Professional Development Risks and Opportunities Embodied within Self-Study

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This paper documents a self-study research group’s development and its effects on 11 participants. Drawing on the scholarship of the self-study tradition within educational research, we see teacher knowledge as an important and largely untapped source for the improvement of teaching. Positioning participants to look at the sense and selves being made on a continual basis is the task embraced by this self-study group. The paper reveals professional development risks and opportunities confronted by educators through vulnerably, accountably, integrally, and mindfully negotiating teaching-learning lives. The findings suggest that our bodies are the reflexive ground of comprehension, confronting vulnerability, seeking accountability to self, negotiating theory as working notions, and experiencing the pull of teaching-learning possibilities. Thus the role of embodiment within teaching-learning practices is elucidated through educator professional development in action.

This paper documents a self-study research group from its inception, storying its development and its effects, both individually and collectively, on the curricular lives of 11 participating educators. Participating educators collaborating with the principal authors in the writing of this paper include Teresa Abrahams, Chandra Diaz-DeBose, Sandra Dop, Kathy Fuchser, Joyce Lehn, Colette Mast, Virginia Newton, Judith Ruskamp, and Sarah Thomas. As curriculum theorists and teacher educators, we seek ways to blend theory with practice in our daily work. Self-study of teacher education practices is a tradition within participatory action research that purposefully fosters interrelatedness between our teaching and research. It positions us to confront self-understandings of the nature of teaching about teaching in order to enhance our practices. Self-study is thus key to our professional development and reflects our desire to do more than “deliver” courses in teacher education.

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Throughout our teaching and research, educators relay how incapacitated they increasingly feel as schooling practices and policies intended to enhance student achievement are mandated and applied. These educational “fixes” are to be carried out by teachers, but most often, are under-resourced, mis-communicated, and entail little teacher input and/or knowledge. The research literature reiterates these concerns and documents ways to orient educator professional development initiatives very differently. For example, Ball (2000) and Delpit (2000) stress the necessity of preparing teachers for diversity of all kinds. Ball documents the lessons learned that teacher preparation programs ought to address and Delpit documents the context-sensitive implications for learners and learning. Bingham & Sidorkin (2004) argue for greater attention to the concept of relations in the work of teaching-learning and the benefits for educators. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2001) and Fullan (1999) point to the strengths of teachers assuming central participatory roles within professional development initiatives. Day (2004) builds a case for teacher passion cultivating professional communities deserving of the term education. Hansen (2001) advocates for educator conversations that consider teaching to be a moral and intellectual practice. Hargreaves (2002), Nias (1996) and Noddings (1996) surface the integral emotional dimensions that give significant contours to the teaching lives of educators. Yet professional development “fixes” persist, disregarding these various orientations that position teachers to be purposefully involved as primary participants. Over and over again, the impact of teachers on the quality of education is vastly underestimated and undermined.

The tradition of self-study holds much potential as a vehicle for educator professional development, countering professional development “fixes” through documenting teachers’ lived engagement with theory/practice considerations, shaping the work of ongoing professional development endeavors. For example, Hamilton (2004), Loughran (2004), Russell (2002), Samaras (2002), and Tidwell & Fitzgerald (2004) document how self-study takes into account that the practice of teaching occurs alongside teachers’ relational understandings of the learning situations they meet and teachers’ interpretations within their lived encounters with learners. Self-study entrusts the work of teaching and learning to teachers and students. Perhaps, in so doing, it reveals what is so desperately absent from the language and practices of fixes. Within this documentation of a self-study research group, a text emerges that deliberately foregrounds the potential of intersections among theory, self-study, and concrete teaching-learning incidents, elucidating the role of embodiment within educator professional development in action.

A Common Point of Departure

The self-study research group meets for 2 to 3 hours monthly over 18 months. Each member’s commitment is to examine a common set of readings and bring individual writing in response to the readings to share with the group at its monthly meetings. The readings and writings serve as a springboard for group discussion and direct the ways we proceed.
Bringing and holding the group of 11 educators together is a common understanding of self as always being in relationship to other(s), with consequences for our teaching-learning practices. This Gadamerian (1964) notion of a relational self is a fundamental assumption central to the workings of our self-study group, acting as a persistent impetus undergirding the ways the research group progresses. Thus a relational self entails valuing personal sense-making alongside collective sense-making. Dewey (1938) describes this concomitant movement of thinking as growing and taking shape “through the process of social intelligence” (p. 72). Our self-study group embraces this process as necessarily instilled and fueled through individual and collective participation within sense-making. To initiate this process, the tenets of self-study of teacher education practices are introduced to the group, including restoring complexity to the nature of teaching and learning, examining assumptions implicit in teaching-learning practices, and questioning and articulating practices that surface in pedagogical reasoning (Loughran, 2002). In one sense this introduction is unnecessary, as we have already encountered these tenets within our daily practices. These tenets are what the participants find so compelling to willingly meet in attempts to come to understand this relational impetus more fully.

