

The Brock Self-study Group in Action: Examining Teacher Candidate Evaluations

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The first paper in this symposium outlined the establishment of a self-study group of nine recently hired professors in the Faculty of Education at Brock University. It also outlined the structure of our sessions and provided an overview of our collaboration over the 2006-2007 academic year.

In the current paper, we focus on a single meeting of the self-study group. This 90-minute meeting, which took place on December 13, 2006, was facilitated by Louis Volante, one of our group members. His self-study presentation and the ensuing discussion focussed on teacher educators' experiences evaluating teacher candidates during their practicum sessions in schools.

Herein, to report on this session, we draw primarily on detailed reflections written by four group members: Julian Kitchen, Tiffany Gallagher, Darlene Ciuffetelli-Parker, and Candace Figg. Reflections were written from notes taken during the session. Some notes were very detailed, while others were more impressionistic. These reports were compiled and cross-confirmed among the four group members. Typically, the reflections featured both detailed information about the session and the personal perspectives of the writers. In citing information and quotations from these reflections, we will refer only to the initials of the writer (e.g. J.K). When members of the group are introduced, their given names and surnames will be used; thereafter, members will be referred to only by given names.

When analyzing the written reflections, we considered important themes that emerged for us as a self-study group. Following is a sequential account of the beginning of the featured session, the presentation offered by Louis, and the subsequent group discussion. Then we provide a synthesis of our perspectives on the structuring of our session and the process of collaborating as new faculty. Later, we offer implications for the self-study of teacher education practices.

Beginning

“The meeting began with some confusion on place and time,” wrote Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker. “Members of the group were uncertain whether the meeting was at 1pm after an hour lunch break, or immediately following the Pre-service Department meeting” (DCP). Once all members of the group had assembled, the meeting began at 12:20.

Scheduling a regular self-study group meeting for nine faculty members has been an ongoing challenge across the academic year. Our faculty work across two campuses, and they have very different schedules for teaching and research. As a result, we decided to meet monthly after our departmental meeting. Meeting rooms are at a premium at our institution and consequently, when the department meetings are at the main campus in St. Catharines, the self-study group must reconvene in a different building. It was decided that since Tiffany Gallagher is based out of this campus, that she would take responsibility for booking a meeting room when we were to meet in St. Catharines; similarly, Darlene would book a meeting space at the Hamilton campus.

On December 13, 2006, the department meeting was scheduled to run until noon at the Hamilton campus. Despite the fact that meeting space is more accessible at this campus, by the time everyone had left the departmental meeting, picked up some lunch,

found a room, and reconvened, half an hour had elapsed. As an attempt to streamline the beginning of future meetings, Darlene proposed that future self-study meetings should begin 20 minutes after the adjournment of the departmental meeting. This suggestion was well received, and Darlene and Tiffany took it upon themselves to ensure that rooms were pre-booked and gentle reminders posted through e-mail to all self-study group members “within a day or so before meeting” (DCP).

The first twenty minutes of the meeting was taken up with “administrative and organizational issues” (TG). The status of conference proposals for the Canadian Society of Studies in Education (CSSE) was discussed. Recently, the self-study group had submitted a symposium proposal to the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) special interest group of CSSE. Darlene and Tiffany also reported on the status of our application for Scholarly Learning Community Initiation Grant from James Heap, Dean of the Faculty of Education. This internal funding source supports the creation of scholarly learning communities within our faculty.

After this period of administrative discussion, seven members were present and ready for the self-study presentation to begin. One member was absent for this particular session; the ninth member did not join the group until January 2007.

The Presentation

Julian Kitchen prefaced the beginning of the presentation with the comment that this session was, “the first one at which a self-study was being presented by someone who had not previously worked in self-study.” The facilitator for this session was Louis Volante, who has researched and published widely in the areas of program evaluation and classroom assessment practices.

In his presentation titled, “Validating Student Teacher Evaluation Frameworks,” Louis relied on his areas of expertise to examine the reliability and validity of the assessment tools he was required to use as a faculty counsellor evaluating teacher candidates during their practicum placements. In particular, he expressed reservations about the evaluation forms that faculty counsellors are expected to complete on each of the teacher candidates in their caseload. The evaluation form includes a checklist of 33 “look-fors” to assess in a one-time classroom visitation. In general, Louis questioned the reliability and validity of such assessments that are based on limited observation time. He posited that this assessment tool that faculty members use to score the teaching ability of our teacher candidates is summative, rather than formative. Furthermore, the tool requires faculty counsellors to evaluate many items that are difficult to reasonably address in 40 to 70 minutes of classroom observation.

