

Teachers + Reform + 7 years + Portfolios = Fruitful Change: a report on a cross-district, cross-institution CFG in Houston.

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(American Educational Research Association has accepted the following proposal submitted by the Portfolio Group, a cross district CFG in Houston, TX.)

Teachers from several area schools connected initially through a city-wide reform initiative, have been involved over a seven year period in the creation of reflective school portfolios that illuminate how their campus-based school reform efforts influenced their school contexts, their teaching practices, and student learning. The Portfolio Group, additionally, is well versed in the high stakes accountability system underway in the state. The Portfolio Group's inquiry emphasizes fruitful actions that arose as a consequence of their reflective school portfolio work in community with one another within and across school sites.

As part of the Houston A+ Challenge CFG Teacher as Researcher Grant, CFG focused its attention on the development of individual teacher portfolios, retaining the driving question, "How do teachers and administrators know that their individual practice impacts learning in aesthetics (Fine Arts) and literacy?". The group concentrated its work around the inquiry of aesthetics and literacy as tools for providing accountability in individual practice, increasing individual and collaborative reflection in order to improve student achievement.

The Portfolio Group communicated routinely to examine their individual and collective work. Through "The Portfolio Group" blog, group members continued to explore electronic forms of reflections on portfolio-making and teacher research. Using Critical Friends Group Protocols to facilitate monthly meetings, the Portfolio Group participated in:

- Text-based discussions of relevant journal articles
- Text-based discussions of related books
- Presentations and tuning of portfolio entries;
- Addressing implementation challenges using consultancies;
- Presentations of portfolio documents;
- Collaborative "traveling journals" that focus on current issues.

In conclusion, the ongoing inquiry focus of the Portfolio Group has so far shown that CFG work can be deepened and sustained over time with active collaboration.

Of Knowledge Communities, Pseudocommunities, and Professional Learning
Communities: The Longitudinal Experiences of the School Portfolio Group

Abstract

In the proposed symposium, the School Portfolio Group of Teachers will share their development and evolution as individuals and as an organized group embedded in a local version of a national reform movement in one of the five most diverse, populated centers in the U.S. Since 1998, members of the School Portfolio Group have created school portfolios, have participated in Critical Friends Groups (often simultaneously), and most recently, have engaged in a funded teacher research project. Over the continuum, the group primarily has interacted as a knowledge community (Craig, 1995a, 1995b) where members have shared their stories of experience and received responses from other members in ways that have enabled them to “move toward improved...reflective practice” (Schwab, 1958). However, occasions (i.e. Craig, 2004a) have occurred when the School Portfolio Group’s interactions have devolved to that of a professional association—what some describe as “pseudo-community” (Wineburg & Grossman, 2005) or what others associate with “professional learning communities” in which any assembly of teachers is assumed to be knowledge creating (see DuFour, 1998, 2004). Through examining situations in which the School Portfolio Group of teachers interacted as members of one another’s knowledge communities, along with times when they interacted simply as professional colleagues, the School Portfolio Group of teachers will address a gap in the literature (see Craig & Ross, in press) concerning the value of autonomous teacher development groups and what spurs individual members’ growth.

At the same time, the conditions and tasks that spark teachers' individual and collective interests and the instances when interactions—despite individual's best efforts—fell short of the mark will also be discussed.

Introduction

In 1950, Joseph Schwab engaged in a debate with an unnamed professor at an Educational Testing Services (ETS) Conference held in Princeton, New Jersey. Schwab advocated for teachers conversing with one another through “pooling [their] diversities of experience and insight” (Schwab, 1969a, p. 30), whereas the unnamed professor advised against “talking...by teachers who don’t know much about the facts of life.” To the unnamed professor, such an approach to teacher development results in a “pooling of ignorance” (Schwab, 1950/1978, p. 32).

Despite this and other exchanges that have taken place over the past half century, tensions continue to exist as to whether teachers who meet independently in groups affect one another’s knowledge developments or whether teachers who gather in groups serve only perfunctory purposes under the safe banner of “pseudo-community” (Wineburg & Grossman, 2005, p. 186). To us, some teacher groups serve primarily functional purposes (often determined by others) under the pretense of community (frequently masked by the chronic misuse of the term, “professional learning community” [Dufour, 1998, 2004]), whereas other teacher groups legitimately constitute knowledge communities (Craig, 1995a, 1995b), where teachers develop and refine their knowledge over time through storying and restorying their narratives of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). However, we also are aware that groups such as our own (see Craig, 2004a) can vacillate between authentic knowledge community interactions and simple teacher group activities. In this symposium, the Portfolio Group of Teachers, a group of teachers/teacher educators that has met since 1998 within the context of locally-based national reform movement, will critically examine the ways individual members have

experienced high quality professional development within their teacher group and the ways group members have found themselves relating to one another as colleagues engaged in activities reflective of any other teacher group.

