

Presence without being present: Reflection and action in a community of practice

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Abstract: Reflection and Communities of Practice are common constructs in teacher education. Co-teaching is often seen as beneficial, yet teacher education students rarely have experiences being co-taught. Thus, reflection, communities of practice, and co-teaching, deserve careful consideration in designing teacher education learning experiences. Based on experiences co-teaching, we argue that unexamined assumptions of university education and university structures can influence how future teachers learn through and about these constructs. We apply sociocultural perspectives to reflexively analyze our co-teaching in order to unpack meanings of: reflection in and on action and communities of practice. Through our analysis we raise questions about how structures of educational systems affect learning. Our goal is to consider issues related to the goals of teacher education and the structures that enable meeting those goals.

Keywords: reflection, communities of practice, co-teaching, teacher learning, discourse.

I. Introduction.

Teacher educators, who are often university professors, generally share a broad, common goal of developing future teachers who can participate productively in professional communities of practice in the field of education. In addition, teacher educators consistently attempt to develop future teachers' abilities to be reflective practitioners (Schon, 1987). Yet these goals can be challenging to meet. The goals are complex and represent sophisticated knowledge and ability – things hard for novices to develop in a short time. As two teacher educators, we cared about these goals and wanted to disrupt common practices to consider how this might impact achievement of these goals.

One challenge of learning to teach relates to programmatic structures and how these structures limit opportunities to model professional dialogue among peers. Traditionally, teacher education occurs in university classrooms with a single expert teaching new concepts or ideas to one group of novices. We wondered about how a hierarchical relationship between single more knowledgeable others and less knowledgeable learners, particularly in college classrooms, affects learning to participate in professional communities of practice. Such a structure can be problematic because the expert/novice construction fails to model or make visible the professional activity of participants in a community of practice. We also wondered about the ways the structure affects learning about reflective practice. Teacher educators ask future teachers to reflect on experiences. However, teacher educators rarely offer explicit modeling of effective reflection; often do not explain how reflection relates to professional activity; or fail to make their own reflections evident to future teachers. This essay describes the result of our

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choice to co-teach two university-based teacher education courses. Our co-teaching resulted in collaboration and unplanned experiences that disrupted traditional classroom structures but allowed us to alternatively pursue some shared goals for students in our program. In this essay, we intend to raise questions related to the goals of teacher education and the structures that enable meeting those goals. We hope to encourage consideration of instructional structures and how those structures promote professional learning within the context of a liberal arts university.

II. What process did we use to generate this essay?

We distinguish our work as a process rather than a methodology because our inquiry is neither fully rhetorical nor fully empirical. We follow processes of autoethnography, a methodology with roots in reflexive ethnography, but we do not produce an autoethnographic account. To understand this distinction and the methods associated with autoethnography it helps to begin with reflexive ethnography. Reflexive ethnography examines cultural phenomena, but in particular considers and examines the ways in which participants and researcher affect research, as well as the process of researching. Similarly, reflexive ethnography acknowledges the ways research affects the research context, especially in a cultural setting, and also how the context affects the researcher. Reflexive ethnography recognizes the reality that ethnographers participate in the construction of data they collect. (Davies, 1999) Autoethnography, arising from reflexive ethnography, attempts to “situate the self within the context of a culture, subculture or group (Duarte, 2007, p. 2).” In order to situate the self, the researcher(s) becomes the subject. Situating the researcher in the research aims to, through reflective analysis, generate personal insights into the context and the process of generation of knowledge. (Davies, 1999; Ellis, 2004) Ellis (2004) specifies that autoethnography involves both process and product. The process reflects approaches to identifying and organizing information by reflexive analysis of oneself. Autoethnography is also a product because the outcome of the analysis is typically presented using a narrative perspective often as an autobiographic account. In this essay, we adhere to autoethnographic processes, but do not strictly produce narrative, autobiographical, ethnographic products. Thus, we apply the processes, but do not construct a full autoethnographic product.