Drawing on Black and Wiliams’s *Inside the Black Box* (1998), a seminal article on formative assessment that articulates the importance of “assessment for learning,” Louis questioned the utility of the current evaluation framework for teacher candidates. Reflecting on his own experiences as a faculty counsellor last year, Louis articulated his feelings of discomfort completing the rating scale on the evaluation form. Based on his understanding of the field, Louis regarded open-ended and anecdotal formats as more authentic and adaptive than rating scales for discrete items. Furthermore, he felt that the use of the same tool for both faculty counsellor and associate teacher was not appropriate.

This year, Louis and Darlene engaged in a collaborative self-study of their practice using the assessment tool to evaluate their teacher candidates. Louis shared his reflections with Darlene, who had also reflected on the use of the assessment tool during

practicum visits. After each teacher candidate's observation, there was a feedback session. For data collection purposes, Louis and Darlene kept logs to document the feedback that they had offered their candidates. This log was not shared with the teacher candidates; it was used for the collaborative self-study. From his reflections, Louis noticed that his feedback comments typically addressed observable criteria, such as "classroom management," "teacher-student interactions" and "discourse." In fact, all of his feedback sessions included a substantial proportion of comments related to "classroom management;" these aspects of teacher candidate performance were observable readily in a 40-minute period. All of the other items on the evaluation form that he observed, such as "sustaining class involvement," were also overt performance indicators. Louis regarded a number of the other criteria such as assessment of "professional knowledge" and "commitment to student learning" as items that are ambiguously assessed. He avoided discussing these items unless the teacher candidate requested Louis's comment on these criteria.

The tensions Louis felt as a faculty counsellor extended beyond his concerns about the details of the assessment instrument. He also felt a tension regarding how to offer teacher candidates feedback that they would find helpful to enhance their practice. Louis questioned, "Should I provide feedback as a counsellor (strictly recording observations using the assessment tool) or as an educator (making comments that would help the teacher candidate improve, but might be construed by those reading the evaluation as indicating substandard teaching performance)?" Louis presented his conjecture to the self-study group in the form of a global consideration, "Is it not counter-

intuitive for faculty counsellors to offer formative feedback while completing a summative evaluation form?”

A third issue that concerned Louis with the teacher candidate evaluation process stemmed from the criteria items in the assessment tool itself. During one 40-minute observation period a few of items in the tool can not always be observed and thus require consultation with the associate teacher in order to get information for the faculty counsellor to assess. This ‘assessment by proxy’ seems to be a less than stringent process and this leaves Louis feeling uneasy. However, the only other alternative is for a faculty counsellor to leave the criteria item unchecked simply indicating that the item was “not observed.” There are potential ramifications to leaving an item blank on the evaluation form, as readers (such as prospective employers) might infer that the teacher candidate was not able to demonstrate these criteria.

In concluding, Louis summarized the tensions that he felt as a faculty counsellor whose area of scholarship is assessment and evaluation. He suggested that alternative, more authentic approaches consistent with a formative focus on assessment would provide the most meaningful ways to improve teacher candidates’ practice.

The Discussion

Once Louis’s presentation was complete, the self-study members engaged eagerly in discussion. “This topic resonated with everyone in the group, as we all shared in the experience of assessing/evaluating teacher candidates using this very form,” recalled Julian.

It was not only the evaluation form that elicited discussion, there was also conversation about evaluation practices and the evaluation period. At our institution,

teacher candidates form cohort groups that are supported by three instructors that constitute a counselling team. Each counselling team consists of one faculty member and two part-time instructors. During our meeting there was also discussion of the practices of our fellow instructors in our counselling group teams. There was great variability in these practices. For some new teacher education faculty, some existing practices reflect different philosophical orientations.

Commenting on the brevity of the teacher candidate's evaluation period, Louis drew the analogy to a doctor determining blood pressure. When a doctor takes a patient's blood pressure it can vary 20 to 30 points higher or lower than previous or future readings. No doctor prescribes medicine to control a patient's blood pressure after one observation. Similarly, for faculty counsellors to prescribe an action plan based on one 40-minute evaluation would be similar to a doctor prescribing medicine after one patient examination.

