became particularly apparent to Stephanie when, early in the second year of data collection, the teachers were asked by a school district leader to share the approach with colleagues; a task Stephanie felt these new participants, who had yet to use the approach in their classrooms, were unprepared for. She wrote of this experience:

I'm still struggling a bit with 'releasing' this (as if I own it ) because I want it to be presented in a way that is true to all of the work we have invested into it, all of the research that has gone into it, etc. I'm also well aware that this is probably a matter of control for me to an extent, and I need to let it go. I need to stop feeling protective of it. (8-Oct-19)

In spite of acknowledging this 'need' and giving teachers the space to work through this process on their own, Stephanie found it challenging to strike a balance between offering teachers support in learning to use the approach and pushing them to do things her way. While she was cautious not to position herself as the expert, she was also aware that the teachers needed guidance in learning to use an approach with which they were unfamiliar. At times, she struggled with this, wondering, for example, "Am I being arrogant? Positioning myself as the expert in spite of telling the teachers that I view them as experts? I feel like I view myself as an 'expert' - to an extent - on meaningfulness and them as experts in their own classrooms" (RJ-4-Sept-19). These moments of tension in her reflection left her "aware that [she was] bordering on compromising [her] overtly constructivist approach to facilitating learning experiences for the teachers" (RJ-4-Sept-19), yet she found this difficult to manage at times.

This was compounded by a perception that teachers sometimes also expected a more direct approach to facilitation. For example, when Stephanie interviewed participants at the end of the first year, some of them suggested that when they were given too much leeway, things more easily fell by the wayside amongst other competing priorities. They felt the need to be "for lack of a better word, forced, to go meet other people" (Molly, Yr1-Interview) because, "it's very easy to prioritize other things when something's not being pushed" (Mia, Yr1-Interview). In addition to wanting more structure, there were times when teachers felt a need to ask 'permission' to do things in their classrooms that they perceived were slightly different to the things presented in their PL sessions. For instance, after one teacher asked if she could alter the terminology she was using with her students, Stephanie wrote:

I see why she was asking...but it's interesting to me that she felt like she needed our 'permission' to do this in her classroom. Maybe an example of the ways some of them seem to want a bit of a facilitator-directed experience though we're trying to make it very participant-centered. (19-Nov-19)

Further, while Stephanie anticipated that initiating and maintaining a PLC structure would not be easy, the challenges she faced were different than she expected. Given that many participants had existing relationships with one another, Stephanie found that there was already a sense of community that seemed to exist amongst most of the group. Early in the study she wrote favorably of this,

suggesting: “I feel like we could not have asked for anything better in terms of the social dynamics of the group” (RJ-21-Mar-19). While this was a great starting point for the group, as the study progressed, Stephanie found that this pre-existing community felt difficult to penetrate, perceiving herself at times as an ‘outsider’, a view manifested by her dual role as facilitator and researcher. For example, when participants struggled with implementing the approach in their classrooms, they tended to turn to other teachers for support in spite of Stephanie continually making attempts to support them. Reflecting on one such instance, Stephanie wrote:

It’s interesting because it confirms what I already knew - that the teachers are functioning within this professional learning community that they already had established, and I am an outsider. I’m not saying if that’s a good thing or a bad thing at this point, but it’s quite apparent. (RJ-14-May-19)

While this was not how Stephanie envisioned the PLC structure taking shape, she came to see it as valuable, acknowledging that fostering an environment where teachers could lean upon one another was more likely to be sustainable beyond the completion of the study. Within this PLC structure, Stephanie wrote frequently of feeling the need to build trust with teacher participants. For instance, following one meeting we had lunch with the teachers, who repeatedly expressed feeling guilty that we were taking them for lunch and not discussing anything related to the project. However, Stephanie felt it was an appropriate use of time in that “it was extremely valuable in helping us to connect with them and build trust” (RJ-28-Jun-19).