As a common point of departure the self-study group reads Kerdeman’s (2003) discussion, “Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning.” Drawing on the thinking of Gadamer (1964) that sees self-understanding as necessarily relational, Kerdeman proposes that a key dimension of teaching and learning that is largely unexplored is the “proclivity for self-questioning and doubt” that Gadamer terms “being pulled up short.”

While the difference between the world and us can be experienced when unforeseen happiness comes our way, more significant disclosures of difference occur whenever our assumptions, expectations, and desires fail to materialize, are thwarted, or reversed. Such disappointments of expectation Gadamer calls “being pulled up short.” (Gadamer, 1993, cited in Kerdeman, 2003, p. 295)

Kerdeman develops such catching of self within the act of teaching and learning as a disposition, a way of being and living giving expression to self-understanding (p. 305). There is a resonance within the group that “being pulled up short” is indeed the catalyst that initiates, sustains, and nurtures our self-study group. The persistent impetus calls our very selves into question, demanding evaluation and reconfiguration, spawning potential for renewal and reverence for limitations. We proceed, cognizant that being pulled up short is unsettling, disrupting and reconfiguring our selves within our teaching-learning practices.

The Individual-Collective Process Character of Self-Study

The process character integral within self-study demands that all of us attend to the experiences and understandings of others, bringing this thinking back to ourselves,
inciting an individual-collective movement that is always in the making, forming and
reforming, transforming self and others. In this way, turning back on self is a process
experienced as interdependent with others. There is a lostness and foundness of self
that characterizes this process, constituted within Dewey's (1934) notion of the live
creature, “the live being recurrently loses and reestablishes equilibrium with his
surroundings” (p. 17). The interplay of a lost and found self is achieved through
questioning and self-doubt, continually seeking “an organic connection between
education and personal experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Such interplay is taken up
by Biesta (2004) as “the [communicative] gap in which education actually takes
place” (p. 21). It is such a gap that asks each of us to surrender personal imposed
control for Dewey’s (1938) notion of social control, with control coming from within
the learning situations encountered in the gap itself (p. 21). Thus space for
speculation, projection, the unanticipated, guides and provides direction. The
ensuing movement of thinking becomes a discourse by nature, an ongoing
conversation responsive to the particulars arising out of situations and folding back
into situations. Our aim in this paper is to articulate the discourse generated within
our self-study group and illustrate the found significances for educator professional
development.

Biesta (2004) insists that enunciating the discursive gap entails both risk and
opportunity. It is this sense of concomitant risk and opportunity, affording agency
and natality, that the self-study research group is encountering. Interrelated
dimensions of “being pulled up short,” found within the discursive gap created,
elicit significant risks and opportunities worth exploring. These risks and
opportunities reverberate throughout the individual-collective movement of thinking
as active intonations enunciating moments of being pulled up short. “Intonations”
is the most fitting term the group found, resonating with the reflexive movement of
thinking created. It is a movement backward, forward, and in place, thus
acknowledging and working with temporality and interplay. Such reflexivity
demands repetition. Repetition is a notion that Risser (1997) traces back to
Aristotle (1925), referring to the turn and re-turn to self-understandings, acting on
possibilities. Risser explains that in “this temporal movement of the self toward its
possibilities, one recommits oneself to the possibilities that are recognized as one’s
own” where “past possibilities of action become future possibilities that are repeated
in the moment of decision” (p. 38). Risser characterizes this repetitive movement
as “fundamentally dynamic” (p. 39), a backward movement that re-covers and
re-presents, alongside a forward movement that generates and evokes. The self-
study group identifies these reflexive moments as “intonations” modulating the
repetitive movement, seeking out and seizing back possibilities for each of
our teaching-learning practices. It is the intonations that enable the individual-
collective engagement in ongoing discourse. Thus we relay these intonations and
invite the reader to experience the risks and opportunities encountered in a similar
fashion, acting as a medium for individual-collective participation in the reflexive
discourse.
The following intonations relay key incidents elicited by individuals of the self-study group, modulating the collective sense-making. The intonations portray multiple ways the risks and opportunities are reflexively engaged, enlarging all of our understandings. This illuminates the issues raised by Kelchtermans & Hamilton (2004) concerning “the relationship between the individual and the collective in the process and position of outcomes, the content of the knowledge produced, and the ways to, and the consequences for, that knowledge production” (p. 785). These active intonations: 1) confront educator vulnerability, exposing self and other(s) as inherent within the process character, necessitating openness and willingness; 2) feel the weight of educator responsibility, confronting accountability to self and other(s); 3) seek out integrity between teaching-learning beliefs and practices turning toward theory as working notions for educators to name and situate themselves and their practices; and 4) navigate the uncertain teaching-learning terrain through the pull of possibilities.