Duarte (2007) argues for the usefulness of autoethnography in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The personal insights of inquirers in the social and cultural context of teaching offer alternative and important understandings of interactions in a given context. We used autoethnography to inquire into our personal experiences co-teaching two disciplinary (Language Arts/Social Studies and Mathematics/Science) teacher education methodology courses. What follows is a brief description of our courses, an account of a single event, and subsequent discussion of other aspects of the course. These descriptions become objects for discussion to provide contrast with the common structures found in teacher education.

A. Setting the stage.

Before the start of a new semester, we agreed to collaborate on two teacher education courses. We started by discussing our interpretations of the goals for our courses, our experiences with student learning in prior courses, and our goals for our students. In addition, we discussed our experiences with approaches that had been more and less successful in helping students learn complex ideas. Through our discussions, we uncovered our common views on teacher education and its role within the structure of a liberal arts university. We identified similarities in our

philosophies of education and our common commitment to inquiry and critical reflection. Ultimately, we agreed that the course should challenge preservice teachers to learn about student-centered planning and teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and curriculum integration for elementary learning. While we had never co-taught a course, we developed a vision of the course that involved intensive co-teaching and placed both courses of teacher education students in one elementary school for practicum experiences. We approached our department chair for permission to pursue this departure from standard practice, received approval, and began planning the course.

The new vision represented a bold adventure of a deeply integrated teacher education methodology course. Mark was assigned to teach the mathematics and science methods section and Bird was assigned to teach the language arts and social studies methods section. We were both experienced teacher educators, Mark had over a decade of experience but was new to the University and Bird had taught for more than two decades and had taught in this teacher education program for several years.

In the weeks prior to the first day of class, we co-constructed a common syllabus that involved separate and combined class sessions, several common readings, and common assignments. There were 13 students in one section and 14 students in the other; all of whom were in the initial phase of an intensive course sequence that ends in student teaching two semesters later. Early in the term, an event occurred that we continued thinking about for several weeks.

B. An Episode.

It was very early in the term and our respective sections had met only a few times and infrequently as a combined group. Bird, having just returned from leading a strenuous study abroad trip, had become ill. This meant for one day Mark needed to lead both sections in a combined session. This created a problem because the conceptualization and implementation of the course represented a shared, co-constructed vision; neither one of us felt as though we owned the course. Thus, Mark was unsure about leading the combined group though a complex set of ideas without Bird present to co-teach the session. In the midst of that moment of uncertainty, we came to the idea that Bird could attend via Skype™. She would call in from home and be able to speak to the class and also listen to the discussion.

Prior to class, we both took extra care to make sure we agreed on the main ideas for this session. Mark made sure he had a clear sense of the readings, the authors' purposes and arguments. We discussed how Mark might stimulate a lively class discussion and what Bird might do to be part of the process. Bird spent extra time re-reading and thinking about the material and how ideas and assumptions might unfold in a discussion for which she was to be primarily a listener and invisible to the students. We prepared much differently than for a class independently taught by either of us. We realized how when we teach alone, the logic of thinking and the critical questions needed to help students come to understandings became embedded in the process. Years of teaching experience have made a certain repertoire of strategies and practices virtually automatic and seamless. But in a situation such as this, where the sequence and logic were based on multiple perspectives, we knew we had to be much more explicit. Mark thought carefully about what he planned to do in the classroom. Then he discussed it with Bird to make sure that she thought the plans were acceptable and to confirm that all the content she wanted addressed was included. As class started, (author one) checked the computer connections

and assured that everyone could be heard – not only Bird but also that she could hear the students. Bird typically relied on being able to see students' actions and expressions in order to guide her responses and formulate critical questions; not having a "sight line" was unnerving. When class started, Mark watched the faces of students and explained that Bird was home ill and that he would lead the class. As he explained that she was attending class via Skype™, there was an audible shuffle in the class, followed by the voice of Bird thundering from the classroom speakers.

