

Co-Constructing a Learner-Centered Curriculum in Teacher Professional Development

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Abstract

A model of the scholarship of teaching and learning is described and analyzed through the cooperative work of an interdisciplinary faculty teaching team and 64 K-12 practicing teachers. The learning outcomes encompass: *The Development of Teacher Empowerment* recognizes the power structures in our classroom; *Reflection as Continuous Improvement* discusses the ways in which teachers perceived their growth; and *Empowerment in Practice* highlights the ways in which teachers worked to create more learner-centered classroom using a critical pedagogy lens.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to convey how we created a teacher professional development process that increases the likelihood for transfer into the K-12 classroom. Our two-year research study assesses a multi-layered curriculum designed to: 1) be learner-centered, 2) empower our teachers with the elements of critical pedagogy and 3) meet the diverse learning needs of a desperate group of adult learners. We describe the curriculum development work that centered on critical pedagogy.

Dewey (1938) described knowledge construction as a social process and by 1933 he was calling for teachers to engage in “reflective action” that would

eventually lead to transforming their practice to be more inquiry-based. We designed curriculum to focus on reflective practice, dialogue, teacher classroom research and collaboration to promote continuous improvement. Within this learner-centered curriculum, teachers were encouraged to develop ownership of their learning. Our curiosity about and a commitment to modeling critical pedagogy and learner-centered theory in a masters degree program for practicing teachers resulted in a transformation of our teaching and learning in graduate and K-12 classrooms.

The two primary theoretical frameworks for our study consisted of: 1) critical pedagogy and 2) learner-centered theory. For our study we used Wink's (2005) definition of critical pedagogy to inform our work. She wrote, critical means

“to see deeply what is below the surface - think, critique, or analyze. Pedagogy does not only mean how a teacher teaches. It is about the visible and hidden human interactions between a teacher and a learner, whether they are in a classroom or in the larger community. Critical pedagogy looks for the why that leads to action” (p.1).

The second framework, learner-centered theory embodies a constructivist orientation toward knowledge and also frames this research (Weimer, 2002).

Weimer argues for five changes in teaching:

1. Changing the balance of power between learners and teacher
2. Using content to promote learning rather than to define what will be learned
3. Shaping the role of the teachers to be a facilitator of learning and designer of learning experience

4. Recognizing that students have the responsibility for learning
5. Using the processes of evaluation (including self-assessment) to promote learning (pp.8-17).

We incorporated these ideas to interrogate our own assumptions and practices of teaching. In addition, we explored the ways in which practicing teachers internalized theory both as learners (in the university classroom) and teachers (in their classrooms).

This paper advances the literature base by closely examining a multi-layered curriculum and makes explicit the work of classroom teachers and faculty as they worked together to connect educational theories in teacher practice. *Developing a Pedagogy of Teacher Education: Understanding Teaching and Learning about Teaching* (2006) by John Loughran suggests that “articulating a pedagogy of teacher education is crucial for it is at the heart of challenging teaching as telling and fundamental to enhancing teaching for understanding” (p.10). While the data from this study are limited and can only be applied within this specific program, it makes visible one way to develop teachers’ ability to perform reflective analysis and develop pedagogically-driven curriculum. A central feature of the curriculum was the opportunity for classroom teachers to engage in two year-long action research projects.

Facilitating teachers understanding on how they learn required us to rethink our understanding of how we taught. The impetus was undeniable once recognized and the outcomes for teaching and learning for us as researchers was significant.

Theoretical overview

Using learner-centered theory and critical pedagogy, we organized course content and learning opportunities using a variety of pedagogical strategies to address diverse learning styles. Our teachers grappled with constructing meaning from course content and educational theory. We asked them to use the content and theory as they sought to make meaning of their personal and professional experiences, perceptions and work in schools. One important task was to overcome their initial tendency to look to us as faculty to guide their priorities in learning.