Intonation 1: The active choice to make self vulnerable

Smith (1996) explains that “the question of what is to be done with respect to Others depends on who I think the Other is, and who I think I am in relation to them” (p. 6). The risks and opportunities such questions open into form the vulnerable terrain our self-study group immediately confronts. This terrain is concomitantly ethical in character as the intersections of who we are individually and collaboratively gather and emerge as personal values, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning surface. Joyce, in her role as a high school counselor, relays a personal narrative facing up to the rawness of exposed identity cognizant of “being with and for the other, not looking at” the other (De Laine, 2000, p. 16). Kathy attends to Joyce’s narrative and examines the ensuing relational vulnerability.

Joyce: In my role as a school counselor I meet a student and find we share a similar feeling, one expressed so well by Nam (2001) in YELL-Oh Girls: “I had grown up feeling invisible, yet conspicuous at the same time and all the time” (p. xxv). Rather than allowing this student to be trapped into a feeling of hopelessness, I hope to empower through the possibilities of self-reflection alongside other(s), navigating through what could remain isolated, inhospitable terrain toward an emancipated state of mutuality. Nicholas has emotional, physical, and social scars adversely affecting his interactions with family, friends, and peers. My assistance as Nicholas’s school counselor was sought, in part because we share a similar childhood experience as we are both international adoptees raised by White parents. Students of color, attending predominantly White schools, often confront a complex survival lesson as they learn the social structure of the school while simultaneously exploring their racial and ethnic identities. For this young man, attending a primarily White school is comparable to navigating an obstacle course with a series of challenges. When students of color are unable to find a way to fit into a predominantly White school, they often feel they have failed the survival game with only shattered dreams remaining. As his counselor, Nicholas’s meaning-making process drew me to confront personal vulnerabilities. In my attempts to work alongside him, toward finding his way and fulfilling dreams of fitting
into the social realm of school, the Lakota Sioux legend of the dreamcatcher came to mind on several occasions. I dream that he discovers how to capture the good things happening in his life while finding ways to release those painful elements in life. Some weeks his dreams of fitting in seem attainable as he progresses in recognizing and confronting vulnerabilities isolating him from others. There are moments when he battles with broken dreams. Shattered pieces become sharp-edged instruments to emotionally wound himself, to escape reality, to end his pain. In one such instance he becomes more isolated, retreating into his own world. He rocks back and forth in his chair as the communicative gap (Biesta, 2004) between us disappears. He escapes into a world void of communication. Later, as I complete the suicide-risk report, I feel pulled up short because not only did his dreams shatter, but also my dreams for him shatter at that point in our work together. I recall that when he describes how it felt to be a student of color in a predominantly White school, I am reminded of my own awkward adolescence, questioning my belonging, feeling White on the inside while others saw me as Asian on the outside. I find resonance and interconnection across our experiences, becoming vulnerable by sharing my experiences with him in order to understand what he is experiencing as a student of color in a predominantly White school. As he shares his feelings about being adopted and not knowing his cultural roots, I revisit my past as I listen to him speak, for his words echo my own words at his age. More than once, as I observe him hesitantly and shyly sharing his life story, I see my own ideas, feelings, and experiences reflected in him. This is the first time that a student’s life narrative so closely resembles my own, and it transforms my understanding of the relationship between myself and other(s) and of the necessity of seeing and working within the educative gap.

Kathy: Gadamer (1964) writes of “belongingness” as recognizing self in the world. This sense of belongingness is what makes self-understanding a catalyst to further learning, a learning that does not “fall back uncritically upon an idealized or ideological ‘possession’ when pressed to listen, to think, to question, to reconsider, to reexamine” (Hansen, 2001, p. 168). Attending to Joyce’s account surfaces numerous personal examples of relational vulnerability from my own teaching and learning experiences. Opening pathways for learning that emerge as learning occurs makes the teacher relationally vulnerable. Listening to what students say and hearing what they do not say make the teacher relationally vulnerable. Cultivating the student’s disposition to experiment makes the teacher relationally vulnerable. Embracing the unknown and all its possibilities makes the teacher relationally vulnerable. Given this relational vulnerability and the change it invites, what is the yield for the teacher and student?