Purpose

In this symposium, we:

- sketch the evolution and development of the School Portfolio Group of Teachers since 1998;
- describe the major urban context and the reform movement which form the backdrop of our shared work;
- introduce knowledge communities (Craig, 1995a, 1995b) as the natural forms of community that teachers appear to form and/or make;
- discuss the risks of “pseudo-community” (Wineburg & Grossman, 2005) and the rhetoric of “professional learning communities” (DuFour, 1998, 2004);
- illuminate how a professor worked alongside the teachers in a manner consistent with what Schwab (1983) would have university professors do;
- offer a fine-grained account of instances where teachers’ knowledge was developed and expanded in community as well as instances when the group dynamics changed and members interacted in perfunctory ways;
- address a major gap in the literature concerning the conditions and activities that foster teacher growth in community (Craig & Ross, in press).

Practical Setting

The Teachers in the School Portfolio Group

The teachers who are members in the School Portfolio Group somewhat mirror the diversity present in the urban core. They represent different subject areas, different career experiences, different genders, different places of employment, and, to a certain extent, different regional cultures. In addition to the teachers, a university professor has also been a longstanding member of the group. Like the teachers, her role has shifted over time.

Initially, the members of the group coordinated the development of school portfolios on their campuses (1997-2002). More recently, their efforts have centered on individual teacher inquiries about a shared theme. In 2005-2006, the topic was an examination of how they work with students and, on occasion, fellow teachers who appear to be “falling through the cracks.” In addition to their independent inquiries, The School Portfolio Group members meet monthly in a local coffee shop or a school library.

The School Reform Context

In the U.S., school reform is an ongoing local, regional, and national activity. While school reform initiatives are generally lumped together, each movement typically operates according to an individual “theory of action” that addresses perceived problems in the field of education (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön & McDonald, 1998; Hatch, 1998; McDonald, 1996). In the School Portfolio Group’s situation, the reform movement in question assumed an intermediary stance from both fiduciary and philosophical standpoints. Philanthropic funds were awarded to particular campuses, networks of schools, and targeted reforms in the areas of mathematics, art, and teacher research. The

local reform movement did not interfere with change plans or expenditures unless the campuses or groups did not undergo their proposed changes. The educators on the individual campuses or in the particular groups crafted their areas of focus, not the reform movement, although the proposed changes fit the reform movement's imperatives.

Theoretical Backdrop

Teacher Knowledge Conceptualization

This symposium on the teacher research conducted by the School Portfolio Group of Teachers is based on the view that teacher knowledge is personally and socially funded (Dewey, 1938) and narrative in form (Bruner, 1987; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; MacIntyre, 1981). Most specifically, it builds on Clandinin's (1986) notion of personal practical knowledge which is understood to be:

in a person's experience, in the person's present mind and body and in the person's future plans and actions. It is knowledge that reflects the individual's prior knowledge and acknowledges the contextual nature of the teacher's knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge, carved out of, and shaped by, situations; knowledge that is constructed and reconstructed as we live out our stories and retell and relive them through the process of reflection (Clandinin, 1992, p. 125).

Professional Knowledge Landscape Conceptualization

This definition of teacher knowledge leads to another major underpinning of our teacher research work. In order to situate our professional knowledge in the contexts of teaching, Clandinin and Connelly offered a second narrative idea that nested the

provisional knowing of teachers in the places within which their knowledge was storied and re-storied. In the authors' words,

a landscape metaphor allows us to talk about space, place, and time. Furthermore, it has a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships...Because we see the professional knowledge landscape as composed of relationships among people, places, and things, we see it as both an intellectual and moral landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 5).

School landscapes are also storied landscapes composed of in-classroom and out-of-classroom places and influenced by in-school and out-of-school forces. This work in some ways addresses how politically and socially charged out-of-school forces affected in-school and in-classroom places on school landscapes.

Teachers' Knowledge Communities Conceptualization

The idea that teachers develop their knowledge in knowledge communities is a third conceptualization that it is foundational to our teacher research endeavor. In longitudinal studies, Craig_ (2001, 2004b) has shown how teachers story and restory their experiences in schools and how the nature of school contexts influence what becomes known, valued, and to what degree.

Teachers' knowledge communities develop around, what Schein (1985) has termed, "an originating event," which brings educators together in a group and then in shared meaning. Once individuals become part of particular knowledge communities, knowledge developed by members continues to be negotiated. However, knowledge

communities can disband or grow as new members join or leave. Related knowledge communities also can emerge through personal connections or shared interests.