Wink (2005) uses the critical pedagogy terms of learning, relearning and unlearning to express the need to examine classroom teachers' assumptions and actions. Critical pedagogy provided a common vocabulary to talk about fundamental questions about knowledge, justice and equity in their own classrooms, school, family and community (Wink, 2005, p. 71, Giroux, 1994). Critical pedagogy is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationships among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relationships of the wider community, society and nation state (McLaren, 1998).

Collectively, we grappled with co-constructing our curriculum based on pedagogical theory. We took time, engaged in a systematic reflection cycle with our teachers and made space for them to contribute their expertise to the larger

learning community. We asked teachers to use the theory as they sought to make meaning of their learning and teaching experiences.

We intended to empower classroom teachers to pursue learning through continuous improvement. The curriculum and pedagogy explicitly recognized that learners have different abilities, interests, prior experience, and learning potentials. Our program “provides multiple opportunities or spheres of learning for teachers and faculty to share their differing gifts, multiple intelligences, and multiple perspectives. It also encourages dialogue of their maturing and nascent understandings of who they are as learners and teachers and how that impacts their students’ learning. In effect, they assist each other’s development and newfound insights through their collaborative problem solving with their ZPDs [Vogotsky, zones of proximal development]” (Samaras, A.P., E.K. DeMulder, M.A. Kayler, L. Newton, L.C. Rigsby, K.L., Weller, and D.R. Wilcox ,2006, p. 148). The scaffolded curriculum supported classroom teachers to reflect deeply on their assumptions, consider alternative perspectives, develop a language, and make explicit connections between theory and practice. We deliberately employed a variety of reflection tools and opportunities to encourage the development and use of meta-cognitive strategies that we believe are essential to sustaining continuous improvement and empowerment. For example, twice a week teachers would journal regarding questions about their classroom practices (Bolton, 2005) and participated in online discussion groups using their postings as authentic evidence of their contributions (Kayler & Weller, 2007). Feedback

was provided in-process for course assignments meeting teachers' developmental needs. The action research process integrated critical theory into practice as classroom teachers worked to continuously improve their classroom practice. Overall, our goal was to provide feedback as a process of learning rather than feedback as a final evaluation of teachers work.

Context of our study

Our master's degree is a two-year, non-traditional, school-based program for practicing classroom teachers in PK-12 positions. These classroom teachers are diverse in many ways: ethnicities, age, years of teaching experience, gender, elementary and secondary backgrounds all working within a variety of educational contexts. We recognize the value and importance of collaboration (Cole & Knowles, 2000); therefore classroom teachers enroll and participate in the program in school teams in a two-year program. School teams typically consist of classroom teachers who teach at the same school; however there are multi-school teams as well. School teams meet weekly to discuss and reflect upon the readings, classroom/school issues, and to share expertise and personal experiences. Teaming provides the context for intellectual community, critical dialogue, social support, and professional growth. Classroom teachers gain the perspectives of others and construct positions on crucial aspects of teaching and learning (Kayler, 2004; DeMulder & Rigsby, 2003). Faculty advisors typically meet on-site twice a semester. We are an interdisciplinary teaching team who

serve as instructors. The teaching team collaboratively constructs and scaffold learning experiences that promote teacher engagement and professional growth.

Methodology

Participants

Specifically, the participants in this study were the 64 licensed K-12 classroom teachers enrolled in our program. Classroom teachers enrolled in this program ranged from 2-23 years of classroom teaching experience and worked in a wide range of school contexts, from highly diverse urban schools to homogeneous, small, rural schools. Teachers are not required to hold a masters degree in order to teach in the public schools.

Data Sources and Analysis

Multiple data sources served to inform our practice and allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of practicing classroom teachers' experiences with learner-centered theory and critical pedagogy. One data source were the class reflections which consisted of 3-5 questions regarding learning and perception of the class day based on the Brookfield (1995) critical incident questionnaire questions. For example, 1) When were you most engaged?; 2) What actions that anyone (faculty or peer) took in class did you find most puzzling or confusing?; and 3) What about the class surprised you most (this could be something about your own reaction to what went on or something some did, or anything else that occurs to you)? Why? The second data source was student coursework to provide authentic evidence.

