

The Professoriate: Transforming Teaching Practices Through Critical Reflection and Dialogue

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The growth of research on teachers' knowledge and beliefs has instigated new ways of thinking about teaching and about professional and educational development, which is the emphasis of this study. The study provided some explanations to the following question: How may teachers' beliefs, through the use of critical reflection and dialogue, facilitate classroom practices and ultimately develop teachers professionally? The results of the study indicated that critical reflection and dialogue, whether done individually with the researcher and/or among colleagues, facilitates classroom practices that, in turn, develop college teachers professionally. Critical reflection and teacher dialogue seemed to influence the participants at a level of awareness rather than by actual change in classroom practices; however, this awareness should not be discounted as it is an important step in the process of developing teachers professionally. Although minimal, some change in classroom practices did occur and should be considered significant in regards to critical reflection and dialogue and their impact on professional development.

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

One hears in academic circles that professors don't necessarily need to be "good" at teaching as long as they know their content. This certainly is not the case within colleges of education. Teacher educators'

jobs are twofold: First, they must know their content, as do colleagues in other colleges. Secondly, however, it is essential that teacher educators are capable to teach the content in a way that is conducive to learning and that they model effective classroom practices. How can one justify employing teacher educators, whose primary responsibility is to produce “good” K-12 teachers, who cannot or do not model effective teaching and learning practices? The purpose of this article is not to compare college faculty, but rather to advocate for the use of critical reflection through teacher dialogue as a tool for improving teacher educators’ practices, thereby potentially improving K-12 teaching as well.

Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983) have contended that teachers’ work is complex and requires deep and foundational reflective practices. They argued for a proactive and learner-centered form of reflection in which the practitioner becomes the owner of, and subject in, the process of his or her own reflection. This will result in developing a language for talking and thinking about their own practices, questioning the sometimes contradictory beliefs underpinning their practice, and taking greater control over their own professional growth. Jay and Johnson (2002) provide a more current definition of the reflective process:

Reflection is a process, both individual and collaborative, involving experience and uncertainty. It is comprised of identifying questions and key elements of a matter that has emerged as significant, then taking one’s thoughts into dialogue with oneself and others. One evaluates insights gained from the process with reference to: 1) additional perspectives, 2) one’s own values, experiences and beliefs, and 3) the larger context within which the questions are raised. (p. 76)

Corcoran and Leahy (2003) support the need for teachers to have an inquiry orientation. Reflection is not simply a matter of thinking back on actions taken but rather effective teachers look for internal, logical consistency and inconsistency between espoused beliefs and actions taken. When describing this inquiry orientation, Corcoran and Leahy (2003) cite Kotkamp’s “a cycle of paying deliberate, analytical attention to one’s action in relation to intentions, as if from an external

observer's perspective, for the purpose of expanding one's options and making decisions about improved ways of acting in the future" (p. 32). Corcoran and Leahy further emphasize social support in reflective practice; this requires a public testing of private assumptions as well as dialogue with other participants in the teaching-learning context (Corcoran & Leahy, 2003; Leahy & Corcoran, 1996).

Recently, there has been a call for greater accountability and a nationwide investment in assessing and documenting the outcomes of education (Levine, 2005). As a result universities have refocused their attention on teaching and the instructional performance of college teachers. According to Baiocco and DeWaters (1998), since faculty are the infantry, attacking the problems on the front lines within colleges and universities, it can be argued that faculty development is the key to reform. As part of the professional role, faculty are responsible for analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and communicating the changes that are occurring not only in the disciplines but also in society.

Current research shows an increasing recognition that the teacher, college and K-12, is at the center of any attempt to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Attempts to reorganize programs, develop curriculum, and improve teacher effectiveness ultimately rely on the professional development of the teacher (Levine, 2005). Engaging in critical reflection through individual interviews, focus groups, and observations by a researcher, as these college teachers did, may facilitate the process of making implicit beliefs explicit, allowing for these individuals to develop, reflect, and enhance their classroom practices.

