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The Power of Autobiography: Unpacking the Past, Understanding the Present, and Impacting the Future While Establishing a Community of Practice

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The power of autobiography: Unpacking the past, understanding the present, and impacting the future while establishing a community of practice

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Doctoral students in teacher education experience multiple challenges as they work to meet the academic demands of their programs and navigate the identity shift from teacher to teacher educator (e.g., Dinkelman, Margolis, & Sikkenga, 2006a, 2006b; Ritter, 2007, 2011; Williams, Ritter, & Bullock, 2012). Often, this experience becomes individualized despite doctoral students' need for adequate support to successfully navigate this transition (Dinkelman et al., 2006a, 2006b; Labaree, 2004; Williams et al., 2012). Examples of such support found in some education doctorate programs include coursework and on-going seminars that specifically address teacher education (Butler et al., 2014; Dinkelman et al., 2012; Kosnik et al., 2011), and identify collaborative spaces where doctoral students support each other academically and professionally (e.g., Logan & Butler, 2013).

These examples highlight how doctoral students participate in collaborative communities. According to Kitchen and Ciuffetelli-Parker (2009), "Conversation, collaboration, and community can have a powerful impact on teachers' confidence, capacity for professional growth, and willingness to share their practices with others" (p. 107). Similarly, doctoral students explore their practice, identity and professional growth through conversation as they work to reframe their practices as teacher educators. Collaboratively, they can reflect upon strengths and weaknesses of their practices in order to improve their trade.

Our study considers doctoral students' development of community through a focus on autobiography. We investigated the tensions involved with sharing our autobiographies and committing to a community of practice that allowed for honest introspection and intrinsic change. Writing and sharing our autobiographies was challenging on many levels. We identified with Kitchen's (2010) view: "Writing an autobiography, particularly an extended version, is not easy. It is, however, an excellent way of examining how one's personal history informs one's present practice and plans for the future" (p. 42). We explored how our personal histories not only informed our present and future practice, but how sharing these histories helped build trust so we could view our

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seminar as a safe place to hold conversations. To guide our study of autobiography and its role in the development of our community of practice, we posed the following research question: How did the sharing of autobiography help develop a viable, effective and sustained community of practice of emerging teacher educators?

Teacher educator development in self-study communities of practice

Communities of practice are well-established spaces to discuss practices, personal growth, challenges, the reformation of identity, and the value that conversations of this type have on the practice of educators (e.g., Logan & Butler, 2013; Kosnik et al., 2011; Wenger, 1998). For example, Kosnik et al. (2011) argue that self-study communities of practice help the process of "...working together to create a certain context and culture...learning to understand, empathize, listen, seek help, and give advice" (p. 71). Within such a community, autobiography is a recognized way to reveal the values, beliefs, and motivations which have shaped our identities and which continue to shape our futures (Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Finding a space where doctoral students feel comfortable sharing their practice, confidences, and concerns can be challenging. Building trust and a sense of community is important in order to commit to such conversations and trust fellow participants (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli-Parker, 2009). Autobiography provides a foundation for conversations, "making it possible for individuals to experience and interpret the world from multiple perspectives as they recognize and alter their frames of reference" (Samaras, Hicks & Berger, 2007, p. 910).

Sharing biography is valuable in helping to understand the shift in identity from teacher to teacher educator; by studying the past we are better able to understand the present, and begin to reframe our perceptions of the future. According to Butler et al. (2014), "There is evidence that personal and professional biography directly influence...the reasons why classroom teachers enter teacher education ...and how they perceive their identities" (p. 257). This is consistent with Samaras et al. (2007) in that "Professors and their students are able to reconstruct significant life events to inform them of their professional identity formation and to help them make meaning of their pedagogy and the connections of their practice to theory" (p. 906). Through a community of practice, the sharing of autobiography becomes an experience which alters perception of both personal and professional identities. Creating communities that share autobiographies can contribute to "the development of a safe and trusting community" (Freese & Beck, 2006, p. 21).