Being relationally vulnerable emphasizes a “proclivity for self-questioning and doubt” instead of “proficiency and power” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). Being relationally vulnerable entails living amid the constant tension of being pulled up short, as Kerdeman suggests. Thus relational vulnerability welcomes question, conflict, challenge, and resolve as continually oscillating progress toward becoming. It honors the voice, the process, and the embodied knowledge of teachers and students. Bass et al. (2002, p. 68) note that “self-study offers us research that puts us in touch with who we are, what we do, and how we change—to consciously be working on ourselves so that we are agents in our daily lives . . . we can work with our defensiveness and vulnerabilities; we can grow as we continuously learn to teach.” It is only in the midst of exposed vulnerability—as counselor, teacher, learner, and researcher—that we find ourselves reframing knowledge, moving in the midst of uncertainty, seeking strength for the growth challenges sure to come.
Intonation 2: Accountability to self

The vulnerable intertwining of the act of teaching with identity becomes the task our self-study group must embrace. This task demands the presence of others, the constant interchange with others, brought to bear on individual sense-making. Accountability to self is desired as each participant seeks to see herself in her teaching-learning practices and, in turn, to be seen by her students. Accountability to self averts pedagogical blindness, the inability to see what is before self. Chandra, Virginia, and Colette as female educators of color are struck by their own visibility in classrooms and relay critical incidents that problematize their “pedagogical mode of address” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 6) within homogeneous classrooms. Subsequently, their experiences lead Gayle, as a teacher educator committed to issues of diversity, to problematize her own practices of recruiting and preparing educators of color to teach in homogenous classrooms.

**Chandra:** My first 2 years of teaching, I teach in a school that is not racially or ethnically diverse in its student population. But this is O.K. As a Latina, I want to make a difference anywhere I choose to teach. During parent-teacher conferences, I welcome parents with a big smile and handshake and before I can get any words out, several parents say, “Oh, Ms. Diaz, you must be my child’s Spanish teacher.” I think it is funny the first time and then hope parents will realize how ignorant they sound asking that question based on my ethnicity. I persist in imagining what a wonderful experience I am going to have as a teacher. I imagine how all students and parents will see that I am a great math teacher who cares about students and their learning. I never think that my teaching of mathematics will be called into question. Don’t they trust that I know what I am doing? I am called into the assistant principal’s office to discuss phone calls the counselor has received. Parents are complaining that I do not know how to teach. Before I know it, my assistant principal and the district’s math curriculum specialist are observing my classroom. Few recommendations are made and I think this nightmare has passed. My assistant principal asks me to meet again for what I think is going to be a conversation of praise for working through this situation. On the contrary, I am notified that I am being put on a performance concerns plan because of all the complaints. Wow, my heart sinks. This is when I start to believe what I am being told. Maybe I do not know what I am doing.

It is difficult returning to the classroom. But my apprehensions soon fade and I am back to teaching as before. Parent-teacher conferences come again. The memories of parents assuming I am the Spanish teacher re-surface. In the back of my mind I wonder what if I was the Spanish teacher? Would my teaching be called into question? As parents greet me, their mouths move but all I can hear is, “You must be the Spanish teacher.” The next day, the assistant principal shares with me that parents informed him that I am teaching better. At the end of the year, I am happy to meet with my assistant principal to check off my accomplishments on the performance concerns plan. However, I am told that I will move “down” and teach a “lower” grade. I am angry and feel let down because there are no choices in the matter. I am crushed. I assume my role the following year, even though I feel like everyone looks at me as the teacher who failed. Isolation subsumes and consumes me.

**Virginia:** During the weeks when I teach the events leading to the Civil War, I am guaranteed at least one phone call to my principal exposing me as a racist. I am told that I expect too much from the students and that spending three weeks on Native American
Cultures is too long. The list goes on and on. There is so much wasted time spent on combating such behavior from parents that it is almost comical. As I revisit the situations and listen to myself it is so difficult not to say, “Stop! Get over the ‘Woe is me’ syndrome.” Then I remember how I feel not worthy to teach their children. Maybe it would be easier to print up a flyer that simply reads:

Christian female educator from a family of postgraduate degree professionals. Strong family values, superior references, great communication skills . . .

Over the years I receive fewer calls and I am more responsible for my behavior, not allowing others to dictate my feelings. My philosophy is to take action, which prevents reactionary behavior based purely on emotion. My behavior is not dictated by the behavior of others. There are still difficult days when I combat the condescending and pompous attitudes of others. But I never forget the focus should always be what is in the best interest of the students. What are their needs, not just for the here and now but what will encourage them to be better adults and citizens? What will foster critical thinking so they may in turn encourage someone else to be more willing to embrace new ideas? Despite greater consciousness of my own teaching practices, I am increasingly aware of the multiple eyes/expectations/assumptions/beliefs/values that look back at me. Do they see an African-American woman or a teacher? How can I push beyond feelings of display and teach authentically?

Colette: As I begin my career in higher education, I struggle with issues of identity. Initially, I feel comfortable and confident in my academic pursuit. I am adamant that I will not become the American Indian representative. I believe my teaching will be undergirded solely by philosophical principles, critical theories and other social theoretical influences. However, one of the challenges that I soon face is my identity within higher education and how this influences my perspective toward teaching.

I find my identity being configured and re-configured on my journey toward the professoriate. I confront perceptions of others and read through long-held assumptions, beliefs, and values. I confront fear within myself and in my students. Ultimately, I confront myself as I find I cannot separate from my ethnic roots. I cannot simply “get over it.”

