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Building, Breaking, and Adjusting Cycles of Reflection Among Students and Teachers to Realize the Goals of Service-Learning: Student Concept Development as a Recursive Measure of Effective Teaching

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**BUILDING, BREAKING, AND ADJUSTING CYCLES OF REFLECTION
AMONG STUDENTS AND TEACHERS TO REALIZE THE GOALS OF
SERVICE-LEARNING: STUDENT CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT AS A
RECURSIVE MEASURE OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING**

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ABSTRACT: Experiential approaches to teacher education resonate with trends in universities in Europe and North America toward education “beyond the classroom” such as service-learning. Both models share the assumption that reflection upon ‘real’ action facilitates deep learning within and across disciplines. Research on reflection in service-learning and teacher education challenges the autonomous benefits often ascribed to reflection and practice teaching, however. This paper examines one teacher’s development ‘on-the-job’ as it was augmented through an educational research partnership. Findings in the area of literacy practices indicate the development of a concept of teaching writing compatible with other teaching emphases. The findings raise questions about the local value of enriching cycles of teacher reflection.

KEYWORDS: reflection, concept development, service-learning, experiential education

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching education and service-learning pedagogies often share the assumption that reflection upon ‘real’ action facilitates deep learning within and across disciplines

(Gordon & Debus 2002). However, research on reflection in service-learning and teacher education challenges the autonomous benefits often ascribed to reflection (Boggs 2011) and school-based teacher education (Smagorinsky, Boggs, Jakubiak, & Wilson 2010). The co-emergence of a brand of progressive pedagogy and supportive literature points to the dilemma in educational research, policy, and practice: whether and how stimuli such as teaching experiences or educational research improve practice.

Vygotsky's (1987) definition of the concept helps explain the importance of stimuli in learning from experience, which in service-learning parlance is called reflection. My mission as a teacher education researcher has been to help early career teachers gain access to reflective stimuli that fit with their areas of interest and can flow together with what they already know about teaching. Part of the strength of Vygotsky's *concept* is the heterogeneity of epistemologies integrated into it—the everyday and the scientific, as well as relational, affective, and other domains (Wells 1994).

Narratives of lived experience limit epistemological heterogeneity when they short-circuit tension among knowledge domains. In dialectical terms, they can rationalize or suppress what might otherwise help create productive tensions leading to the synthetic, sophisticated concepts of teaching. The concept was important as evidence of a kind of freedom from the tyranny of one's own experience (Luria 1976). Developing an understanding of teaching that supersedes narratives of experience may also be considered a pursuit of justice, since conceptual understanding positions a teacher to dialogue with rather than assimilate, marginalize, or co-opt other narratives. At issue are means by which teachers may access stimuli for developing conceptual approaches to practice areas.

2. WHAT'S WRONG WITH 'EXISTING' STIMULI?

Service-learning and experiential education require rich feedback loops to accommodate experience narratives and other kinds of knowledge because of the complex relations among course activities and learning outcomes. Academic performance of reflection in journaling and on course evaluations limits the epistemological distinctiveness of student knowledge and thus weakens those artifacts as reflective stimuli. Service-learning pedagogy promises students opportunities to incorporate their own goals and understanding of social problems, conditions that favor the development of new understanding of writing and other literacy practices when literacy helps them achieve desired ends. When service-learning positions students as having relevant goals for which forms of literacy, practical and social skills, and conceptual knowledge may become necessary, the *process* of language-mediated learning becomes more interesting than the products.

3. CONCEPT AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Learning from experience and reflection are complex processes deeply embedded in sociocultural context. Vygotsky resolved the paradoxical homogeneity and heterogeneity of narratives of experience through a theory of mind driven by assimilation of language-in-use. Experience consists of narratives spun for particular purposes with cultural signs for real and potential audiences.

I designed my study of a service-learning program to help interested teachers identify and adapt their practice to the known and unknown forces at work in their teaching and institutions (Smagorinsky, Boggs, Jakubiak, & Wilson, 2011). To aid in constructing augmented feedback loops for teachers wishing to improve outcomes of student

reflection, I employed the following research questions: For what purposes and to what effects do students employ reflection? In what manners do teachers respond or apply reflective stimuli available? What is the relationship between changes in the available reflective means and changes in the purposes and effects of students' use of reflection?