Research Design

College teachers were selected from a department within a college of education at a midsized urban university in the Midwest. The three college teachers are on a tenure track; one is tenured and the other two are working toward tenure. The researcher relied on field notes to record information from individual interviews, focus group meetings, classroom observations, and after-class reflections.

Prior to the fall semester, the participants completed the Teacher Belief and Attitude Survey developed by Pourdavood and Harrington (1998), which had been adapted for purposes of this particular study. This survey inquired about their specific classroom practices in relation to their beliefs about student learning and teaching. In addition, the college teachers were individually interviewed at the beginning of fall semester to understand their initial, stated beliefs about student learning and teaching. Data collected from the first interviews and surveys were analyzed and used as a measure against the responses from the interviews and surveys that were given at the end of spring semester. The focus group approach provided an opportunity to hold guided discussions among the three participants pertaining to their beliefs about student learning and teaching. The objective of the focus group was to assist the college teachers in moving from an implicitly held, private belief system to an explicit description of their cognitive frame of reference. Once these beliefs were explicit among the members of the focus group, it was possible to compare the college teachers' beliefs about student learning and teaching and their practices within the classroom. The focus group met once every three weeks for approximately one hour throughout the spring semester, for a total of five meetings.

The college teachers were also observed individually in their classrooms five times, along with after-class reflections facilitated by the researcher throughout the spring semester. Classroom behavior was assessed as an indicator of either a teacher-centered or student-centered approach among participants. After each class, the individual teacher and the researcher spent approximately fifteen minutes discussing the classroom experience that had taken place. In each case, the researcher asked the teacher how he thought the class went based on what he had planned and with what he was most and least satisfied. The researcher then inquired about any significant occurrences she had noticed.

The research was completed in two phases, each of which was vital to the credibility of the overall study. *Phase One*, the preliminary phase, consisted of the process in which the researcher determined the who, what, where, when, and how of the study (i.e., the process by which the participants would be brought together as a committed group for the study and the selection of the data sources to be used in the study). *Phase Two* of the study was the active phase of data collection.

The initial interviews and administration of the survey took place just prior to the spring semester. These data were analyzed prior to the start of the focus groups, classroom observations, and after-class reflections so that the researcher could use this information as a starting point for dialogue among participants. In addition, data collected from the fall surveys and interviews were analyzed and used as a measure against the responses from the surveys and interviews given at the end of spring semester. The analyses revealed how teachers' reflection through dialogue facilitated classroom practices and ultimately teachers' professional development. Once the spring semester began, the focus group meetings, classroom observations, and after-class reflections occurred simultaneously.

Data Analysis

The researcher used an interpretive approach to determine how teachers' reflection and dialogue facilitated classroom practices and ultimately teachers' professional development (Calderhead, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The inductive data analysis allows for patterns and themes to emerge from the inquiry. Based on emerging patterns, categories were developed. Constant comparative analysis was used to combine inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), as new events are constantly compared with previous events, new typological dimensions, as well as new relationships, may be discovered.

Using these methods for analysis, data from the transcriptions of focus group interactions, after-class reflection, field notes from classroom observations, and the college teachers' responses to the surveys and interviews were inductively analyzed. In addition, every piece of information collected can be traced back to its source; the source being the data collected from the interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations of the participants of the study. These data were distributed to the participants for their modification. This allowed the participants to confirm the data collected from them and to make any adjustments or clarifications needed for the data to be trustworthy.

Emergent Themes

The themes that emerged within this study were the notion of reflection in transforming one's beliefs and practices, the individualistic culture of higher education, mentoring relationships, and collegial relationships and professional dialogue.

Reflection of One's Beliefs and Practices. The researcher believes the simple fact that the professors agreed to participate in the study was an indication that they felt reflecting on one's beliefs and practices was important. They were aware that the researcher would be asking them to think about student learning and teaching and its relationship to practice. The presence of the researcher throughout the observations, as noted by all the participants, provided an awareness of what was taking place within the classroom context that had not existed before. In addition, the dialogue between the researcher and participant after class observations allowed for reflection of beliefs and practices. Last, the focus group discussions provided a means for issues to surface pertaining to student learning and teaching. Simply allowing oneself to listen and respond to others can, as indicated in this study, facilitate self-reflection.