Through this process I attend to my “inner dialogue” devoting time to issues of community, class, race and gender, and I attempt to take this dialogue to my students. After reading Brown’s (2002) self-study, my feelings as a new teaching assistant are validated. I identify with the intersections of ethnicity, race, gender, and culture, portrayed within the scenarios of Brown’s classroom situations. I appreciate the sincere manner in which she tells her story. Teachers need to acknowledge that they cannot “divorce” themselves from the classroom, instructional style, or any other interactions within the institutions. But what does that entail? The intersections of my background, values, beliefs, and culture definitely influence or direct my words and actions within the classroom. My passionate commitments to social issues are revealed in all areas of my life. Issues such as race, gender and class have been very important to me as a teacher in a homogenous environment. But when my students are reading Delpit’s (1995) Other People’s Children, conversations about race and class do not come through in forthcoming ways. I am completely perplexed by this because I struggled to engage students in dialogue about these issues. There are “scenes” within the Delpit text that address race explicitly. Through small-group discussions I probe student responses to these scenes,
trying to dig beneath surface levels. Some of the students hold back, hesitant and resistant to probing. I find myself repressing my thinking to put forth an accepting atmosphere. Why do I assume a more restrained, passive role in an effort to get students to engage in these discussions? The fast and easy response is that I value the opinions and thoughts of my students. When I push my own thinking further, I have to admit that I hold some fear about pushing some of these potential hot-button topics. Perhaps this fear comes from my position as a disenfranchised person in society. I find that issues of race, gender, culture, and class can stir up emotions that scare others and myself. This can erupt in conflict, and my very being as a Northern Cheyenne teacher-mother-activist-student is called into question. My years of training and socialization in the discipline leave me with little solace. The very theories, philosophies and cultural knowledge feel miles away. Within this “afterplace” I am propelled into unknown territory, pulling back fears to seek new understandings about the various positions I hold.

Gayle: Laubscher & Powell (2003) describe their experiences as educators who are marked as “other.” According to these authors, such a mark often includes qualities that are considered of lesser value by members of predominately White institutions. Sometimes being marked as such leads the educator to feel pressure to think, feel or act as others expect. Chandra, Virginia and Colette’s critical incidents reveal their realization that they also had such a mark, the strong feelings associated with being marked as different, and the negative impact this label has on their ability to meet the needs of their students. They enter the classroom seeing themselves as a math, social studies, or multicultural education teacher; but quickly find these identities being reconfigured for them. They approach their teaching duties prepared to hold themselves accountable to their students and, through the self-study process, find themselves questioning what it means to be held accountable to self—self as a teacher and self as a disenfranchised person in society. Disappointments of expectation manifest themselves in moments of “being pulled up short” (Gadamer, 1964, p. 268).

As a teacher educator committed to issues of diversity, I seek a teaching profession that is not dominated by one population: White, middle-class females. I assume that a diverse teaching pool will easily lead to a more inclusive education for all children. In light of my desires and assumptions, I often encourage members of populations traditionally underrepresented in teacher education to enter the profession. As I attend to the critical incidents of Colette, Virginia and Chandra, I become painfully aware of how I was “pulled-up-short” in regards to preparing diverse teachers to enter the classroom. Instead of a more inclusive education, I see the deeply embedded expectations of the students and parents for teachers who are White, middle-class and female shaping these high-quality teachers in unexpected ways that they were not prepared to encounter and that I and teacher educators like me did not prepare them to encounter. Fortunately, these women are strong. They do not just “get over it” or leave the teaching profession. Instead, they are able to explore what it means to be accountable to themselves and emerge as stronger teachers and women of diversity. Now it is my turn. My disappointment of expectation leads me to question what it means to be accountable to my goal of a more inclusive education for all children. I must explore what it means to prepare diverse teachers to encounter a historically heterogeneous profession. Fortunately, these teachers are laying a strong foundation on which I can build.
Intonation 3: Theory as working notions

Participating self-study educators increasingly take up theory as working notions to examine as philosophical, theoretical, and pragmatic processes to be concretely worked within the particularities of an individual’s teaching-learning practices and, concomitantly, collectively seeking and gaining vocabulary and teaching-learning images through theory. In this way theory is given a “face” and a “repertoire of actions” that teachers bodily identify and can articulate and that Kessels and Korthagen (1996, p. 21) identify as critical in teacher education.

Terry, a self-study participant, is drawn to Hargreaves’ (2001) theoretical notion of “emotional geographies” that explain the nature of teachers’ recollections of emotion-laden interactions with those around them. Terry maps out her attempt to re-story herself in a new high school during her 26th year of teaching. As she maps out the terrain encountered, focusing on one interaction in particular, Margaret listens and considers the embeddedness of self-understandings revealed through negotiating the teaching self. A conversation begins.