A doctoral graduate assistant read through the data to identify patterns of responses. Teachers' responses were analyzed through multiple readings by the teaching team as well. Class reflections were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992) to identify dominant themes. For example, sharing power, professional growth, our classroom community, and teacher needs were coding categories. Within these categories three broad themes were identified and are discussed below. Independent analysis by individual faculty served as a reliability check.

Findings

Our findings are categorized under three curriculum innovations: co-creating curriculum, reflective practice and integration of theory into the K-12 classroom. Collaboratively as faculty and as teachers incorporated learner-centered theory and critical pedagogy into the curriculum as a way to deepen our theoretical and practical knowledge. While we as faculty had a cursory understanding of these pedagogies, the process of developing a curriculum and incorporating teachers' feedback required a deeper understanding in order to create meaningful learning opportunities for our teachers. We made visible the hidden curriculum and made pedagogy explicit to support and scaffold understanding.

The development of teacher empowerment

This section of our paper discusses the ways in which we recognized and reconfigured the power structures within our class. One outcome of modeling

learner-centered theory and incorporating student feedback into our teaching practice was that we became much more conscious of using data to inform curriculum conversations. Over time it became clear to us that we could/should create more open spaces for teachers to contribute directly to the curriculum beyond participating in pre-designed learning experiences and discussions. Student feedback told us what they were ready for and what we needed to change; challenging us instructionally and them professionally.

Making Space

A similar transformation occurred on our teaching team. We began to discuss areas in which we could relinquish power. Our assignments provided teachers with broad guidelines, choice and evaluation criteria. Therefore, we had already eliminated paper formatting, length and allowed choice in text selection. Even with these areas we felt challenged to move towards including our classroom teachers in the curriculum and acknowledge the expertise they brought to our class. We wanted to provide space for teachers to share areas of expertise with their peers and to have ownership of their learning through choosing what to present and what sessions to attend.

One specific example of this space was the development of the *Teachers' Ways of Knowing Learning* (TWK) Experience. This innovation required us to give up a two and a half hour block of teaching time in five eight –hour class days, giving up a little more than 20% of allotted class time and curriculum space. Teachers

presented in one session and participated in four sessions given by their peers.

The culminating activity for this was a reflective synthesis of the dynamics between being a teacher and learner among their peers.

We had to trust, based on reviewed proposals that the instruction would grow out of their expertise and be framed by critical pedagogy and learner-centered theory. Further, we wanted our class days to be coherent and have integrated purpose. This challenged us to organize their proposed teaching experiences into the existing curricular framework in a meaningful way. For example, sessions were organized as thematically as possible. Several proposals dealt with cultural issues such as poverty, gender, and the role of standards and testing impacting classroom culture. Therefore, we designed class days that emphasized critical pedagogy through a cultural lens. This example illustrates how curriculum choices were made to support the teachers' areas of expertise and interest. This type of curriculum planning is fluid, non-hierarchical and authentic.

We view our classroom teachers as active participants who have valuable contributions to make to our learning community. We recognize that they are often placed in the role of received knowers. We work to engage teachers in meaningful learner-centered activities so that they can experience the power of "owning" their learning.

Our objectives in bringing classroom teachers' voices into the curriculum planning were tied to our philosophy. Our intent was that they gain experience in

planning and carrying out professional development with colleagues and that they would learn how to collect critical feedback for their own data analysis and reflection. By providing space for our teachers' to share an area of expertise with their peers and to have ownership of their learning they would begin to share decision making in the curriculum. The extension would be to distribute power in "our" classroom and make "our" curriculum more responsive to teachers' lives and classrooms.

Groups of teachers designed a learning experience which incorporated their expertise and the theoretical frameworks of the curriculum. These learning experiences were determined by the teachers rather than being pre-established by the faculty. They crafted a two-hour, learner-centered session. In addition, we allocated an additional half hour for reflection after these sessions. Each session also included participant feedback and individual reflections on designing and conducting the session. Finally, we wanted the participants to develop, in the words of W.E.B. DuBois (1903), a "double consciousness"--themselves as learners and themselves as creators of learning. They reflected on these aspects of consciousness in a paper.