Having built this trust with teachers in year one, Stephanie was disappointed when only three of the original five teachers could continue into the next year of the study. She felt the need to begin this trust-building process again with the new participants. After conducting a set of first interviews, Stephanie wrote:

As I was leaving today, I was thinking, ‘I don’t feel like I connect as well with this new group of teachers as I did with the group last year.’ Yet, upon further reflection I began to recall that I worked hard in the beginning with the last group to break down barriers to their feeling comfortable with the interview process and things like that. (RJ-24-Sept-19)

In spite of the challenges Stephanie felt she faced, teacher data were overwhelmingly supportive of the PLC -- its structure and the experiences it provided -- as most effective for their learning. Stephanie felt that the key resource required for fostering a PLC was an abundance of time - time to bring participants together repeatedly and build a sense of community and trust. In addition to time being a key factor for participants, the challenges Stephanie faced in aligning her philosophy of PL with her practice in implementation further emphasized the importance of the longitudinal design of the study, as she seemed to grow more comfortable in her role over an extended period of time.

## **Conclusion**

Although the two themes of identifying as a facilitator of PL and aligning personal philosophy with practice capture distinct ways of looking at some of the dynamics and experiences faced by Stephanie

as she facilitated the PLC, there is a common thread that connects them. Specifically, the presence of tensions – feelings of internal turmoil (Berry, 2007) is readily apparent in our interpretation of the data as Stephanie enacted her personal pedagogy of PL facilitation. For instance, in coming to identify as a facilitator and as a researcher of facilitation, there was a tension in how Stephanie could occupy these two spaces at the same time. This was also evident in how Stephanie tried to reconcile her personal philosophy with the philosophies brought by the teachers to their PLC and research experience. For Stephanie, coming to terms with these tensions – and learning to live with them rather than overcome them was a crucial part of her personal pedagogy of PL facilitation. That is, she recognized that both roles were crucial, and, in this context, it was impossible to exist as one without the other. Thus, she was identifying in multiple ways simultaneously (Stryker & Burke, 2000). We suggest Stephanie’s struggle with these tensions in negotiating multiple identities reflects her position as a living contradiction – experiencing holding particular values, in this case in relation to teachers’ PL, while also negating those values (Whitehead, 1989).

In conclusion, this research has the potential to make a significant contribution to the literature on the facilitation of teachers’ PL. While previous research has shown a PLC approach to offer an effective format for PE teachers’ professional learning (e.g. Tannehill & MacPhail, 2017; Oliver et al., 2017), the current study offers insight from the vantage point of the facilitator of such experiences. In particular, it is clear there are important personal and professional tensions to be managed by the facilitator, particularly in relation to the internal and external processes of identification, in this type of practice (Jenkins, 2008). Self-study offered a useful and appropriate methodological approach to consider the work of a teacher educator in a context outside of pre-service teacher education; that of supporting teachers in their ongoing professional learning. Further examples by other facilitators may offer clearer and/or more diverse pictures of pedagogies of facilitation to develop deeper understanding for the field of teacher education.

There is clearly much to be learned about understanding the complex work of the self-in-practice in facilitating teachers’ professional learning.

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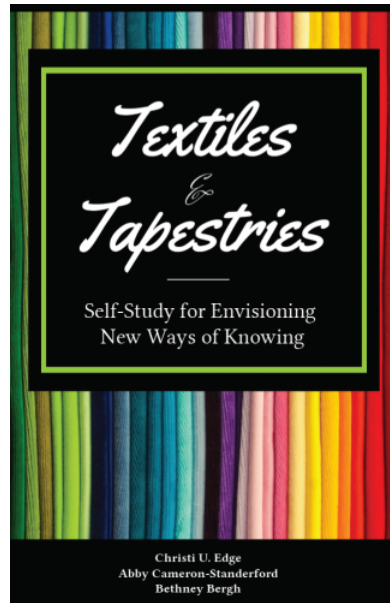
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## Suggested Citation

Beni, S. & Fletcher, T. (2020). *Enacting a Personal Pedagogy of Facilitating Professional Learning for Teachers*. In C. Edge, A. Cameron-Standerford, & B. Bergh (Eds.), *Textiles and Tapestries*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from [https://edtechbooks.org/textiles\\_tapestries\\_self\\_study/chapter\\_7](https://edtechbooks.org/textiles_tapestries_self_study/chapter_7)



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