**Terry:** What is revealed to me in the experience I recount is a clearer understanding that teaching for me is a political act. I would not have used that adjective before; in fact, I might have rejected a suggestion that teaching is political. However, we live in an age in which morality is political. As I recollect the emotional geography of this interaction, there remains a rawness that very much confronts and exposes who I am as a teacher.

I have accumulated numerous books dealing with various cultures through my years. I hope that these books can be both window and mirror as my students read and discuss different cultural views. Each group member in my high school English class will be reading a different title from the same cultural group. We do some preliminary reading and I provide book talks over each book, including warnings about language and content where necessary. I include a caveat that they can change books or groups if they find the reading too emotionally or morally challenging. Then they arrange themselves into groups and choose their books to set out on their various tasks. Everything seems to be going well; they get into their books and are engaging in some lively discussions. I am attentive to the group that selected to study gay and lesbian issues. One book in particular, Paul Monette’s (1992) *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story,* is somewhat graphic in places. I do not want the young woman who has chosen it to feel stuck reading it if it does not suit her. I often ask her how the reading is going and if she is comfortable with it. She does not appear to be having any problem with it; in fact, she is finished writing her book review when the trouble begins. Her father discovers the book in her possession and is incensed. She evidently told him she “had” to read it. The next day he storms to his daughter’s counselor and demands that she be removed from my class. The counselor encourages him to talk with me and tries to assure him that she is sure I would never force a student to read a book she is not comfortable with, but he wants no part of that. He will speak to an associate principal, but not to me. He says he does not want to “get me in trouble.” I do not “get in trouble” because the associate principal trusts that I have not made the girl read the book. The administrator supports me when she speaks with me later, but I feel horrible.
Margaret: Aspects of your account stir a familiar unease in me as similar experiences surface in my thoughts. I know what you mean by the unfinished, uncomfortable, felt lack. The thoughtfulness of your planning process is not seen. The care for multiplicity of ideas and the deliberate attempt to improve student thinking is identified as irresponsible.

Terry: Yes, all of those things you mention are troubling, but even more I realize that I am in the throes of a political struggle, one that makes me afraid, in a way. Since there is no opportunity for dialogue with the girl or her father, an important medium for learning is severed. Such conversation is not only a means of interaction but also a relationship with participants and context, and the conversation is shut down, or perhaps thwarted is more accurate, as we all know we have wandered into uncomfortable territory and, instead of pursuing the conversation, it is never going to happen.

Margaret: In theoretical terms, it is easy to talk of the significances of difficult learning conversations, the importance of plurality and natality, the integral role of grappling through discomfort and turmoil. But the embeddedness of teachers’ emotions in the conditions and interactions of their work (Hargreaves, 2001) and the lived consequences are concrete realities that can present themselves with a suddenness that consumes, eradicating and eroding ways of living and being in classrooms.

Terry: Hargreaves’ (2001) notion of moral distance causing negative emotion comes to life as my teaching purposes are threatened. Furthermore, as Hargreaves points out, the means to work through these differences of purpose are absent, and so loose ends are all abandoned. Professionally, I find my self-understandings ignored with no space for expression and explanation. I never HAD to explain myself, but I never GOT to explain myself either. My student’s father must think that I am some kind of lunatic and should not be trusted to teach his child. I didn’t get to talk this over with him so I can understand where his concern lay. Obviously, my student was in a bind and felt compelled to tell her dad that she had to read it, right? Or was she just too afraid to talk to me about it? Was he trying to protect her innocence? Does he think homosexuality is an abomination, or does he just not want his daughter reading a somewhat sexually explicit book? Does he think I am evil? Incompetent? Irresponsible? Has he told others in the community about this, painting me in a bad light? The physical distancing of the student and the situation asks me to be pedagogically blind. I have so many questions that will never be answered because I have not talked to the girl, except to say hello to her if I happen to see her in the halls. I still have a very unsettled feeling about the whole thing. I think about writing her a letter explaining that I understand why she told her dad she had to read the book and to tell her I am sorry she is not in my class any more. I want to say that I am sorry that a book came between a student and teacher, because it is not worth that. Alas, I do not write that letter.

Margaret: Your thinking points to the visibility of your identity in your teaching practices. And our dialogue has made me very visible, cognizant of my self as a teacher educator.

Terry: The theorizing we engage in articulates the risks and opportunities of such visibility for both of us. The emotional ebb and flow that moves in my life as a teacher is a given. I know that being “pulled up short” is a way of being in teaching and learning, but I find that teaching and learning events are articulated, analyzed, and enlarged through dialogue. I see, again and again, the significances of being in touch with self, context, and other(s) as an integral dynamic within the nature of teaching.
Margaret: A stronger professional identity is the outcome, but such strength is derived from a capacity to see and act with reciprocity, complexity, and humility, with the emotional geographies melding theory, practice, and ethics. Locating language giving expression to these teaching-learning interactions enhances professional practices and integrity realized as Dalmau and Gudjonsdottir (2002) term “professional theory”: working theory extending beyond explanations for further actions to situating teacher identity in individual and collective professional action of the community (p. 110).