Designers of Curriculum for Professional Development

The element of choice was manifested in two ways. The first was the opportunity to develop a session which would meet the needs of their peers and build on their own interests as well. The feedback from teachers resoundingly documented that they took this responsibility very seriously. The second was the

ability for teachers to determine their immediate needs and attend sessions which directly impacted their current teaching. We also found that teachers appreciated our decision as faculty to open this space. The opportunity enabled them to see themselves as experts.

The sense of personal expertise appeared in the data most frequently. Teachers acknowledged that we as faculty valued what they brought to the room. The feedback from their peers reinforced and verified their expertise:

As a presenter this time around I thought it was very beneficial for me in the fact that it did two things: 1) it made me face my fear of presenting to other teachers, because I know how critical we are of presenters as “presenters” ourselves, 2) it helped our group get positive ideas and feedback on our topic which we hold very near and dear. So we now have ways to improve and strengthen our techniques to benefit our students.

I think it’s empowering and motivating to be in a position to present your ideas to peers. I really don’t see myself as enough of an expert to be presenting to my peers, but being made to do it, or given the opportunity where it’s a laid back atmosphere makes me see myself as leader whose ideas and opinions are valuable enough to be shared with my peers.

I like that you have the confidence in us that we can lead our peers in certain activities. It has helped me grow as a teacher and learn from other teachers in a way that is not possible in a typical school day period.

Teachers reported experiencing new found confidence in their professional abilities when sharing their areas of expertise with their peers.

Participants in Peer-Developed Curriculum

Below are data from the teachers about their experience as a participant in peer-developed instruction. Feedback suggests that teachers gain practical information, classroom strategies and enjoyed problem-solving with their peers. They also were able to make connections between their practice and the sessions they attended. Several reported experiencing their assumptions being challenged while at the same time valuing different perspectives. Samples of student statements included:

I truly value hearing from my peers. I continue to strongly believe that our best and most valuable resource is our colleagues. I enjoyed hearing from other teachers and learning new ideas.

Rather than reading about all the differences that exist among student I find it more fruitful to learn strategies that will help me meet the many difference and needs of my students. In these sessions I learn from other teacher's successes/failures in addressing such needs.

They have given me an opportunity see how other teachers are using knowledge they have gained from this program. Learning from our peers is encouraging: the expertise they present shows us ways that we, too, can be learner-centered.

The general idea of drawing on the expertise of peers is very valuable to me. At times it is direct affirmation of perceptions that I may have. Other times, they are radically contrary to mine, and such difference makes me more certain of what I believe to be true or right...we do enjoy plentiful time to dialogue and reflecting upon our experience.

As faculty we were impressed by the ways in which teachers integrated critical pedagogy and learner-centered theory into the construction of the sessions.

From the teachers perspective one reported "I think the TWK project is a valuable experience for both the participant and the leader. This project is a true

example of allowing our class to have ownership in our learning.” One outcome for the sessions was to evaluate the degree to which teachers could use higher-order thinking skills to incorporate theory into their understanding. We found many teachers made connections between theory and learning opportunities that that we did not anticipate.

Reflection as continuous improvement

Continuous improvement is an ongoing effort to improve products, services or processes. These efforts can seek “incremental” improvement over time or “breakthrough” improvement all at once. Reflective practice plays an important role when teachers integrate educational theory into their practice as a way to sustain continuous improvement and develop teacher empowerment.

Teachers engaged in reflective practice using a variety of modalities such as journaling, action research, self-assessments and collaboration scaffolded their understandings to become critically reflective practitioners. The use of reflective practice as a mechanism to self-assess helps to illustrate areas of personal and professional improvement. Critical pedagogy and learner-centered theory gave teachers the tools to examine their teaching and their students’ learning. A teacher wrote how her assumptions about teaching and learning changed:

It took some time to think about how those assumptions had changed. For example, I realized that I had been teaching my students the way I liked to learn. I had forgotten to teach to all different learning styles. I also realized that children need to make connections in order to retain and take ownership of their learning. Connections are critical in learning...I want to continue to be a

reflective teacher. I must continue to monitor and adjust my teaching each day.