Stories of educational practice form the centerpiece of discussions in teachers' knowledge communities. Frequently, these narratives are stories that could not be uttered elsewhere in professional settings. Not only are these narratives shared, critical response is received as well. Stories are often given back to individuals, along with enlarged interpretations and new possibilities to be potentially lived by.

In knowledge communities, teachers not only use knowledge but also create new knowledge. They pinpoint new ideas they have learned through their associations and conversations with others. Teachers often explain to themselves and other members of their knowledge communities how they have taken new learning back to their classrooms and school contexts and how they have "made it their own" through processes of reflection.

Teachers' knowledge communities additionally can serve as bridges to connect what is happening in one school site with what is happening elsewhere in the educational enterprise. Individual and communal ways of knowing become linked as knowledge becomes public and shared. Interpretations of experience become fuller and more informed as multiple horizons of knowing among community members merge. New knowledge constructions become deeply influenced by members of knowledge communities but not reducible to any one member.

Although teachers' knowledge communities may take shape in spaces sanctioned by traditional hierarchies in schools and school districts or sponsored by a reform movement, interactions within such knowledge communities are not dependent on, or

driven by, conventional views of power, authority, and the hierarchy of knowledge. Rather, commonplaces of experience (Lane, 1988) bind the chosen groups of people together, in spite of other agendas — even reform agendas — swirling around them.

Teachers especially turn to their communities of knowing when tensions and uneasiness mark their professional lives. Their knowledge communities sustain them by providing instruction and opportunities for growth. Participation in these communities helps teachers to become more able to deal with exigencies in their professional lives. The efficacy of individuals, along with the power of small groups to inspire and influence change, becomes readily apparent to others. Similarly, the gulf between teachers as humanly knowing and acting units of change and schools as non-human units of change is consciously addressed.

Having outlined the attributes that distinguish teachers' knowledge communities, we now introduce the portfolio literature that scaffolds our teacher research project and which specifically drove our work on school portfolios. We highlight it because our annual report to the reform movement continues to be an electronic portfolio to which each of us contributed several entries.

Reflective Portfolio Literature

In our teacher research centering on students' falling "through the cracks," we adopted a definition that described portfolios as:

the dynamic process of teachers documenting the evidence of their work and growth, gathered and authored by them through careful reflection, shared with colleagues and students, and presented for public discussion and debate about their conceptions in good teaching. (Lyons, 1998, p. ix)

Following Shulman (1998), our approach to portfolio construction is concerned with teacher theory making. In Shulman's words, "what is declared worth documenting, worth reflecting on, what is deemed to be portfolio-worthy, is a theoretical act" (p. 24). In reflective school portfolio development, the process publicly involves teachers determining evidential material relating to the shared theme.

In addition to the work of Lyons and Shulman, Freidus's notion of portfolio mentoring is critical to our work. Freidus noted that the presence of mentors is a fundamental prerequisite for the success of portfolio entries. To Freidus,

Mentoring. . .becomes the nexus of trust building and accountability.

Mentors. . .validate. . .experience on both professional and personal levels

without being judgmental. . .they articulate not only the strength. . .of the

work but also the way in which they see the work as professionally

substantive. (Freidus, 1998, p. 58)

As members of one another's knowledge communities, the educators in the School Portfolio Group mentor one another, as will become apparent in the individual contributions to the symposium.

The Reflective Portfolio Method

The method that guided how we conducted our work arose from many diverse sources. First, Chatman's work (1990) on the distinctions between and among argument, description, and narrative suggested that, because we are funded by the reform movement, that our electronic portfolio entries would ultimately serve the purpose of argument: the argument that School Portfolio Group is worthy of the funds invested in it. This association is a reality and a challenge deeply embedded in the origins of the work

that can not be forgotten. It sat in the wings even when our work developed a purpose, and took on a vitality—even assumed an identity—of its own.

A second notion that deeply informed the particular portfolio process is Bruner's interpretation (1986) of White's annals, chronicles, and narratives. In mapping out narrative ways of knowing, Bruner posited that annals represent nuggets of what happened during a particular period of time whereas chronicles comprise thumbnail sketches of the particular events. Narratives, in the meantime, penetrate selected events to illuminate people's experiences of them. Bruner's sense making of White's conceptualizations appeared to address some of the manifold complexities present in our teacher research project. First, the annals provide an account of our overall change activities, a requirement of the reform movement. Second, the chronicles offer enough description to render the annals meaningful. Third, the narratives represent the highly developed portfolio pieces that connect teacher knowledge with the learning of those students at risk of school failure. The first type of text met the reform movement's compliance requirements whereas the third type excavated the learning that is so vital to educators. Meanwhile, the chronicles bridged the other two varieties of text and rounded out the overall accounts of change and growth, which we will spotlight in our presentation.