4. METHOD

This portion of my dissertation research is a case study of one of three teachers who convenes the Urban Food Collective (UFC), a service-learning course for upper level Geography undergraduates and graduate students as well as non-majors. Offered seven times since Spring 2008. My study began on the third iteration, which I dub UFC I and is now in its fifth iteration. I have collected between five and twelve case studies each semester, and Dylan (a pseudonym) is the first UFC instructor whose teaching I have studied *after* providing multiple forms of feedback about student learning through the case studies, presentations, and informal interviews.

4.1 Context of the Investigation

4.1.1 Urban Food Collective Course

The mission of the course is expressed in its motto: "Direct learning through direct action." Direct action, an activist term rooted in anarchism, denotes community based grassroots efforts to confront social problems on the scale at which they are experienced, rather than through government channels, for instance. Class time in the first half of the semester is spent reading and discussing articles and book chapters selected to prepare UFC members to assess, organize, and act around a particular community need they identify.

4.1.2 The Teacher

Dylan's initial reluctance to be *evaluated* in my study helped establish affinity as the basis of my project. He and his colleagues could employ my analyses of student learning as a source of reflective stimuli as they chose and ignore them without penalty. Thus, my research became a source of possible and provisional tools for reflection on teaching.

Dylan's courses "align" his scholarly reading, teaching, and social action. "It makes sense when reflecting on the day," he explained, "to have taught . . . and to have been speaking with someone about starting a market garden. It puts together all these contract stipulations to do this and this with my time. It brings it all together."

4.1.3 The University Context

Complementary support for the UFC course from the Office of Service-Learning, Geography Department faculty, and the College of Agriculture have drastically changed the status of the UFC within the department and university over the course of my study. The course has recently been made the capstone course in a new USDA-funded interdisciplinary initiative bringing together the college of agriculture and the geography department.

4.2 Data Collection

Creating the 'augmented reality' in which teachers may examine their practice through multi-voiced accounts of student concept development requires data organized to fit teachers' goals. I collected three levels of data in which I expected to find evidence of Dylan's reflective practice as augmented by the case studies: talking about teaching,

changes observed in his teaching, and changes in his teaching suggested by alternative patterns in classroom discourse.

Informal interviews covered a wide range of topics and purposes. I used them to investigate connections Dylan made within and across the domains of academic and activist experience. Observation of teaching consisted, in UFC I, of field notes, interviews, and selected small group audiorecordings. In UFC IV, approximately one year later, I made transcripts of what Dylan and his students said in class in addition to introductory and exit interviews.

4.3 Data Analysis

I divided the data from interviews and observation of Dylan into five categories that fit his teaching goals and areas of concentrated activity: *academic readings, action, the course in the department and community, day-to-day facilitation, and literacy practices*. Each category represented areas in which my findings about student learning were most likely to find traction and for which changes in his speech indexed concept-based planning, facilitation, and self-assessment. The next step involved a comparison between his concept development and patterns in student discourse putatively mediated by changes in teaching.

The looped nature of my research assumes that concept development is a benefit to a teacher, but probes student learning for evidence of students' benefit. In this way, my analysis arranges what students appeared to have learned in the course as a mirror through which teachers may assess their teaching and understanding of teaching—with subsequent loops iterating the process and providing a fresh mirror to stimulate teacher reflection. While students' conceptual learning may not directly and immediately have a

corresponding influence on teacher performance, this arrangement affords examination of weaknesses in the reflective processes as supported by schools and academic research.

While areas of student learning could, to some extent, be separated into corresponding categories, it does not follow theoretically that they should neatly match. Indeed, the findings below indicate that Dylan's construction of experience narratives plays an important role in *applying* reflective stimuli, an aspect of my research that now seems rather obvious. So, after grouping general findings of changes in Dylan's teaching into the five categories, I noted the *manner of application* in which stimuli appeared in Dylan's teaching: *transference*, in which reflective stimuli jump across categories, *negation*, in which reflective stimuli appear to evoke a reversal of practice, and *fine tuning*, in which reflective stimuli appear as part of microscopic adjustments.