Culture of Higher Education. It is the researcher's conclusion that when speaking of the individualistic nature of higher education, this desire to function independently seems to have taken an exaggerated state and has become a barrier to establishing relationships amongst colleagues.

Mentoring Relationships. The researcher believes, in theory, this idea of collaboration could begin with developing *mentoring* relationships. The importance of this was apparent between two professors within the study who co-taught a class. The dialogue between them about their experiences seemed to provide the junior faculty member with several ideas about the process of teaching that did not exist before. It is the opinion of the researcher that the questions raised by the senior faculty member allowed for his mentee to self-reflect and self-evaluate. For the senior faculty member, the importance of mentoring relationships became apparent to him as a result of his participation in this study. Discussions within the focus groups

evidenced the significance of the mentoring process as well, in that the senior faculty member noticed his colleagues truly reflecting on his comments.

Collegial Relationships and Professional Dialogue. Building collegial relationships and their impact on beliefs and practices can be successful in helping one understand the relationship between beliefs about student learning and one's teachings. It is understood that collegial relationships can create change within the teaching profession.

Findings and Discussion

The results of the study indicate that critical reflection through dialogue, whether done individually with the researcher or among colleagues, does facilitate classroom practices. This, in turn, develops college teachers professionally.

It is important to note that it is difficult to determine which aspect(s) of the study were the sources for awareness/change in beliefs and practices. This is due to the fact that the surveys, interviews, classroom observations, after-class reflections, and focus groups are interrelated; as a result, they may have influenced each other. All the sources could have contributed to any awareness/change; this makes it extremely difficult to pinpoint which had the most influence. However, it would be fair to say that all the means for collecting data are in and of themselves a form of critical reflection and have been shown to change classroom practices, ultimately improving teaching and learning.

Throughout the study, there were numerous examples of how critical reflection through dialogue facilitated classroom practices and developed college teachers' skills. Critical reflection allowed for an awareness and/or change to take place and, to some degree, it allowed college teachers to grow professionally.

Paired Critical Reflection: Dialogue Between Researcher and Teacher

The central task of the dialogue with the researcher was to assist the college teachers in moving from an implicitly held and private

belief system to an explicit description of their cognitive frame of reference. The researcher questioned the participants individually to determine their existing beliefs and again, after each classroom observation, as it allowed for an opportunity to reflect about student learning and teaching and their practices within the classroom, in turn, providing an opportunity to develop professionally.

Professor B expressed numerous beliefs about teaching and learning, a few of which are highlighted for purposes of this article. Professor B had a tendency to pay more attention to the students who were engaged in their work; whereas the students who were not as engaged or not engaged at all did not get as much attention. His preferences were expressed during the following after-class reflection:

Researcher: Do you tend to work more with the engaged students because you like that? And the ones that aren't, like with Student O—she worked on her own and she wasn't really in a group—and you two did not really spend a lot of time together. Is that an issue I am reading into, in that you prefer to work with the students that are showing that they are engaged?

P_B: I think we all have that bias, and you gravitate to them; and I will be honest with you. I thought Student O dropped the class. How far is enough? How far should I go? Because you are right with Student C; I backed off. With Student O, to be honest with you, I did not know she was even supposed to be here. I did not go that far.

As part of this preference, when the professor defined something that was obvious in his mind, his patience was minimal when the students didn't catch on. And yet, after explanation, there was an awareness that some students didn't understand, but he chose to continue on with the lesson.