Methods

Our collaborative self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) focused on the use of autobiography and its place in building and sustaining a community of practice of future teacher-educators (Bodone, Guojonsdottir & Dalmau, 2004; Kitchen & Ciuffetelli-Parker, 2009). Angela, Mark, and Kristen participated in Pedagogy of Teacher Education (PTE), a six-week doctoral seminar on teacher education pedagogy and self-study research led by Brandon in Summer 2015. We met for three-hour sessions twice a week both in classroom settings and off-campus environments. Angela a first-year, full-time doctoral student in library science had approximately 40 years' experience as an educator. Mark, a third-year, full-time doctoral student in social studies education had approximately 20 years' experience as a social studies and technology specialist. Kristen, a second-year, part-time doctoral student in literacy education had approximately 15 years' experience as a literacy educator. Brandon, an assistant professor of social studies education, had taught the seminar previously (see Butler et al., 2014). For this iteration, he assigned an educational autobiography due before the first class period with the intent of strengthening the group's sense of community early in the seminar.

In order to better understand how autobiography impacted our experience in a community of practice, we collected the following data over the course of the seminar: course documents (e.g., course syllabus, written directions for assignments, planned in-class activities), student work products with instructor feedback (e.g., initial and revised educational autobiographies, written

critical summaries of course readings, instructor reflection-on-action digital posts and student responses, student weekly journals), and transcribed audio recordings of course sessions. These data sources provided insight about how our community of practice was created and sustained, how each of us grew in our commitment to the community, and how sharing our autobiographies strengthened our community.

Over 80 pieces of data were collected and stored in a shared digital drive. The instructors' reflection-on-action posts and student responses totaled 27,798 words. Students wrote 43 journal entries with 18,447 words. Approximately 36 hours of conversations were recorded and transcribed. As we participated in the course, and following the course's conclusion, we conducted a constant comparative analysis of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We collaboratively coded the first few data sets to identify a coding protocol. Next we individually, then collaboratively, coded documents to identify initial and focused codes. This was an iterative process of comparing our initial and focused codes over multiple sessions in order to verify consistency. We identified the focused codes, noted repeating themes, and condensed to three main themes with several subthemes. We revisited all data sources to confirm the focused codes before finalizing themes and subthemes.

Findings

The PTE seminar afforded us the opportunity to develop and participate in a community of practice that emanated from our first pre-class assignment: writing and sharing an autobiography. As the seminar began with us having some knowledge of our classmates from reading each other's autobiographies, it became apparent from the course outline and first class discussion that the connection between developing a community of practice and autobiography would be a center of discussion. The sharing, and subsequent unpacking, of our autobiographies provided the foundation upon which our community of practice was built. Through our rigorous data analysis, we identified three themes: using the past to create community, using the present to establish community, and using the future to maintain community.

Using the past to create community

Sharing in-depth autobiographies prior to the course provided a jump-start to the community building process in a private, safe environment. We focused our first class meeting on unpacking key elements of our autobiographies utilizing a critical incident protocol (National School Reform Faculty, 2007). We noted our immediate connection to this activity. Mark noted, "*The autobiographies let some layers of protection be dropped so that we were able to create an open space for dialogue.*" Sharing our autobiographies and evaluating critical incidents connected our personalities, teaching experiences and developing identities in a protected environment.

Additionally, the assignment laid the groundwork for developing our community of practice. Mark added, "*We've got some value if we look at how we use the protocol to open up the discussion and break down barriers. Autobiographies are a great way to go forward. Studying and sharing them is a good starting point.*" We each chose one critical incident from our autobiography to share and discuss. We then asked clarifying questions about each incident and raised further questions about what the incident might mean, leading each of us to examine our history within a professional, caring context.

As the sense of community grew, so did the trust we placed in each other to become vulnerable about our practices, open to critical input, and eager to become collaborators. Angela wrote, "*My feelings about teaching, my triumphs and low points have been just that...mine. It will be interesting to see if and how sharing our autobiographies affects the building of our community.*" This experience of being open and trusting our colleagues to become collaborators in our professional and personal growth as educators was echoed by Kristen when she wrote,

I was really pleased how the first night went. My nervousness about feeling connected to my classmates dissipated as we got to know each other and talked about our journeys. I feel that we let our guards down some as we talked. We understand that it is necessary to do so to complete the self-study and grow together as future teacher educators.