Another source that greatly influenced how we engaged in the teacher research project is the series of stories that Clandinin and Connelly (1996) use in their narrative inquiries of "the professional knowledge landscapes" within which teachers work. Clandinin and Connelly imagined a number of paired stories that provide entry points into the stories lived and told, and relived and retold, in schools. Among these narratives,

“stories of teachers—teacher stories—stories of school—school stories” stand out. Stories of teachers are stories told about teachers whereas teacher stories are stories told by teachers. Meanwhile, stories of school are stories given to schools whereas school stories are stories told about school landscapes. These paired stories address some of the inevitable tensions that inevitably arise between schools as non-human units of change and educators as knowing and knowledgeable agents of change in our teacher research project.

The fourth source informing our teacher research arose from an inquiry conducted by Grant and Huebner (1998). Grant and Huebner’s research reminds us about the cultivation of two important habits of mind: one, that teaching is ongoing inquiry; two, that collaboration is a way of knowing teaching. These orientations underlined the fact that growth would be evident in the electronic portfolio documents we would produce but much more so embodied in the pedagogical attitudes and reflective exchanges of those of us who created them.

Mode of Analysis

In our teacher research, we use broadening (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) to set up the general context of our teacher research portfolio entries. Broadening helps us to paint the temporal and social/contextual horizons within which our fine-grained accounts of teacher practice take place. It brings to light such contextual considerations as the ethnic, racial, socio-economic, and ability composition of the students peopling the campuses where we work. Through broadening, the influences and complexities of the professional knowledge landscapes where we are employed become revealed. How

context—whose reach is believed to be limitless (Schwab, 1978; Bruner, 2002) — shapes what is available for us to know rises to the fore.

Burrowing (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) is the second analytical tool we use. It means reconstructing events from our personal points of view, supported by the perspectives of those who immediately surround us, including members of the School Portfolio Group of Teachers. This requires us to reflect on how we string together our life experiences to make sense of them. Burrowing allows the emotional, moral and aesthetic qualities of teacher knowledge to surface. In the process, tough realities and gritty details become public as “moment-by-moment relationships and happenings on the landscape” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 76) are made public.

Our third analytical device, restorying, captures changes on our professional knowledge landscapes in terms of our own and others’ actions and meaning making. Restorying allows for “unsystematic, uneasy, pragmatic, and uncertain unions and connections” to be made, that give rise to “*changing* connections and differing orderings at different times” (Schwab, 1969b, p. 10). Restorying makes the turbulence, tensions, and epistemological dilemmas that invariably appear in our professional visible. The ways in which competing and conflicting stories bump into one another emerge and are made public. Such changes, however, do not represent “mere increase.” Rather, they involve “revisions” where our relationships change and old ideas are discarded or new ones introduced (Schwab, 1954/1978). Through restorying, we are able to pinpoint “different partitionings” and “divers[ions] to the flow of events.” Furthermore, “new connections become probable, and new ways of interacting...arise” (Schwab, 1956/1978, p. 136). In the end result, restorying does not provide us with answers. Rather, it offers

us a means to think more deeply about the dilemmas and challenges we face as educators and enables us to narrow the questions as our perceptions become increasingly focused. the work. As Bruner has explained, “story is enormously sensitive to whatever challenges our conception of the canonical. It is an instrument not so much for solving problems as for finding them.” (Bruner, 2002, p. 15)

Content of the Symposium

After providing the audience with the necessary background and introducing the topic of the symposium, the members of the School Portfolio Group of Teachers will roleplay a number of situations where they interacted as a knowledge community or a pseudo community and break into a reflective discussion of their experiences of both phenomena. From the outset, the audience will be warned that how individuals of the School Portfolio Group of Teachers interpreted particular activities were not always the same—which adds further elements of complexity to our discussion of independent professional development groups and their value to individuals’ professional development. For example, the process through which we individually and collectively wrote a chapter for an edited book was unanimously representative of knowledge community activity. At the same time, when we prepared for two conferences, several of our transactions were procedural. Yet, there were occasions when one member offered another member an insight into his/her practice that seemed more knowledge community-like than pseudo community-like in orientation. The same situation arose with our Blog. For some members, it represented an extension of our face-to-face knowledge community work. For others, though, it was more procedural. Also, some members received undue

amounts of spam associated with the Blog, which robbed this form of communication of its knowledge community capacities.

Contributions

The proposed symposium will make the following contributions:

- allow attendees to get inside the exchanges and activities of a longstanding teacher group;
- enable attendees and group members to reflect on instances when individuals engaged in “pseudo-community” posturing and occasions when individuals participated in knowledge use and generation in community;
- elucidate the conditions and shared work conducive to teachers’ knowledge community formation and sustenance;
- make an important contribution to the literature concerning the value of self-directed teacher development groups.

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