Darlene, like Louis, seemed frustrated with the assessment and evaluation process during practicum visits. Consequently, Darlene and Louis have been engaged in a collaborative self-study of teacher candidates' evaluations that is tangential to the whole self-study group meetings. She informed the group that she and Louis began holding conversations regarding these issues in the Fall of 2006 and soon after began emailing each other reflections made during practicum evaluations. She felt that her feedback sessions with teacher candidates were always subjective. Darlene, too, felt she had to discuss items with associate teachers in order to provide a complete summative evaluation based on the tool. She held similar tensions as to whether to evaluate the lesson for the benefit of the teacher candidate, with comments that could be used for

improving the lesson (formative evaluation), or whether to use the tool for summative evaluation purposes. Darlene explained that she had also been taking notes after practicum evaluation sessions and teacher candidates were echoing concerns about the evaluation process. Louis and Darlene have presented their preliminary work at meetings of the Ontario Teacher's Federation/Ontario Association of Dean's of Education (OTF/OADE) in January 2007, and to the Ontario Ministry of Education/Faculties of Education Forum in May 2007. Later, they presented a paper on their collaborative self-study at Canadian Society for Studies in Education conference (Volante & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2007).

During the session, Louis and Darlene continued to elaborate on their views and their conversation was interspersed with comments made by other members of the group. Peter Vietgen also expressed his discomfort using the present type of evaluation form. Based on this important conversation, he suggested that a departmental committee should be struck to adapt the teacher candidate evaluation form. Later, Peter indicated that he generally assesses teacher candidates through an anecdotal approach so as to reconcile his tension with the evaluation process and to focus on the positive aspects of their performance. Tiffany's process involves taking detailed anecdotal notes during the observation period. She shares these notes as well as a preliminary grading of where the student ranks in accordance with the criteria items on the assessment tool. During consultation, Tiffany informs her teacher candidates that she needs time to digest what she observed and she will review her anecdotal notes and then confirm that her preliminary grading is accurate before a final evaluation form is completed. Candace Figg, a new faculty member with considerable teacher education experience in the United

States, reported that she had always used anecdotal forms of assessment to identify areas for teacher candidates' performance strengths, weaknesses and next steps.

Julian, in his first year at Brock after seven years as an adjunct professor at another university, had considerable experience with practice teaching including a year as practicum coordinator at the secondary level. Julian compared the assessment practices across a number of universities: anecdotal versus checklists, faculty as supervisors versus mentors. All, he suggested, had their advantages and disadvantages. There were no easy answers! In his reflection, Julian indicated that he was impressed by the “commonality of experiences. We all shared Louis’s frustration with the form. We all expressed our concerns and identified that improvement of the form as a priority.” In the ensuing exchange with Louis, emerged a shared agreement that the assessment tool should be formative and anecdotal, if the mandate for the faculty counsellor is to help teacher candidates develop professionally. Tiffany wrote, “All members are intently listening to this conversation. This discussion had the potential to alter the very purpose of our role as faculty counsellors and require a complete examination of the whole organization of the Department.”

Towards the end of the meeting, Darlene asked Chunlei Lu for his thoughts on the teacher candidates' evaluation process. Chunlei recounted that the evaluation formats he had used in his graduate studies in China, New York and Alberta were very different. In China, professors have one cohort of teacher candidates with only one subject matter to report on, while professors in Alberta are called “facilitators” and generally evaluate about seven students each. In New York, professors do not even evaluate; retired professors evaluate teacher candidates in the field. At Brock, he noticed the evaluation of

teacher candidates was shared by full-time faculty members and part-time instructors. He also noted that part-time instructors (usually retired educators) often lead the counselling groups.

Chunlei's final comments were significant in two respects. Tiffany, for example, valued his insightfulness, "based on his varied institutional experiences." In addition, until that point Chunlei had "listened thoughtfully without adding to the discussion" (TG). Julian wrote, "I was glad that Darlene drew Chunlei out at the very end. It is important that everyone contribute, and that some of us monitor our contributions so others may contribute more." Darlene also felt that it was crucial that the participation of everyone be monitored and facilitated to ensure that everyone believes that their voice has been heard and that they have been actively involved in our "community within a community" (DCP).

Another way in which group members strive to support and extend each other's work is by writing letters of thanks to the presenters. On December 20, a week after Louis's presentation, Tiffany wrote:

Dear Louis,

I found it interesting how you pointed out the lack of application of such a basic concept in assessment and evaluation within our current practices in teacher candidate evaluation: formative assessment. Why are we not practicing what we preach? It begs the question of whether formative assessment or assessment for learning practices are going on in our pre-service courses or not; wouldn't that be an interesting study? Interestingly, it didn't always used to be this way.

A few days after your facilitation I was cleaning out our basement storage area and came across my teaching evaluations. I had to laugh at them. Most noteworthy was the format of the evaluation for Block 1 (this was when there were 3 Block placements). This evaluation was a checklist of 24 criteria that could be checked if the counsellor deemed it necessary to discuss an issue with the teacher candidate. Anecdotal comments were made on the bottom of the carbonated form. Evaluations for Blocks II and III were summative, similar to the format that we have now.