The class continued in a seemingly conventional format. The focus for the session was on two articles about metaphors for learning. We also continued to discuss culturally responsive pedagogy. There were a number of planned activities to help students engage with and make sense of the readings. Since it was early in the term, the readings and activities focused on general ideas about teaching. However, as the class continued, it became clear this session was unique. While the students worked on an activity, Mark used the instant messaging feature of Skype™ to chat with Bird. She listened to class discussions and also sent chat messages about what she heard, describing how and where she thought the discussion was going. Thus, we were able to talk with the students and also with each other about the same event. In effect, we were able to teach and reflect and discuss on our teaching while it was taking place.

Our chats enabled Mark to reflect in the moment and get help thinking through what was actually going on, and thus respond more effectively. With Bird intellectually present in the content, virtually present via Skype™, and simultaneously at a distance, we were able to both teach and reflect with a colleague in action. For example, in the following excerpt, the class had been discussing culturally responsive pedagogy and metaphors for learning. The point was to interrogate students' individual, implicit definitions of learning. Additionally, we wanted to disrupt common ideas about banking models of education – without putting a name on it. Here is a verbatim transcript of the Skype™ chat from one moment from that session:

Bird: I think this is hard for your little tribe as this is not what they think teaching is about so we (you) will need to tie that in for them.

This requires considerable thought and analysis on their part.

Mark: I'm not sure how, so feel free to jump in. We're breaking a few minutes, but after that feel free to jump in. I'm not quite getting them where I hoped.

Bird: Okay ... I think you are doing fine when they start talking about metaphors, what are they talking about?

I would just plain ask them by going back to the first question or two on the calendar.

This is about the relationship piece in schools and schools within communities etc.

Mark: Do you mean, a) What does good practice look like? And b) How do we teach children that are different from ourselves?

After a short break, Mark displayed the questions from the course syllabus. The discussion continued, re-enlivened by Bird's suggestion to revisit some driving questions for the course. Bird continued to be part of the discussion both as reflective listener and a distant but invisible contributor. The class moved into a spirited discussion that could have continued for much longer.

Class ended that day, the students left and the class seemed not radically different than any other class; but something lingered for us both. Our private real-time chats about on-going class discussions left us thinking about what it means to teach, the nature of teaching at the

university, and how we can begin to help prospective teachers develop as critical and reflective practitioners in a community of practice. As we began to consider what occurred, we realized an important aspect was our real time chats based on one person being in the room with students and one person listening and speaking without being able to see the group dynamics. As a result, we thought about communities of practice and began to think about the role of critical reflection as a listening endeavor. The structure of co-teaching, especially with one instructor at a distance, allowed us to develop different interpretations of class dynamics. Ultimately, we recognized how these actions and structures could be at the core of communities of practice.

C. What followed?

After this class session, the course continued but the experience had many lasting impacts. Our approach shifted as we continued to reflect on our experience. We developed shared instructional approaches, we collaboratively observed students in practicum settings, and we began making our reflections on our teaching public to our students. In particular, our written reflections about class sessions, which ultimately became a core of this manuscript, were shared publicly and discussed with the students. These actions, both consistent with our philosophies and precipitated by the events described above, helped transform our teaching. It reformed our notion of co-teaching, which challenged each of us to think differently about reflection and communities of practice.

To elaborate on how co-teaching transformed our practice a specific example is illustrative. Bird previously developed and presented to students a graphic/narrative model of child-centered pedagogies. At her recommendation, we presented this to both sections in a co-taught session. While Bird presented the model to students, Mark listened and participated, but also thought about the model and how it reflected his approach to teaching preservice teachers about child-centered pedagogies and learning in general. During this particular co-taught class session, Mark joined the discussion and together, we reflected on our thinking publicly with the students, shared our critical analyses and questions, and modified the model to accommodate the commonalities shared in our perspectives. Reflecting on the session after class, we collaboratively transformed the model into a planning heuristic and classroom observation format relying on the essential features of model. In the next class, we shared the revised heuristic and classroom observation format with the students and engaged students in another co-led discussion about the limitations and affordances of the new heuristic. Thus, we used co-teaching both in the moment and reflectively within our community of practice to transform each of our practice to arrive at new, alternative approaches.