5. FINDINGS

In an abbreviated findings presentation, I focus on reflection-mediated changes in teaching according to the category of *literacy practices* and with respect to the manner in which reflective stimuli appear to have been employed.

5.1 Literacy practices

Literacy practices I identified in UFC I and IV were reading, discussing, and taking notes on assigned texts; making individual entries in reflective journals; collaboratively composing texts for publication; emailing about upcoming action; and collaboratively using whiteboards and a computer with projector for organizing, composing texts, and brainstorming. Although the selection of readings remained firmly within Dylan's purview, he thought changes in the content of required readings improved that aspect of

the course and took pressure off him to regiment large-group discussion. Formal large group discussions remained the centerpiece of the first eight to ten class meetings in both UFC I and IV, and formal discussion tools were used the majority of the time in both courses.

Dylan maintained the journaling requirement unchanged, but he warned students that previous students had not put sufficient effort into the journals to meet the requirement of disciplined reflection. Dylan reported no improvement in UFC IV journal entries, however.

I judged the differences in Dylan's treatment of collaborative writing and students' use of classroom tools to be among the most significant of all the changes evident in the data over time. Personal accounts and discursive patterns in UFC I and UFC IV data suggest that students experienced two very different courses when it comes to writing. In the first course descriptions Dylan wrote, students received assigned readings and turned in academic reflection papers. Dylan complained that, despite "emphasis on the experiential side," academic writing always dominated students concerns. Dylan therefore eliminated all academic writing assignments the first time he taught UFC on his own. The move demonstrates both transferring and negating applications in response to reflective stimuli. The elimination of formal writing assignments was an example of transference in that he responded to students' anemic interest in action by modifying the role of normally privileged literacy practices. The move was also negative in that the adjustment meant a complete reversal of an accepted approach to student reflection.

Nonacademic collaborative writing UFC I consisted of a food zine. Dylan presented the project as a means of communicating relevant food issues to a wide local audience, an

idea that appealed to the students in the course, but no one found the process or product very rewarding. Prepping the next class, UFC IV, Dylan reported past zine projects as partial failures in that crucial activist information—how the zines are affecting the local audience—had never been collected. In UFC I, students felt rushed and confused as they worked in an unfamiliar genre on unfamiliar topics for an officially unknown audience. One student remarked,

When he assigned it, the push was basically ‘People are expecting a zine. This is what we want; this is what it’s looked like in the past.’ For us who’d never been in the class before, never done a zine, it was very like end-product-oriented work.

In UFC IV, although Dylan suggested the zine as a possibility, new forms of collaborative writing emerged that involved students in markedly different ways. For Aria (a pseudonym), the experience of collaborative writing in UFC I positioned her as her classmates’ “nagging babysitter,” where the rigid but unfamiliar zine format created an opposition between projects like the zine which involved mainly “editing and formatting” and projects requiring “writing and critical thinking—drawing connections” like the collaborative writing project in UFC II taught by a different instructor. Aria rejected my characterization of later collaborative writing as really writing at all, saying “The writing part was only a very small part of that process,” unlike the creation of the zine. She emphasized “background work, like reading other people’s research and using that for ideas” to explain why it shouldn’t be considered a writing project like the zine. In her critique of UFC I writing by comparison with what she did in UFC II under a different UFC instructor, Aria provided a prescient definition of consensus-based collaborative writing that Dylan fostered in UFC IV: “Interpreting together was the main

thing. People seeing how they worked on a project like that, people deciding how they worked.”

Group and individual goals grounded the UFC IV collaborative writing effort. Thomas (a pseudonym) “didn’t like it all that well. It’s not the way I work.” He explained, “One, I hate writing. Two, it was so much [input from different sources] that my mind could not handle it.” Reporting this frustration to the group, he added, “But the end product was way better than I could have independently written. Better than any of us. So I gained a lot of respect for the process when I read the final product.”