Clearly now there is a position that all evaluations are to be “counted in calculating the summary grade for 8L09.” Yet, regardless of the fact that the Pre-Service Candidate Handbook states that some criteria are “[more] important in determining the level of success in practice teaching (p.23),” all criteria are (seemingly) weighted equally in the calculation. Are these 5 “most important” criteria truly the essential skills for teacher candidates to demonstrate? There is another study. Why aren’t those 5 “most important criteria” the ones that counsellors provide anecdotal evaluations of during Block I? Wow, is there ever a lot of work to be done here, eh? I think that you have just gotten the ball rolling.

Thanks for a thought provoking facilitation,

Tiffany

At the end of each self-study group meeting, members are invited to step forward and volunteer to facilitate the next gathering. Tiffany, who offered to present at the next meeting, left looking “forward to vetting my concerns and ideas through an enthusiastic and constructively critical group.”

Conclusion

The self-study group of new faculty came together in order to create a sense of community within a large faculty of education. It was a safe place where our voices could be heard and our work as teacher educators supported.

The session protocol, which began with administrative items followed by a presentation by a group member, worked well. Efforts were made to shift into a tone appropriate for listening to the story of the presenter with few interruptions. The individual or shared presentations enabled each person to become a contributing member and an active researcher of teacher education practices.

While the session format worked well, time was always an issue. Gathering after the department meeting enabled faculty from both campuses to attend, but it also led to confusion about start times and a feeling of being rushed. Administrative issues also consumed more time than we intended. In particular, since we had submitted proposals to conferences, a certain amount of time was needed to discuss these submissions. A longer scheduled meeting time would permit more discussion and reflection. On the other hand, since all faculty members have identified time as a perennial issue as they juggle teaching, scholarship and service, convenience makes it likely that we will continue with the present meeting time.

This self-study group meeting was regarded as stimulating and affirming by all members in attendance. "There is a sense of purpose early on in this stage of our collaboration and a feeling of collegiality amongst the group, albeit everyone coming from various perspectives/places in their careers" (DCP). An unanticipated outcome of the meeting that Louis facilitated was the sense of further establishing our community of

new faculty. This community became secured by the group members' commitment to self-study through the sharing of a common concern with respect to teacher candidates' evaluations. Julian wrote, "I believe the trail of discussion that resulted in Louis' presentation has generated, and possibly created a more authentic space for the self-study group to share tensions/challenges/rewards/successes in teacher education practices through this self-study group."

Group members departed with a feeling of optimism in the process of collaborating through self-study along with the goal of continually enhancing our practice and teacher education program. Darlene reflected that, "... this area of curriculum, assessment, has had a large impact on our discussion in self-study of our practice which moves us toward a newer, fresher perspective of the department." It is likely that follow up meetings may be needed to determine whether a plan is warranted to examine the evaluation of our teacher candidates. For now, the commonalities of experiences combined with variations in perspectives resulted in meaningful professional development.

Educational Significance

New faculty are often caught between the demands of teaching, scholarship and service while striving for promotion and tenure. Self-study of teacher education practices may enable new faculty to combine teacher education with scholarship.

There is much collaboration among teacher educators committed to self-study. Most consists of collaboration among two or three faculty in an institution or a small

group of teacher educators across institutions. Our self-study group of nine new professors in a faculty of education is significant for its size and diversity.

Based on our review of the literature and discussions with members of the Self-Study Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association, our group of nine professors from one faculty is unusually large, perhaps unprecedented. While it is too early to assess the success of the group, our pioneering efforts may be of interest to teacher educators interested in expanding self-study within their institutions. Questions that have emerged from our study to date include: Can a large self-study group be effective? Will it improve teacher education practices? Will it lead to increased scholarship on teaching?

Equally significant is the diversity of the group. Prior to the group's formation, only Julian (Kitchen, 2005a; 2005b) had been active in self-study for more than a year. Darlene had previously presented her self-study work at the Herstmonceux Castle in the summer of 2006 (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2006). As well, both Darlene and Lorenzo had engaged in a collaborative self-study the previous year (Cherbini & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2006). Members also came from a wide variety of subject disciplines and research traditions, including quantitative methods. Everyone, however, found common ground in the study of their own practices. Louis's reflections on teacher candidate evaluation practices were informed by his scholarship in educational assessment and evaluation. His auditors found his presentation engaging because it addressed issues of common concern to teacher educators. The diversity of the group also raises questions: Can group members sustain a common interest in self-study? How will they negotiate the tensions between their academic traditions and interests?

Collaborative self-study of teacher educators can help professors to improve their practice and contribute to their scholarship. Our success during this first year suggests that large, diverse self-study groups can succeed. More research is needed to determine how effective large self-study groups can be, and how they can contribute to the study of teacher education practices.

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