



The Slice

Developed from the work of the Bush Educational Leadership Program at the University of Minnesota.

What might one learn by examining all the student work produced during a narrow time period by a broad sample of students in a particular school or district? In a 1996 project of the Bush Educational Leadership Program at the University of Minnesota, one Minnesota district agreed to capture such data in a “vertical slice” and analyze what it revealed about the purposes of education in the real district they referred to as “Prairieville.”

The collection came from a sample of two Prairieville elementary classrooms at each grade in two socio-economically different schools, and from a sample of secondary students that cut across curriculum “levels.” Everything students did from the morning of January 10 to noon on the following day – homework, worksheets, artwork, notes, drafts, even discussions or events captured on audiotapes, videotapes, or photographs – was to make up the completed archive. Later, groups of school people pored for two hours over its contents. Then, in a Socratic seminar with the archives as its “text,” they discussed the implications of what they saw.

This method is quite open to adaptation. The following strategy can be used by those considering a “slice” of their own design.

1. Decide on the purpose of your slice.

The Prairieville school district administration, for example, wanted to hold up the daily reality of schooling against the district’s stead philosophy. But a school might also use the slice to shed light on a particular problem it faces.

2. Come up with a guiding question.

Prairieville asked, for example, “What does this work reveal about the dominant purposes for different students, subjects, schools, or levels of schooling?” In a slice involving one heterogeneously grouped high school, the question might be, “Is class work appropriately challenging all students?”

3. Decide on a sampling strategy.

Depending on your purpose, the sample should be distributed across the range of groups you want represented, which may be different schools, socio-economic concentrations, grade levels, curriculum groupings either formal (such as vocational education, Advanced Placement, or special education), or informal (such as band students). Though this distribution cannot be scientifically prescribed it will determine how useful the slice proves in answering your guiding question.

4. Identify the methods of the slice.

Will you ask only for work on paper or can you collect other artifacts: artwork, photos, audiotapes, videotapes, student logs or reflections, information on what goes on outside of school hours? Will you see the work in context or divorced from assignment sheets, discussions, and the like?

5. Decide on the duration of the slice.

Prairieville used a day and a half; depending on your situation you might choose a time period of up to a week. This is a cross-section, not a longitudinal study; and remember, work piles up fast.

6. Arrange the logistics.

Someone will need to collect the work; gather parental permission to analyze it; remove from it all identifying names; copy it; create and organize the archive in an accessible form. Funding for this from an interested university or foundation partner could help.

7. Decide how to interrogate the slice.

A number of discussion protocols might prove useful. For instance, the Minnesota district used a Socratic seminar conducted in a “fishbowl”:

- a. The facilitator introduces the norms for the seminar. Then the facilitator introduces the slice’s presenters. (5 minutes)
- b. A spokesperson for the presenters briefly describes the parameters and methodology of the slice. The facilitator then presents the guiding question for the discussion. (5 minutes)
- c. Responders examine the work (including any video or audio evidence) and take notes in silence. Small groups may examine different blocks of evidence in order to cover all the work presented. (45 minutes)
- d. The facilitator leads a Socratic seminar among the responders, using the norms previously introduced. The work in the slice serves as the seminar’s only text. Presenters remain silent. (40 minutes)
- e. Responders and presenters change places, and the presenters continue the seminar discussion among themselves, with facilitation continuing. Responders remain silent. (20 minutes)
- f. Led by the facilitator, the entire group debriefs the process. What have they learned of value through this process, and why? What could be improved? (20 minutes)