Intonation 4: The pull of possibilities—mindfully moving within “being pulled up short”

Experiencing the pull of possibilities in teaching-learning situations assumes that teaching and learning are moving forces to be grappled with through deliberation and interaction. Biesta (2004, p. 13) states that “it is not about the constituents of this relationship (i.e., the teacher and the learner) but about the relationality of the relationship”. Thus the locus of education lives in-between teacher and learner. It is within these gaps that the pull of possibilities is first glimpsed and provokes panic to overcome or evokes a boldness to proceed with care. It is this concern for the pull’s agentic possibilities within teaching and learning (and life, for that matter) that characterizes Sarah’s, Sandy’s and Judith’s mindfulness. Attending to processes not necessarily directly connected to teaching, Sarah, Judith, and Sandy recall what such attunement stirs spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally.

Sarah: I return to my writing life. I write myself into and out of ideas and the attunement to process creates space for me to better see and negotiate learning relationships with my students. These movements of eye, hand, heart, and head navigating creative writing projects become ways of re-turning, re-entering the flow of possibility and, ultimately, self-restoration. In this way the process of developing one’s pedagogical identity is much like operating in poetic form where multiple dimensions of one’s being—mind, soul, and body—allow for the pull of possibilities to be experienced. When we are at our finest, when we occupy our most humane spaces as thinkers, creators, and educators, I contend that we live out poet Merwin’s (2005) perpetual state of looking and listening because “a poem . . . results from a sudden awakening of attention, when you perceive something that has always been there but that you have not really ‘noticed’” (p. 37). Mindfulness dives into that which is routine and familiar with new eyes and ears and voice. Seeking luminosity from the familiar is akin to poet Kooser’s (2005) observance of the poetic eye as one that becomes a “prism-like kaleidoscope held against the familiar, seeking strands of extraordinary” (personal communication, June 8, 2005). I observe the necessity for Kooser’s pause, for considering each “shard of color,” to extend the metaphor, in hopes of better understanding the center of life, teaching, and learning.

Judith: I relive the journey of my voice performing in church, intimately engaged in a sort of reflexive interpretation at several levels: contact with the language, awareness of the act of interpretation, and connection with the other voices providing feedback. The lines of empty pews stand before me, shoulder to shoulder, my audience for now. The introductory music briefly suspends itself amidst the rafters, dancing from beam to beam before floating downward, searching for a voice to mate itself with. Mine is that voice and
she begins. The moment is captured, the music is absorbed, and the voice sings. The value of the relationships existing among the process of producing music and the various dimensions of such a process, all the while conscious of the involvement of my voice, is suddenly so apparent. Kirk (2005, p. 233) validates this assertion by suggesting that “the praxis of reflexivity... includes a sustained attention to the positions in which I place myself and am placed by others, a listening to and acknowledging of inner voices.” An image of teaching and learning emerges. I strive toward it.

Sandy: Becoming a student, once again, I am encouraged to read across varied texts and attend to the voices and experiences of others. I listen as other readers relay their interpretations of texts. The ensuing multiplicity scares me at times, as I know I have to find ways to articulate my understandings. Amidst the search for words I find myself valuing the ambiguity and uncertainty arising, and I am actually excited by the unfolding ideas. I am struck by the significant role these qualities are playing in my life as a learner.

Sarah, Judith, & Sandy: Recovering the living landscape that we corporeally and sensorially embedded within demands attending to the relationality of the relationships gathering and intersecting. We surrender, allowing ourselves to engage in a process wherein we likely will be “pulled up short” by the insularity of private reflection alongside a community of intensive interactions with professional peers. What we are calling for is greater mindfulness so that this kind of authentic participation occurs more frequently and thus influences a fuller bodied response to the humility and sensitivity required of teaching. For mindfulness to become indelibly operational, the educator occupies a state of paradox—a place of being “pulled up short” leading to vulnerability and the pull of possibilities.