Dylan’s facilitation of the writing of newspaper articles as follow-up action to more typical UFC initiatives constituted the first example of writing instruction per se in his UFC teaching. Through personal anecdotes of experience as a member of an activist writing collective, Dylan supported students’ development of new reasons to write. One student said that what he liked best about the class was that it went beyond “typical academic activities: lectures, notes, reading, and writing,” an attitude that very much corresponds to Dylan’s negation, in UFC I, of the original writing requirement. In UFC IV, however, “consciousness-raising,” descriptions of popular education, “breakout groups” based on personal affinity, and continual challenges to “understand the political goal of the document” represent significant changes in Dylan’s practice and an additional dialectic step in the “experimental” process of teaching UFC.

Reminiscent of Vygotsky’s (1987) zone of proximal development, the most vocal critic of UFC IV collaborative writing said, “Even though I couldn’t handle it, I say, ‘Wow, that really worked.’” However, Dylan’s reflection on the project suggests a conceptual turn in the experimental process: He reported concern that “the consensus process kind of

broke down toward the end,” explaining that “certain personalities tended to dominate” by virtue of their “extensive experience.” Dylan’s development of a collectivist, activist writing pedagogy moved through negation to concept-based “fine tuning.” In response to comments such as “Collaborative writing is something I had wanted to do for a while. It was difficult, for sure, but I’d like to do more of it,” Dylan probed for interest in continuing the writing collective after the end of the semester. One student added, “I’ve been doing a lot of reflecting over the last couple of days. [Writing in the collective] was a cool way to end the semester. I’ve been encouraged cause I feel like in a lot of ways, we are ‘being the change that we want to see.’ Like prefigurational politics.” Whether or not Dylan thought students might have been putting a too-perfect spin on things, comments about collaborative writing may have mediated reflective transference to other literary practices that make up the class. In particular, he at last revisited the journaling requirement as he planned for the following semester, crafting the requirement to support a multi-vocal approach to journal writing.

6. DISCUSSION

I identified two phases in Dylan’s UFC instruction with respect to writing instruction. Dylan relied on preconceptual experimentation to achieve alignment between between writing and the desired characteristics of the idiosetting: consensus, mutual aid, and direct action. He used trial and error to find ways of distinguishing the course from dominant, disciplining ideologies implicit in notions of “schooling.” The prior phase was characterized by the ascription to writing of fixed meanings *dictated* by the setting, as evidenced both by Dylan’s use of academic writing assignments to legitimize the course and also by his elimination of writing that he believed was crowding out action.

A more penetrating view of writing as a social process distinguished a second phase, in which Dylan's students employed existing skills as communicators to solve new problems through collaborative writing. Applying a conceptual understanding of the contingent meaning of writing, Dylan sought street credibility for the course by encouraging the development of group goals for activism for which writing would be a powerful tool. The chain of stimuli primarily responsible for the more sophisticated approach include the case studies, readings in pragmatic philosophy, and ownership of a popular educational idea that Dylan and his students might "make the road by walking" (Horton & Freire 1990). Recognizing the contextual meaning of writing as a cultural tool enabled Dylan to direct students' reflection on course activities in ways that were previously impossible both practically and in terms of his pedagogical approach. In the prior phase, Dylan had no way of knowing how attitudes toward "typical academic activities" were shaping students' learning in the course.

Intentional dialogue about Dylan's goals helped me identify means of distinguishing between conceptual and aconceptual pedagogical experimentation such as through different meanings of the word "alignment." In one case study, a student's writing, class participation, and her course evaluation—the typical reflective means available to Dylan—told a drastically different story than interviews, observation, and discourse analysis. That students *perform* was no surprise; that they might develop concepts of activism hobbled by institutional ideology in UFC was anathema. This research raises the questions of whether and how educational research should accommodate specific teachers' narratives of experience. Turning the methodological question of the case study

on its head, the rise of on-the-job training may necessitate research on-demand, tailor-made for individuals.

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