Professor B, through his reflection with the researcher, became aware of this and believed this was a bias that occurred among all professors. Although it bothered him, he believed that he had to be realistic about the fact that some students just did not care. This critical reflection forced the college teacher to evaluate whether or not his

belief was appropriate and, in turn, decide whether he felt the need to change his belief and practice. There was no evidence of a behavior change following this reflection; rather awareness only. However, this “new” awareness allowed the participant to at least question his current belief and practice and should not be minimized.

Professor B agreed with the statement, “It is important to cover all curriculum assigned to a course if students are to be successful in the remaining required coursework.” One of the reasons this college teacher may have used the teacher-centered approach more often could have been due to time constraints in relationship to covering all curriculum. Time management seemed to be difficult for this participant. An example of this was when the students were rushed to come up with their group’s choices as to what they valued most. With a limited amount of time, the students were told to write their choices on the chalkboard. The professor informed the researcher that the activity actually takes 1½ hours to complete, but the students were given 15 minutes. The professor emphasized the problems he faced due to time constraints and the influence this had on his teaching practices. He wanted to go more in-depth with the content; however, the number of topics that he introduced to his students would not allow for it. Professor B commented:

I tried to squeeze six hours into three, and in that sense I cut a lot of corners; so I don’t feel overly happy about the material I covered and in the depth that I wanted to. So, in the time, I accomplished in a way what I said I would do covering the topics; but I did not go into depth that I wish we could have.

The professor felt that even though college teachers might lose some students, the lecture was a necessary part of teaching. The professor, when using the lecture format, indicated that he was unclear whether or not the students were developing an understanding of the material. He stated:

At the beginning with lecturing, you have to get the information across, like audience, location, selecting a story. That’s a given, you have to get it across. You can see it in the eyes. They were drifting off; they didn’t seem into it. ... I

think with the lecture part of it, because this always happens, it's obvious people lose you.

Again, it is apparent that the critical reflection experience allowed for this participant's implicit beliefs to become explicit, in turn, giving him the opportunity to decide whether or not his belief/practice is appropriate. Although the researcher didn't observe any change in the current classroom practice, the awareness of this struggle provided an opportunity for this participant to evolve professionally through critical reflection with the researcher.

Professor C struggled with his teaching approach in relationship to institutional norms values. Professor C mentioned:

I do not think that we define teaching as risk-taking, thoughtful behavior, often enough; so that when I try to present it as that, that is a real challenge to folks. We present education, teaching and learning, from birth to death too often as simple, straightforward, basically an elaborate fill-in-the-blank process and that there is one answer. I do not think that that is what it should be, and I don't think that is what we really want it to be.

Although this professor struggled with what the institution valued in relationship to teaching, he continued to practice his own beliefs. An observation showed evidence of this. For example, the college teacher stated to the class as the activity continued, "I know this is not your usual way of interacting with other students. I would ask you to step back and give it a chance." Each group took a turn at showing their snapshot to the rest of the class. As this occurred, Professor C took a picture of the snapshot with his camera. After each snapshot, he asked the other students what they saw. Students responded with a variety of answers. Critical reflection through dialogue with the researcher permitted this participant to question his existing value system in relationship to the institution values. He concluded that there was not a need to shift his value; this was a confirming experience for the participant.

In regards to assessment, Professor C believed in authentic assessment—assignments in which the students truly had an interest. He believed in the value of one-on-one interaction with his students

and spent a lot of time conferencing with students; this method “worked” for him. One of the reasons Professor C valued this one-on-one interaction was because it allowed for reflection on one’s own experiences. Professor C commented, “I had a chance to talk to them afterwards and hoped to make a little bit of a difference there.” The participant stated that he became aware of conferencing through his own reflection with the researcher during this study and planned to make this more a part of his teaching in the future. These conferences, according to the college teacher, would allow him to gain a better understanding of where the students were in their learning. The shift to more conferencing was apparent from the following comments:

I was probably most satisfied with the conversation afterwards. This is a good chance to talk things through and see where they were because that is more important than the actual activity that they led. They had a sense of how they would do it differently, how they would improve it, or how they were challenged by it. ... I think I am going to have to structure some conference times, regular conference times, with these students in every class from now on.