Two teachers commented after reviewing journal entries written over two years:

I went back and reread through my journal entries. They reminded me of all the books, discussions, and insights I had throughout the year. I have spent the past year learning how to be a critical, reflective learner. I have learned to work as part of a team and embrace others' differences. This process helped me to develop as a professional and study an area of my teaching I felt needed work. I have also begun to construct a firm research based theory for my teaching philosophy.

The journal book enabled me to take a closer look on how I progressed as a developing professional. I realized that I've grown so much over the span of this year by reading the texts, discussing the texts with other professionals, and doing the school projects. I feel more comfortable critically analyzing my classroom through observations and journals. It seems like I observe and reflect each and every day now.

We found that teachers also developed a language to talk about their good work and enabled them to develop a deeper understanding of why they taught as they did. They were able to refine and structure their reflective practice skills.

Teachers wrote:

I think we relish in those opportunities and come away with new insight. The activities helped me to see where I have been and where I am going. I saw areas of growth and areas of needed improvement....I no longer have an idealized picture of teaching, well I lost that a while ago, but now I see that there are more things that hinder a child and a teacher than I ever imagined!

This program has proven to me that what I was doing all along was right for my students. Now I know the theory behind why I was teaching the way I was. I have become more reflective and want to keep a journal next year of my year teaching so that I continue to let my students drive my teaching as much as possible.

I am constantly rethinking my teaching...what it means to me, what it means for my students. I am at times overwhelmed by all the things I want to do or need to do in order to make my classroom learner centered, but I feel that this is the trademark of critical pedagogy – always looking in from the outside and remaining open to change while remaining vigilant that the “good things” stay in place, too.

Teachers were able to articulate the ways in which they had improved, identified goals and constructed a way to research their practice. We saw evidence of teachers using critical pedagogy and learner-centered theory language in their writing. They shared a common language as a framework to talk about their work in the classroom. It is the incorporation of theory in talking about their practice that exhibits higher order of thinking.

Systematic inquiry and reflection informed teachers’ work in classrooms.

Teachers were empowered to ask questions and seek out answers regarding classroom practice. The development of a language and a deepening of theoretical understandings enabled teachers to better articulate their work in classrooms. Teachers found their reflections to be particularly powerful in helping them learn to use data from their students to assess learning and plan next steps, for example:

It was good to be given the opportunity to think about what and why we have done things. It also helped me to see how I have changed as an educator. I was definitely able to develop more professional goals for myself.

The majority of teachers highlighted how the process of reflecting on their work enhanced their understanding of themselves as learners and teachers. The process of scaffolding learning experiences which focus on learner-centered

theory and critical pedagogy supported continuous improvement and empowered teachers to reconceptualize their pedagogical practice. Teachers reflected and worked to incorporate the application of theory into their teaching practices. The majority reported making gains toward a more learner-centered curriculum.

Empowerment in practice: Transfer to the classroom

Teachers made connections between educational theories and what was happening in their classrooms. Teachers identified critical questions regarding their practice which then became the focus of action research projects. One outcome was the integration of theoretical frameworks into their conceptions of teaching and learning. One of the most prevalent themes in our class reflections was the value of listening to students' voices and sharing power. Teachers transferred reflective methods into their own classrooms to engage students in learner-centered processes.

Our use of Weimer's (2002) chapter on power enabled our classroom teachers to make connections to and exercise power in their own classrooms. For example, a second grade teacher had never before considered student input on setting assignment due dates. She bravely worked with her students to allow individual students to set individual project deadlines. She found that her turn-in rate for this project was higher than for any other and those students who asked for more time to complete the project actually turned them in earlier. The teacher was not only surprised but energized by these findings. She explained, "I have used my

students a lot more than in the past. I think using their feedback and ideas have made me look at my pedagogy in a new light. I think it has strengthened us in the classroom because they know that I value them and that I need them to be a better teacher”.