III. Theoretical Perspectives.

For this essay, we apply sociocultural theories to examine our interactions in communities of practice. In addition, we consider our co-teaching from theories of discourse and connections between discourse and reflective practice. These two broad frameworks interact and overlap to open up discussions informative for teacher education and also the scholarship of teaching and learning. Through this discussion, we hope to raise questions about co-teaching as it relates to teacher education in a liberal arts university education. We also hope to provoke thinking about issues of co-teaching, communities of practice, and reflective practice more broadly.

A. Sociocultural Theory and Communities of Practice.

Sociocultural theory describes and explains events in social contexts (Cobb, 1994; Cobb and Bowers, 1999). A social context is defined by participation in social practices, including the ways of acting and being which participants deem to be meaningful and useful (Cobb and Bowers, 1999; Perkins, 1998). Individual actions in social contexts must be viewed as activities that enable participation in a system of practices. Individual actions can also be described based on the cultural, historical, and institutional contexts in which those actions occur (Wertsch et al., 1995).

Wenger (1998) elaborates on these ideas by describing a Community of Practice as a group having a common domain of interests, engaging in joint activity, and developing a shared repertoire of resources. The construct arises from research that formulated theories of situated learning, which describe how apprentices learned from experts (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995). In an apprenticeship individuals learn by watching an expert, mimicking that expert, and then taking on increasingly challenging responsibilities of the practice of the expert. Situated learning also explains how experiences induct novices into communities of practice. Novices, through participation, learn about the shared domain of interest distinguishes participants in the community of practice. However, communities of practice are also based on joint activity and a shared repertoire of resources. In order to have joint activity and shared repertoires, interactions must be based on common understandings about how to make meaning in a shared context in which all participants have equivalent means, opportunity, and incentive to participate. The implication is that communities of practice become communities of practice when learning occurs through peer interactions.

B. Reflective Practice.

Schön (1987) theorizes, based on ethnographic research, that Reflective Practice represents a hallmark of professional activity. Schön describes two actions: being able to *reflect on action* and *reflect in action*. Reflection *on action* refers to thinking about actions and events after the fact. While reflection *on action* is important, it is not the sole activity of professionals. Reflection *in action*, Schön argues, is a distinguishing feature of professionals. This kind of reflection involves the ability to consider ongoing activity from the perspective of multiple criteria, while also being able to anticipate probable outcomes, and as a result take action in order to reshape the perceived, potential, and experienced outcomes of ongoing activity. In short, reflection *in action* involves being able to evaluate, assess, and act in order to shape ongoing activity in the moment. Both types of reflection are important in professional activity.

Related to reflection is the notion of private discourse in reflection *in action*. Vygotsky (1986) describes inner speech as thinking through ideas and experiences using unspoken words, while engaging in a personal internal dialogue. Private discourse, or inner speech, involves the internal dialogues we have with ourselves in the context of action. Thus, reflection *in action* often occurs through inner speech. But logically, we might wonder whether reflection *in action* may benefit from more than inner speech. As opposed to reacting in the moment based on stimuli, our internal dialogue results in deeper, sophisticated thinking about experiences. From the perspective of reflection *in action*, inner speech seems to be a prerequisite.

However, if we situate in the concept of reflection *in action* in a community of practice, this might create dialogic activity that, as Bahktin (1986) describes, participants continuously

define and redefine understandings of themselves, others, and ideas. This yields two important outcomes relevant to reflection *in action*. First, when individuals think through ideas and make those ideas part of joint activity, they must transform random thoughts into public discourse, which forces articulation of ideas into coherent claims and speculations. This leads to the second outcome; the individuals must articulate ideas in ways that also communicate meanings to the audience (Grice, 1999); thus it requires a kind of coherence. Then, as dialogism suggests, the audience can respond and engage in a dialogue that can affect our thinking. In the event described above, the dialogic activity was semi-public, because it occurred peripherally to the main dialogue. Thus reflection *in action* in a community of practice may be benefitted by semi-public speech. Semi-public speech could enable dialogic joint activity which results in deeper reflection *in action* and more elaborated understandings about the psychological time and space of on-going activity (Edelsky, 1993; O'Connor and Michaels, 1996; Shultz, Florio, and Erickson, 1982). We suggest that dialogic activity may facilitate reflection *in action*. However, to support reflection in action, dialogic activity relies on participants engaging in public or semi-public speech about reflections to make thinking transformed into shared action.