Again, an awareness of one’s beliefs, through critical reflection, allows for the opportunity to change current beliefs. Professor C perceived his new belief/practice of individual conferencing to be more appropriate practice.

Grouped Critical Reflection: Dialogue Between Teachers

During the initial interviews, topics that could be discussed during the focus groups were brainstormed with the participants. This allowed the participants to feel they held some responsibility for the progress of the group discussions and had ownership, to some extent, for the overall direction of the study. The discussions gravitated towards the following topics: how students learn, learning styles, goal of instruction, role of the teacher, standards, expectations, and student participation. These topics originated from the initial interviews and the examination that took place during the classroom observations. In order to secure the compatibility between the researcher’s

understanding (interpretation) of the participants' stated beliefs, the transcriptions of audiotapes were shared with the participants for modifications and input.

The central task of the focus group discussions (teacher dialogue) was to assist the college teachers in moving from an implicitly held and private belief system to an explicit description of their cognitive frame of reference. Once these beliefs were explicit among the members of the focus group, it allowed for a comparison of the college teachers' beliefs about student learning and teaching and their practices within the classroom, in turn, providing an opportunity to develop professionally through grouped critical reflection.

In theory, the focus groups seemed to be an effective way to facilitate in-depth discussion about student learning and teaching; however, the teacher dialogue ended up mostly being a medium for information sharing including descriptions of their teaching methods, their role in the classroom, and learning situations created by the participants. The number of discussions that moved beyond information sharing was minimal. The intention was for the teacher dialogue to reach confrontation and reconstruction levels, which are necessary for deconstruction and reconstruction of one's beliefs and practices (Smyth, 1989). The study determined that the teacher dialogue had an influence on the individual teacher's beliefs about student learning and their classroom practices, although minimal and possibly only immediate. This particular study showed that collaboration among teachers can potentially facilitate one's professional development. This is evidenced in the following interactions that occurred during the teacher dialogue.

Professor A commented that the discussion that occurred about attendance policies within the focus group was a pivotal event. Professor A said, "It was kind of interesting to watch, especially Professor B; he seemed to wrestle with this issue." So it was pivotal to the college teacher in terms of the role he seems to be taking on as a mentor to junior faculty. Professor A realized that he had to try to help them grow and understand why he did things the way he did. An example of this was his willingness to team-teach with Professor B and to help Professor B's transition into the politics and policies of the elementary school where they taught. Professor A didn't know if Professor B's transformation was going to be permanent or as dramatic

as he was interpreting it; but at least he watched Professor B transform and then realized that he had helped Professor B transform by just presenting an alternative way.

Professor A also stated, “Almost as if there needs to be a consequence of the conversation (i.e., as a result of talking about this), now you are going to have to think about what you are doing in your teaching.” This consequence seemed to be an important part to the professional development process, according to this professor.

Professor B made an additional comment pertaining to getting to know colleagues. He said, “I think if anything in terms of professional development with Professor A and myself, during our period of working together, there was a lot of reflection when we were talking out loud to each other.” A pivotal event that occurred during the focus group, which was mentioned by Professor B during the interview, showed how much he valued and may have been influenced by teacher dialogue:

The test format discussed in Focus Group #5; I had never done that. I think the students did amazingly well on the test and I was willing to try in that sense to be a little more offbeat. What is the long-term effect on it? I am going to try it with the doctoral class. As for an intangible effect, hopefully more of a sensitivity and understanding, listening to my colleagues; what would they bring to their teaching? Maybe before I wasn't as attuned or sensitive enough to realize they have their baggage and experience that they bring to it.

More evidence of the emerging theme that systematic discussions/feedback from peers and other professionals would facilitate one's transformation came from Professor C:

In terms of the focus groups, definitely a similar impact, it made me think a little bit more about my teaching. I think it makes one reflect on it to some extent. Long term, again, you [the researcher] reinforce something that I think is incredibly important to us as professionals, that is that we need to be engaging with others that are around this work. We just can't be doing it in isolation. And it's not just a nice

idea to be engaged with others; it should be part of the definition of the profession. It's not and it should be.