Teacher empowerment and application of theory was listening to students’ voices resulted in a redistribution of power and curriculum construction. Clearly teachers learned to value students’ critical insights, experiences and perceptions. The dynamics of teaching and learning in a community empowered both teachers and students. One teacher stated:

Wow, power shifting is the name of the game. I have given power and received power. My students now have a say in the direction of language arts. They help to plan what direction we need to go to achieve the goals we set. I feel empowered to plan with them and for them as we journey together each day.... So I have discovered that I need to be alert and take change as it comes. Rather than fear it I now must embrace the chance to create a learning environment that is power shared and strengthened by each and every voice.

Listening to their students gave teachers the impetus they needed to try new things and to let go of old ways. Two teachers discuss a balance between the structures of schools and incorporating student voice:

I am constantly analyzing my classroom environment, trying new ideas, and giving my students more responsibility. I am doing a better job of listening to my students and designing lesson plans that accommodate their interests and needs. The biggest transformation throughout this program has been to let go of some of the structural methods I’ve used in the past.

I find myself more willing to allow students to have more voice in the classroom, to make some of the decisions, to decide how things should be done and graded.

Teachers conveyed a willingness to be flexible in designing classroom environments to involve students in goal setting to better meet student interests and needs. Some teachers reported on their comfort of trying new ideas based on student feedback. However, not all teachers found the transfer of theory into their practice to be fluid. One teacher wrote,

It creates tension in the area of power, choice and responsibility. I'm extending my sharing of power with my students and they aren't using it the way that I think that it should be used. This causes stress because I find myself wanting to tell them how to do it the "right way". It is scary to allow them the power of choice and to see them make the wrong choices. I'm not sure where I should step back in. I'm not sure how to teach them to become independent learners.

The transfer of theory to classroom practice is a challenging process. Teachers' application emerged in varying degrees of personal success and comfort. Some teachers reported deepened understanding in their assumptions and practices. Most teachers included the voices of their students, gathered feedback and shared power to more fully engage their students within the teaching and learning process.

Discussion

Educational research often focuses on the impact of teaching on students. We, as faculty, choose to "live" the pedagogical theory rather than to teach the theory which transferred authentically into our graduate classroom. Baxter-Magolda (1999) defined learning as "mutually constructing meaning makes both teacher and student active players in learning. It suggests that the teacher and the

students put their understandings together by exploring students' experiences and views in the context of knowledge the teachers introduces. Together they constructed knowledge that takes experience and evidence into account" (p. 37). Her work is particularly relevant to this study in that we and teachers co-created knowledge in the graduate classroom.

Our modeling of critical pedagogy and learner-centered theory challenged our pedagogical assumptions and deepened our own understanding of theory in practice as faculty but also created meaningful professional development for our teachers. Weimer (2002) contends that not only do learners go through developmental stages but teachers do as well. We provided a framework and a language to deepen our co-constructed understandings. Our graduate students bring their content and context; we take their knowledge seriously by meeting them in their classroom, integrating their knowledge, and respecting their level of development as learners. In as much as we provide space for them in our university classroom, they too respect that their students bring understandings and context to the K-12 classroom.

Teachers grappled to use theory as they sought to make meaning of their professional experiences, perceptions and work in schools. One outcome of our work resulted in teachers exercising initiative of their own learning. Our work illustrates one way to implement learner-centered teaching and learning from the university to the K-12 student.

Faculty interested in work that transforms teachers as learners must place emphasis on the pedagogical theory rather than on content. Wink (2005) states "... teaching makes us vulnerable" (p. 26). We found that sharing our meta-conversation regarding curriculum and pedagogy with our teachers made us feel "naked" at times. The context of creating dialogue with teachers forced us to wrestle with the implications of the theory as well.