The Professional Development Movement Generated

Loughran (2004) examines the influence of purpose, participants, and context through self-study. Indeed, it is the intersections of purpose, participants, and context that give direction to the self-study group’s individual-collective sense-making, finding expression through the intonations. A felt personal worthiness permeates the intonations, revealing particularities of the risks and opportunities of self-study. Intonation 1 reveals the risks and opportunities of educators’ active decision to position oneself as vulnerable. Intonation 2 reveals the risks and opportunities of educators holding themselves relationally accountable to self, negotiating a fitting teaching identity. Intonation 3 reveals the risks and opportunities of educators situating their teaching identity amidst theory, self, and action, seeking integrity. Intonation 4 reveals the risks and opportunities of greater mindfulness derived within the acts of teaching and learning. These active intonations enunciate the ensuing intersections of professional knowledge, teacher education, and “the ways self-study research might strengthen that relationship” (Hamilton, 2004, p. 375). Vulnerability, the greater cognizance of values, beliefs, and assumptions in self and others, the role of theory in articulating the work of teaching and learning, and the ensuing tensions, relations, pulls, and possibilities give collective expression to teaching selves demanding that “to be a teacher... requires that [we] face our teacher, which is
the world as it comes to meet [us] in all of its variation, complexity, and simplicity” (Smith, 1996, p. 11). Indeed, our intonations reveal such meetings pulling each of us up short. Repeatedly turning back on self is the necessary turn we have all taken. In so doing, it asks us to see what is at stake fundamentally within teaching-learning situations, encountering ourselves and our relations to others and otherness. Weber and Mitchell (2004, p. 986) affirm that “we are not ideas, but flesh and blood beings learning through our senses.” Bringing thinking, feeling, seeing, and acting into pedagogical relationships demands “putting our bodies on the line” (p. 995). As Bowman (2004, p. 46) clarifies, “knowing is inseparable from action: Knowing is doing, and always bears the body’s imprint.” The imprints that our intonations recall form the sensible ground occupied with bringing meaning to being. “Knowing in any humanly meaningful sense is emergent from and grounded in bodily experience and continuous with the cultural production of meaning” (Bowman, 2004, p. 48). Within this movement, attention is called to process—how one is creating meaning and being created. The active intonations our self-study group encounters document that daring to examine ourselves and the sense we are making demands “falling into trust” (Gottlieb, 2004) with the body’s role in teaching and learning: “Not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 283). It seems that this intertwining relationship of vision and movement is the place where the conjuncture must be experienced as a “sensible thing,” holding itself together, cohering into things, embodying within it a unity of sense (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). The intonations reverberate through our bodies causing each of us to pause, living with the felt experience, exploring the reverberations and the movement forward, backward, and in place. As practicing educators we are aware that there is much in our day-to-day practices that robs teaching-learning of such mindful reflexive engagement. Self-studies’ opportunity to attend to these bodily imprints embraces the contingencies of a becoming self, disclosing the pursuit of greater self-understanding as the long overdue return to the work of learning.

The “Afterplace”

The process character of the interrelated and interdependent intonations led the self study group collectively to embodiment as a compelling “afterplace” to rethink the nature of professional development in teaching and learning. Merleau-Ponty (1968) refers to embodiment as the fundamental reversibility experienced through one’s body, “the fabric, into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived word, the general instrument of my comprehension” (p. 235). The intonations that the self-study group encounters suggest that our bodies are indeed the reflexive instruments of comprehension, confronting vulnerability, seeking accountability to self, negotiating theory as working notions, and experiencing the pull of possibilities, revealing the role of our bodies mindfully forming and informing self and other.
As the self-study group seizes the intonations to pull common understandings, we are increasingly aware that the experiencing body must be understood as a conscious and explicit medium for professional development. Our self-study reveals the potential reflexive role and place of the mindful body within teacher education as the afterplace, holding implications for connected professional knowledge, empowering teachers and fostering the work of learning. The ensuing reciprocal interaction and modification experienced in and through bodily reflexive engagement locate the implications as educators mindfully negotiate the learning situations they meet and the lived interpretations with learners. Individually and collectively, self-involvement instills and re-instills purposeful participation within teaching and learning, articulating why educators orient pedagogical practices in particular ways. This is what is so desperately missing from the language and practices of professional development “fixes” that tend to undermine teacher and student participation in the learning process. Bakhtin’s (1993) principle of “no alibi” in existence cuts to the core of the issue. Bakhtin insists that ignoring the role and place of self in activities and living by passivity alone allows one to abdicate one’s participatory obligations and assume an indifference. If participatory thinking is not an expectation, then “in that world I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it” (p. 9). Professional development fixes encourage such teacher and student alibis. Fixes sustain such alibis because they foster personal separation and indifference. As Bakhtin clarifies, “a life lived on the tacit basis of my alibi in Being falls away into indifferent Being that is not rooted in anything” (p. 43).

Self-study as professional development entrusts the work of learning to teachers and their students and is rooted in self-involvement. Educator professional development can be evoked and nurtured, derived from individual and collective involvement entailing no alibi in existence. Such connectedness seems fundamental to what it means to be human. Indeed, our self-study group found that the consequence was greater attention to the reflexive, multi-sensory experiences of lived teaching bodies. The concomitant risks and opportunities for the acts of teaching and learning foreground the relational and interactive workings of our bodies as the determining ground that needs to be purposefully pursued as inherent to the work of embodied pedagogy, in touch with self, others, and subject matter. To disregard the potential power of embodied teaching is inhuman, undermining teachers and undermining the inherent risks and opportunities of what it means to educate. The consequences matter to our selves now and for the future.

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References