Through sharing and unpacking our autobiographies, we opened ourselves to each other and built a common sense of trust and purpose around our participation in the seminar. We quickly understood that we could safely share our experiences and learn from each other.

Using the present to establish community

As we established relationships based on our autobiographies, we strengthened our community by sharing and reflecting upon individual and collective work. Angela wrote,

...the real conversations occur when I see you in the classroom see your expressions immediately, and know how we are communicating. Part of my practice is to not just role model building relationships, but to actually build them. Isn't this the way collaboration has to begin?

As conversations continued, we became familiar with each other's professional needs, creating the context for even more authentic communication. We provided honest critique of one another's practice and were able to further our sense of professional growth. Mark wrote,

We gain insight into each other's professional tensions and developments, which is affirming as it shows that I am not alone ... We are able to ask good questions of each other that make me think. I also appreciate the level of support...they are there to help me improve...

We felt able to reframe our identities as emerging teacher educators in the context of our experiences. Similar to Mark's insights, Kristen noted that as a group we shared more than she would have ever imagined. The level of sharing enabled her to share some things she might not have shared if the group had not built these critical friendships. She appreciated the feedback from the others and was grateful for the opportunity to reflect upon her own practice through their lenses. Crucially, she observed that, *"I didn't feel threatened in that process, but almost relieved that it was okay to bring those issues out. I am excited to continue down this path with Mark and Angela."*

As we continued to meet and work together, our practices were revealed through authentic conversations, written contributions, and professional and personal support as we developed relationships among ourselves, our work, and our identities. We attributed this growth to the connections established through the autobiography assignment. Kristen was particularly positive about how we worked together as a community. She credited that as a reason to

...let go and put myself out there more than I thought I would. I know that as I continue to get used to the process and the feeling of being vulnerable, I will grow not only in my ability to conduct self-study research but also in my practice.

Each of us agreed that it was the safety of the community that allowed us to reveal our failures, our insecurities, and our doubts about our practices. This safety grew from the professional and personal security we felt within the structure of our group.

Another unexpected product of our community of practice was the sense of responsibility we felt for each other. Because we collaboratively analyzed data, each of us had to come to class prepared or the entire project would stall. Kristen wrote, *"There was an added layer this time [in class], however, as I felt an obligation to Brandon, Angela, and Mark to be present for data. We have committed to this class and this self-study, and I hated the thought that I wasn't pulling my weight."* Mark, in addition to taking the class, was also working on his comprehensive exam and editing articles for submissions. He expressed his concern about the responsibility of being in a community by stating, *"As well as the support and critique, there is a negative aspect to a community of practice: the pressure to perform and bring my 'A' game. When I don't, then I am letting the team down."* Once this personal concern was verbalized, we realized that all of us experienced the same sense of pressure. From this conversation, our sense of being a group was further strengthened. Beginning with sharing our autobiographies and continuing by sharing our personal and professional challenges, we found that we had stepped out of our individual comfort zones into a caring and supportive community of practice.

Using the future to maintain community

With the end of the course approaching, we realized our investment in a community was an important aspect of our journey through the doctoral program. This caused us to examine other relationships outside our seminar. Mark wrote,

In such a short period of time we have developed a trusting, comfortable community, learned a research approach, participated in a research project that required complete buy-in and trust among the participants, and identified valuable findings....our findings will not only inform our future practice, but will provide a point of reference for future doctoral students in their transition from teacher to teacher educator.

This sense of responsibility to future doctoral students motivated us to discuss the topic of the inclusion of other doctoral students and creating spaces for discussion of professional growth with our colleagues. The transformation of identities did not have to be solitary. This prompted Kristen to question her practice by asking,

How often have I kept my curtains drawn to protect myself? What has it taken for me to open those curtains and let my peers see into my mind? I am a confident person, but am I confident enough to allow my students and peers to see me vulnerable?