The process of reflection on prior experience, listening to students' voices and redistributing power resulted in conceptualizing and restructuring classroom practices. There is a double consciousness of knowing the theory as a learner and knowing the theory as a teacher. A primary process for negotiating this double understanding is through continuous reflection. Faculty created multiply ways and opportunities for teachers to reflect on themselves as learners and as teachers.

Reflection and self-assessment are inherent in teachers' incorporating and experimenting with course experience and ideas. It gives them a mechanism of the time and space to make explicit connections to push their thinking into practice. Over time, teachers demonstrated ownership of their own learning. They reported the belief that their individual contributions were valued and impacted the community. Teachers' established themselves along a continuum between pedagogical understanding and the transfer of knowledge into practice.

For example, the faculty team collected class reflections after each class day for two-years. This information was organized and given back to teachers in a morning PowerPoint at the beginning of the next class day. The salient experiences and perceptions were shared on the following class day as a way to build community and shared understandings of others' experiences in the program. The impact of sharing these data is threefold:

- First is the importance of modeling and valuing feedback into the teaching and learning process.
- Second, illustrates to teachers that there are many different learning preferences, styles, and ways to construct knowledge within learning community.
- Third, instructors also use these data to inform and shape future curriculum and class designs.

All three aspects ideally shape teachers ways of thinking about their own teaching practices and have implications for learning. We talk to our teachers about the curriculum, choices, dynamics, team meetings, and whole class reflections. Teachers then began to have structured conversations with their students. One teacher summarized her experience in the program stating, "Your critical thinking and empowering teaching enable me as an educator to walk towards the development and achievement of the professional goals set during our summer 2003. By setting a compass, and tracing a road my experience as a middle school teacher this year (2003 - 2004) was richer, deeper and filled with deep reflections, not only my thoughts, but voices from my students, and colleagues."

Our pedagogy mirrors the adult development model of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, M., 1999; Baxter Magolda, M. & King, P., 2004). We met teachers where they were, we embedded their learning experiences in their existing knowledge and experience and we created learning structures that placed them in dialogue with themselves and with each other to construct their understandings (Baxter-Magolda, 1999). Our teachers experienced themselves as continuous learners, experienced the dynamics between content and pedagogy, and experienced the transformation of their classrooms from “teacher knows best” to co-creating knowledge with their students.

Conclusion

We conclude that collaboration between faculty and teachers did create a constructivist learning community. We found that as a teaching team we had to overcome teachers’ initial doubts and resistance. Teachers’ reported on how an atmosphere of accountability to faculty and peers supported and enhanced the process of constructing understandings. Teachers and faculty incorporated class day feedback and responded by creating curriculum opportunities to further understandings of learner-centered theory and critical pedagogy. Faculty reshaped curriculum to meet teachers’ learning needs. Over time teachers reported higher levels of trust and comfort that we would support and scaffold their work through multiple experiences. It was our desire to develop reflective,

critical participants who would be risk takers and would value the processes of learning.

Teachers came into our program from many different contexts, held a variety of content expertise and had a wide range of teaching experience. Within the framework of continuous improvement we held no expectations of teachers understanding of critical pedagogy and learner-centered theory. Critical pedagogy and a learner-centered curriculum embedded within reflective practice fostered continuous improvement and teacher empowerment. One student conveyed her understanding in this manner,

Learning revolves around individuality. Each person is different in their thinking... therefore teaching must embrace the idea of choice so that individuals can learn to make their own choices and think on their own....They will not think for themselves but rather follow suit with the society they were born into, never knowing they could do anything with their lives. To teach, you must be able to learn from others and learning means creating your own knowledge as an individual and being able to communicate that knowledge to others.

Our curriculum was designed to be fluid and flexible to meet teachers in their current understandings of teaching and learning. They entered the discussion of theory and practice from current points of reference and we made specific efforts to value these beginning points and celebrate the destination they achieved.

Teachers demonstrated their understanding of theory in multiple ways as they simultaneously applied it to their classrooms. It is important to foster an attitude of continuous improvement in teachers in which they are supported, and yet challenged to examine their philosophies for the purpose of empowering themselves and their students.

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