Professor B said, "In some cases, the observations and reflections confirmed what I already suspected about certain things; in another way it was a fresh pair of eyes looking at what I did that perhaps caught something that I did not catch." Professor C confirmed that reflection on one's beliefs and practices influenced one's decision making and instructional strategies in the following statement: "What you had us do, it's so just completely in alignment with what I believe is important in teaching and that is more professional community building, more participating, more participating one-on-one in a more thoughtful, caring, sensitive, a more responsible way."

Conclusions and Future Considerations

A certain culture exists among teachers within higher education. One aspect of this culture is the individualistic nature of higher education in relationship to its teachers. One of the more well-known reasons people choose to become college teachers is for the autonomy that they are able to have. It is the researcher's conclusion that when speaking of the individualistic nature of higher education, this desire to function independently seems to have taken an exaggerated state and has become a barrier to establishing productive dialogue among colleagues. The researcher believes one can have autonomy and still critically reflect with other teachers.

The decision to develop professionally, as was evident in the current study, depends much on what is at stake. If the stakes are high (i.e., the tenure process in higher education), significant cognitive conflict would most likely have to exist for change to occur. For these college teachers, the cognitive conflict was not significant enough to take precedent over the high stakes of the tenure process, and in turn, minimal change occurred. A changed level of awareness seemed to be the outcome from a professional development standpoint. However, even when the stakes are high, individuals need to embrace cognitive conflict, or disequilibrium, which could be a means to possible change. Awareness and change, through critical reflection, are a vital part of professional development.

Sunal, Hodges, and Sunal (2001) believe change is difficult in higher education because the organization of the institution, its expectations, and its roles inhibit risk-taking, ambiguity, and the inquiry required for change to occur. Change in faculty members will not occur unless they experience dissatisfaction with their existing conceptions of teaching. Creating cognitive conflict, through critical reflection, with faculty members' conceptions of teaching is an important goal for successful professional development. According to Sunal et al. (2001), change likely will not take place unless faculty members work with their colleagues to negotiate and create common understandings related to reform.

Quinlan and Akerlind (2000) found that more highly cohesive and interactive departments would experience greater comfort with the idea of collaborative teaching projects and would be more willing to share their experiences and practices. More recently, there has been increased interest in such situated teaching enhancement activities in higher education, fueled by attention to disciplinary differences and constructivist approaches to learning and professional development. These researchers demonstrate the importance of considering the context within which peer review of teaching and collaborative teaching activities are attempted. Generally, college teachers will most likely react positively to collaboration if collaborative work patterns already exist, agreement exists upon a set of external standards, an involvement in education reform is present, a need or problem wants to be addressed, reasonable levels of morale and trust are present between faculty, and confidence is there in terms of status and reputation.

After the researcher facilitated the paired reflections and focus groups for an entire semester, it became more apparent what needed to exist in terms of critical reflection for this collaboration to succeed. Although the teacher dialogues for this particular study were influential to some degree, it appears that if certain dynamics had been present, the influence may have been much greater. Regardless of the venue used to encourage dialogue, it is the researcher's understanding that a personal commitment, time, and active listening must exist in order to have successful critical reflection and dialogue with colleagues.

Building critical reflection opportunities can be successful in helping one understand the relationship between beliefs about student learning and one's teachings. It is understood that critical reflection

can create change within the teaching profession, even if minimal. Time needs to be set aside specifically for professional dialogue which, in turn, develops critical reflection. The research findings also suggest that in order to create change via professional dialogue, there has to be a long-term process. The findings of the study also indicate that, as educators, it must be kept in mind for results to occur, critical reflection through professional dialogue has to start with authentic issues that college teachers have—the concerns, ideas, questions, and celebrations they have. By engaging in dialogue, individuals may become uncomfortable due to a new awareness; however, that is how individuals are motivated to change.

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