Her realization that she may have to make changes to her teaching and scholarly practices coupled with our realization that the sharing of our autobiographies was the beginning of our community, caused us to wonder how we could incorporate that into our personal and professional interactions with our colleagues. The journey to become teacher educator-researchers who reflect critically on our practices influenced us to realize we need each other to complete the process.

Each of us left the class with thoughts about how we might support and refine our practice with critical friends. Mark wanted to further explore the question of his changing professional identity: *“Am I an emerging scholar? Or am I still punching above my weight? When will I feel like I am actually what I am, as opposed to feeling like I am masquerading as a smart person? I wonder if that will ever happen.”* For Angela, the course ended with her continued exploration of vulnerability as an ingredient in building trust. She compared her own vulnerabilities to Mark’s questioning of his professional identity. *“Maybe it goes back to Mark’s thoughts about the imposter syndrome. I don’t want it to be discovered that I don’t belong here.”* Angela, however, also reflected on the affirmation that participation in the seminar brought her. She wrote,

I realize the importance of collaboration and having a group of people to critique your practice but also give you the courage to change...feeling accountable to a group who you are working with... and to dare to step out of your own comfort zone and make a change in your practice.

At the end of the course, we expressed the desire to continue meeting beyond the required seminar dates. Kristen expressed her thoughts: *“I am excited that we were all willing to continue our space. I know it will not only benefit our future research together, but it will also help us to maintain this community.”* Working collaboratively, we revisited and reframed our autobiographies, looking to incorporate them into future research. To accomplish this end, we have continued meeting on our own time and recording our sessions with the purpose of continuing to collect data and collaborate. Angela wrote, *“Collaboration comes more naturally when it grows out of mutual interests and mutual respect.”* Our community of practice had given us an opportunity to examine our autobiographies and find our mutual interest in education. It provided support and respect for our individual growth and change.

Discussions and conclusion

Our use of autobiography provided impetus for developing our community of practice and achieving an open, trusting space so quickly. Beginning with our first meeting, we began to reflect on our practices in light of who we were, who we are, and who we might become. The latter was the most frightening part because we all knew who we were and felt comfortable in that role personally and professionally. By opening up our lives and our practices to critical scrutiny, might we become too vulnerable? Larsen (2007) described the “seemingly contradictory potential of self-study research to illuminate our fears, anxieties, tensions, and uncertainties as teacher educators whilst acting as a catalyst for community building” (p. 173). Similarly, Margolin (2008) described how communities are built through resistance to change and dependence on the familiar, then a movement from dependence to interdependence, and finally from interdependence to

connectivity. Our community mirrored this development.

Through the sharing and unpacking of autobiography, we were able to develop the sense of trust and professional purpose that afforded us the opportunity to explore our evolving identities. Our community of practice evolved from the context of the seminar to an ongoing space beyond. Moreover, as we continue to collect data and research the form and function of autobiography in the creation and sustainability of a community, each of us knows that our growth was spurred by our engagement with sharing and reflecting upon our autobiographies and subsequently developing our sense of obligation to the other members of our community. Angela wrote,

I talked about the value self-study had given to my summer course. I was only beginning the journey to understand the process and the effects of self-study, I knew that it had changed my world-view about becoming a scholar and a teacher-educator.

Yet each of us knows that despite the unknown factors the future may hold, our autobiographical discussions rooted us in the past as practitioners committed to the practice of education, built us into the present educators we now are, and has the possibility of transforming us into teacher-educators that will reflectively practice both the art and science of preparing new teachers. The critical incidents that formulated our biographies formed the basis for us to choose to continue our work together. Mark summarized our feelings when he stated, "I like it because [generally] it is a bit *avant garde*. It is a dangerous way to work as it encourages the participant to question the status quo. This is the sort of thinking that can start revolutions." We believe one has started in us as we begin to question the systems of education from which we came and the organizations into which we will be going.

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