IV. Discussion.

Stepping back from theory, we would like to discuss the event described above using these theoretical perspectives. This discussion intends to generate dialogue among colleagues about communities of practice, the role of sociocultural perspectives in introspection, and the ways that each of these helps elaborate our understandings of reflective practice. Such a discussion offers the opportunity to consider limitations and also questions implied in this essay.

In terms of limitations, we would like to distinguish practical from philosophical limitations. It is tempting to focus on practical limitations including such things as scheduling, time, load, and faculty expectations. Clearly our context is particular; we are faculty in a liberal arts university that privileges teacher-scholars. While many of the approaches and actions we took may be perceived as being only relevant in similar institutions, we believe that such practical limitations can be overcome through commitment and creative endeavor. For example, developing a community of practice around a course can occur in many contexts in many disciplines. Similarly, we can say anecdotally – we have colleagues who have done similar things – that the use of Skype™ is possible in a variety of contexts. Clearly we were afforded a practical benefit of time that our courses were scheduled concurrently. Yet this remains a practical dilemma that does not seem insurmountable. For us, philosophical limitations are potentially much more profound than practical ones. Engaging in practices as we describe here require a willingness to take risks, to be fearless, and to make oneself vulnerable. Such actions are intuitively counter to stereotypical roles as professor. Thus we recognize that our willingness to engage in this project was serendipitous in that we were both willing to take risks, be vulnerable, and expose our faults to one another. In short, we were willing to take a stance that co-teaching would be effective for our students given the course and context.

A. Communities of practice of practice and university education.

Communities of practice offer one perspective from which we can examine our story. We devoted considerable time and energy coming to common understandings so that enabled us to develop common readings and assignments across the multiple content domains (language arts,

mathematics, science, and social studies pedagogy). We made efforts to identify central concepts we felt were important for students of teaching to learn. Our development of common understandings led us to determine that we must engage in joint activity in our course(s). Stepping in and out of our discussions we found ourselves developing shared common frameworks for thinking about teaching which crossed disciplinary (e.g. Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science) boundaries. Ultimately, as a result of our common activity, we evolved a shared repertoire in our practice.

One might wonder about how this differs from instructors engaging in collaborative or co-teaching; what distinguishes our situation? This largely depends on how collaborative teaching is defined. Collaborative teaching can occur without development of common language or repertoires of practice. Instructors can contribute personal expertise without developing shared norms and practices or synergistic relationships that supersede individual or discipline. We developed unique synergistic structures that reflected our common understandings. This privileged neither of our perspectives and required that we share and discuss our values, beliefs and assumptions about learning to teach. We shared these ideas with each other and also with our students.

Ultimately, our experiences caused us to wonder about structures present in university education. Graduates of the university, future professionals, will be expected to participate in communities of practice. To learn to participate in communities of practice, students need to observe and experience communities of practice in order to learn to be effective and productive members of such communities of practice. We wonder, in what ways do course structures enable development of students' abilities to participate in communities of practice? We recognize that institutional contexts can be limited in their ability to offer flexible structures similar ours. Yet we remain curious about whether creative faculty within those institutions might be able to generate contextually feasible structures that might enable such experiences. Moreover we wonder, what might result from rethinking structures to facilitate high fidelity implementation of communities of practice in university courses?

