

Building a Community of Multicultural Practice through Critical Conversations

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(Co-authors are listed in the order of farthest distance to closest distance of upbringing to Dallas)

The majority of the students at our university self-identify as Hispanic. As of spring 2013, out of 274 students planning to become teachers, 64% identified as Hispanic, 17% as African American; 17 % as Caucasian, and .8% each for Asian, Native American, and Other. We are all professors, and our research project was designed to create space for the eight of us to collaborate by writing our critical stories of experience we perceive prepared us for working with diverse students in a teacher education program. Similar to most teacher education programs, our program requires pre teacher candidates to take a multicultural education course. Unlike many programs, our candidates are fortunate in that they experience the diverse views of their peers during every class because diversity is a reality on our campus. Our faculty as well can enjoy the privilege of a global perspective if we take the time to interact with one another.

Our research connects with the conference theme of Shaping Teachers and Students through Collaboration and Research because our project allows us to form a multicultural community of practice. Our research team includes two Hispanics, one Basque (from Spain), one African American, two Caucasians, one Palestinian, and one Indian. This team represents only some of the cultural backgrounds represented among the entire faculty, but most of us had not engaged with one another on a deep personal level to share our socio political and multicultural perspectives.

Glenda and a colleague at our university had engaged with seven diverse preservice teachers in a narrative and dialogical community of practice to explore issues around the preparation of immigrants and children of immigrants to teach immigrants and children of immigrants (Shappeck & Moss, 2012). The experience was a powerful multicultural experience for Glenda, who wondered if a similar experience would be valuable for faculty. She invited our team to participate as co-researchers to write our critical stories of experience and engage in dialogical analysis to build a multicultural community through the critical conversations.

The purpose of the study is to create a setting for us to engage in advancing our working relationship toward a stronger community of practice. The study provides each co-researcher an opportunity to reflect on our critical experiences that impacted our growth toward a multicultural perspective. We are exploring how our critical stories of experience prepared us for joining together in the goal of the Teacher Education program to prepare diverse candidates to teach in a multicultural community as defined by changing demographics.

The purpose of this project is professional development and to contribute to the discussion on diversity in the U.S. It demonstrates how a diverse faculty uses reflection and personal narratives to explore multicultural development and how they can all collaborate to address the needs of a diverse student body. Through reflection, we are gaining insight into issues concerning language acquisition, socio-economic complexity, and gender issues. The goal of creating a critical learning community is not only focused on developing narrative stories of experience and responses to reflective questioning, but it also involves fostering a 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, 2006) that maximizes the

tacit knowledge emerging from each individual's critical narratives about past educational interactions.

Developing a Community of Practice through Personal Narratives

A community of practice design in critical reflective writing orients the co-researchers to share common goals and personal insights in order to augment the knowledge base of the members of the group. The principle tenants of developing a community of practice emerged during the process of authoring our critical stories of experience. The first step involved establishing membership and participation roles in the community. One of the co-authors invited the other seven to participate in this project. She designed the project based on an earlier project with preservice teachers (Author, 2012). She emphasized that the contributions and insights to the issues raised by the critical stories would be enriched by the participation of the team of researchers. Wenger (1998) refers to the building of these types of collaborative relationships as 'mutual engagement' and views it as an essential component to binding the members of a newly formed community together.

The second element, which Wenger labels 'joint enterprise', relates to the group's perception that the collective knowledge in a community of practice is beneficial for an individual's development in a particular field. Lave & Wenger (1991) originally observed the formation of communities of practice outside the sphere of education and classroom instruction and found it to be common practice with informal learning in online communities, criminal underworlds, and workplaces throughout the world. One of the primary motivations for introducing this form of social organization into our collaborative study has everything to do with its effectiveness in sharing information, maximizing the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991) of individuals, and strengthening our desire to learn. We, as co-authors of critical insights, as demonstrated through the content of our writing, were able to conceptualize our own group as valuable and essential to the knowledge production process.

Through the mutual engagement established in group membership and a joint enterprise that develops in a common understanding of communal participation, a community of practice produces a 'shared repertoire' (Wenger 1998) of resources and cumulated knowledge. In the context of teacher preparation, the creation of social learning systems becomes germane to critical research. It is through our dialogues that the community-of-practice goals ('clearly defined group identity', 'joint enterprise', and 'shared repertoire') begins to take shape and emerge as collaborative knowledge creation and reciprocal communication. We will attempt to highlight some of the themes that are emerging within our community's rich and critical repertoire.

Methods and Procedures

Our critical narratives of experience became narrative data sets (Polkinghorne, 1995) for this project. After we all wrote our critical stories of experience, we met for a four hour block of time and then two subsequent three hour blocks of time to begin the process of building a multicultural community of practice through critical conversations. We took turns reading our critical stories and then engaging in critical conversations in response. We recorded the dialogue that unfolded as we read and responded to each other's stories. We each transcribed the dialogue

that followed our individual story and made the transcriptions available to all of the co-researchers for analysis.

The plan is to analyze the narrative data (Polkinghorne, 1995) for themes and select key excerpts to exemplify the themes. We are not as far along as we had planned, but have realized that debate rather than dialogue had emerged during the first two sessions. Two major side conversations outside our meeting times had resulted among the participants, further polarizing along Black and White lines. When Glenda realized this, she began the third session by putting this phenomenon on the table and suggesting that we work toward listening to the critical stories to understand rather than to engage in interrogating the stories based on assumptions and biases.

We had not taken time to set norms before the critical conversations other than confidentiality. We had not begun by discussing our definitions of dialogue or expectations. The process was messy from the outset as participants responded out of their assumptions, values, and perspectives. All agreed that the messiness was okay and part of the process. We then heard two more stories and engaged in critical conversations.

We ended our third session with a discussion concerning what we would present at CSOTTE. We recorded our conversation and agreed that the co-researchers would each write a brief analysis of our experience to this point and send it to Glenda, who would integrate the contributions. Since CSOTTE has set an October 12 deadline for uploading materials for review by participants before the conference, we are uploading this much of our paper to give conference participants some sense of the dynamics of this project. During the presentation, three of the researchers (Cynthia, Larry, and Glenda) will present the co-researchers' initial analysis and lessons learned from the initial critical conversations.

We invite participants to engage in their own professional development by writing their own critical stories of experience that have prepared them to work with diverse students preparing to be teachers in the twenty-first century and bring those to our session. We would further invite participants to engage with us at CSOTTE in critical dialogue concerning issues of race, social class, and gender.