Within the discipline of teacher education, one might argue that students gain experiences with communities of practice through student teaching. Practicum experiences of teacher education follow ideas of situated learning to design apprenticeship models for learning to teach. Prospective teachers learn about teaching by taking on increasing responsibility for running a classroom. Such an approach situates prospective teacher learning within a community of practice. Yet this argument has shortcomings and leads to pragmatic problems. Logically, apprenticeships focus on development of skills useful in a particular profession through modeling and practice. Some argue that apprenticeships can be a challenging context for teacher learning (Feiman-Nemser and Buchman, 1985; Feiman-Nemser and Buchman, 1987). Furthermore, apprenticeship models imply that teaching is a technical craft to be learned through practice (Britzman, 2003). However, it is clear that teaching is an intellectual activity involving more than skill (Jackson, 1990; Lampert, 1985; Lortie, 1975; Wilson, Floden, and Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). Furthermore, the apprenticeship is structured around a hierarchy, which is problematic in a community of practice. Apprenticeships can obscure the need for teachers to build communities of practice in classrooms; it implies a model of teacher as expert and students as learners who are recipients of knowledge, ideas, and meaning. Finally, the apprenticeship approach is confounded by the ways it places novice teachers in conflicting roles. The novice must navigate multiple expectations including: their personal expectations, expectations of their cooperating teachers, and the demands of the licensure program. The multiple expectations are

challenged by novice teachers' identities and assumptions about learning to teach. (Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann, 1985) Thus, we wonder whether the hierarchical arrangement of an apprenticeship ultimately limits teacher education. Regardless, the broader notion of entering a community of practice seems potentially useful as both a construct and a theoretical orientation; but *both* the construct and orientation need to be applied.

B. Reflection and dialogism in university education.

Schön (1987) argues that reflective practice, including reflection *on* and *in* action, results in professional learning. The official structure of our respective courses might have inhibited opportunities to learn the professional activity of reflection. Structures that arrange one instructor teaching a group of students can create challenges to making reflection visible to students and actually engaging in reflective practice while teaching. Thinking particularly about reflection *in* action, the challenge arises in that the structure neither enables discourses around reflection nor makes professional reflection visible to students. While we are concerned with teacher education students, we wonder whether the structure (e.g. one instructor assigned to one group of students) similarly affects the broader university community and whether other disciplines face impediments to learning reflective practice.

Reflection can occur in communities of practice, which offer contexts where peers can easily reflect *on* their actions through joint activity using professional resources. Schön's (1987) distinction of professionals as reflective practitioners and the nature of reflection professionals engage in is more prominent in the specific event described here, but this represents a larger issue. In the specific event, the on-going dialogue embedded in the class session represents a reflection *in* action; but reflection relatively unique to have documented. This essay subsequently becomes reflection *on* action. But, we argue that the community of practice and disruptions in the context were vital to enabling reflection *in* action, and also our subsequent reflection *on* action. Having an intellectually present peer, who shared a repertoire of action, provoked a kind of reflection *in* action facilitated by public discourse as well as dialogism that forced explicit metacognition about the on-going activity. This was only possible due to the disruption in the context we created by co-teaching our courses. Thus, we infer that these interacting planes and reflections were important in creating a kind of learning we value and see as critical in developing reflective professionals.

V. A Final Episode.

Now, as we are rocking on the porch in mid-May while looking at the draft of this essay, we reflect on the semester. We confess to one another that we had no idea that our beginnings – and particularly the class session using Skype™ – would lead to this moment. We begin sharing our thoughts and successes from our combined efforts during the semester. We talk about the ways we see changes in our students who have begun to emerge as professionals over the past fifteen weeks. Our discussion begins to meander into hopes for our students, their strengths, and the challenges they will face. But, we soon realize that reflection on our semester is not the task of the moment. Reflecting in the moment on the scholarly dimension of our professional lives we realize that to tell this story our joint activity in this moment must focus on: clarifying our shared goals and intentions for this essay, identifying the common understandings of our personal and broader communities of practice, and developing our shared repertoire around this piece. The

draft is our shared public discourse that we can examine, consider, and discuss. Through our discussion, we identify central points, revisit the claims and argument, and we engage in the process of creation, reflecting the professional activity of an academic. Reflecting in action allows us to focus on the present task. In retrospect we realize that our present activity might have been improbable were we not in a context that enabled it. We developed a community of practice based on shared goals, norms, and repertoires. Finally, through our community of practice we were able to jointly explore alternative approaches and media to facilitate a disruption of the norm.

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