1996

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Harper, Victoria, "Establishing a Community of Conversation: Creating a Context for Self-Reflection Among Teacher Scholars" (1996). *To Improve the Academy*. 357.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/357

Establishing a Community of Conversation: Creating a Context for Self-Reflection Among Teacher Scholars

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*This paper will discuss how the Teacher Scholars Project was
created to encourage thoughtful conversations about teaching at the
university, how portfolio activities such as videotape sessions and the
sharing of narratives about teaching were integrated into project
activities, and how faculty were encouraged to seriously look at their
own practice and to reflect on it in conversations with a group of peers
over the course of an entire academic year. It concludes by consider-
ing the importance of the creation of a community of conversation
across disciplines in establishing conditions for more meaningful
discussion and self-reflection on campus.*

My conversations as I hurry around campus end up being staccato
fragments of talk above the drone of the copy machine, as I shuffle
through the papers in my mailbox, or as I hurry down the hall to office
hours or to meet a class. "I'm going to teach the qualitative research

class in the spring. I would like to hear your ideas about it. Yes. We *must* get together and *really* talk," I hear myself saying to a colleague as we both continue our stride in different directions, heads turned to catch the last words as they trail off down the hallway. How do we have serious conversations about teaching in the academy? Rarely do they take place at faculty or committee meetings, where a full agenda interspersed with idle chat form a checkerboard of babble. These communities are most often based on bureaucratic requirements and not conducive to engagement in real conversation. How do we claim the time and space to engage in real conversations about teaching? How can those conversations lead to critical self-reflection and transformation of our understandings about ourselves and our teaching practice? Gillespie (1989) urges teachers to engage in discussions about teaching practice. She describes the isolation of classroom life as part of the historical development of teaching stating:

> Teachers have been sequestered in their classrooms. As a result they have found it difficult to find public forums where, in Madeleine Grumet's words, they could "serve the fruit of their inquiry to others." (1989, p. 89)

Gillespie believes this is especially true at universities where "legitimate 'public' talk almost always concerns research" because it is tacitly understood that stories about research are the stories worth telling (p. 89). Talk about teaching, on the other hand, is conducted in the photocopy room, the mailroom, or in the hallways, places that do not support serious and critical discourse over time. At San Jose State University, many faculty members and administrators have been interested in creating a context where conversations can take place that enable college teachers to critically reflect on their assumptions, share their thinking and concerns with peers, and focus on themselves as teachers/learners. Movement over the past decade to increase the reflective posture of the teacher in the area of pedagogical practice has been championed by Schön (1987), Shulman (1989), and others (Boice, 1992; Ebel & McKeachie, 1985; McKeachie, 1980; Menges, & Mathis, 1988). They suggest that college teachers engage in activities and practices to promote reflection, such as narrative accounts of practice, journal keeping, and case-study development. It was this

interest in promotion of a discerning posture toward teaching that led us to create the Teacher Scholars Project. This paper will discuss how the project was created to encourage thoughtful conversations about teaching, how portfolio activities such as videotape sessions and the sharing of narratives about teaching were integrated into project activities, and how faculty were encouraged to look seriously at their own practice and to reflect on it with a group of peers. It concludes by considering the importance of the creation of a community of conversation across disciplines in establishing conditions for more meaningful discussion and self-reflection.

The Teacher Scholars Project

The Teacher Scholars Project was designed to create a scholarly conversational community on campus focused on issues important to college teachers. Initiated in 1991, the project is similar in structure to the Alumni Teaching Scholars Program at Miami University and to the FACET program at Indiana in that it brings together teachers from across the university and across disciplines to talk about teaching and learning. Teacher Scholars are selected from each of the university's colleges through a peer nomination process based on acknowledged excellence in teaching and a desire to contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning in a conversational community. Teacher Scholars participate for one year in study and reflection on teaching in which they, a) participate in regularly scheduled (two hours every two weeks) cross-disciplinary discussions about college teaching; b) open their own classrooms for observation by Teacher Scholars and other faculty through a classroom visitation program, and c) engage in activities that include conducting classroom research and the discussing issues related to teaching, learning, and classroom assessment.

During the four years of the project, qualitative research has been conducted that involves open-ended conversational interviews, tape-recording and transcription of conversational meetings, informal observations of Teacher Scholars in their classrooms, at retreats and social events. The research data provides some helpful examples of the activities, conversations and self-reflection of Teacher Scholars. In the following sections are examples of activities and discussions

drawn from the experiences of Teacher Scholars as they engaged in a community of conversation. First, I describe a videotaped classroom observation activity, conducted in the fall, designed to familiarize participants with the teaching contexts of their peers. Second, an activity conducted in the spring involves sharing narrative stories about teaching within a group that has engaged in conversations over nearly two semesters. These activities have not only sparked conversation among the group but have often led to insights and changes in the way participants approach their teaching practice.

Videotape Sharing

We are not really alone in the classroom; we have our students. Although teachers spend their teaching time with students they seldom discuss their knowledge of teaching practice with them. Sharing the world of classroom life with other teachers provides opportunities to be heard and to derive significance from others who have similar experiences. To promote this, Teacher Scholars engaged in a classroom research activity early in the fall semester where they teamed with a partner to videotape teaching sessions. After taping a class session, faculty pairs met to review and discuss the tape and to consider questions such as: How did they organize the learning environment? Where were the high and low energy points in the class? What did they really want to accomplish with their students?

Five minute video "clips" were selected to be viewed by the entire group during regular discussion sessions thus facilitating serious conversation across disciplines focused on specific moments in teaching. As a result of the videotape activity, Teacher Scholars a) became familiar with the classrooms and teaching approaches of their colleagues; b) engaged in conversation about teaching based on a specific context, and c) tested their own assumptions and concerns against those of others. As illustrated in the following example, these video segments moved the discussion beyond a focus on specific incidents in teaching to reflection on the broader issues of teaching, learning and social interaction on a non-traditional urban campus.

As Coleen, a professor of nursing, presented her video segment to the group, she expressed concern for meeting the needs of an

increasingly diverse classroom. Coleen's concerns were not unfamiliar to the group:

> My biggest quandary at the time we were doing this was I had just been assigned a really large class that I hadn't taught for several years. Since I had last taught this class the range of English proficiency and the range of academic ability was very much wider than it used to be—plus the students worked a lot more at jobs than they used to so they weren't as prepared.

University financial constraints have forced ever larger classes adding to and creating new challenges for both new and experienced faculty. The group discussed paradoxes inherent in equity versus equality issues and explored ways in which we might better support the students we have rather than bemoan our often distorted memories of "the way things used to be." They described similar tensions and frustrations regarding levels of expectation such as: How do I make concepts clear without oversimplification or watering down the content? How do I pose a proper challenge for students? Should I move on to cover the content or back up and cover what one-third of the students don't seem to have? How do I present material in enough depth and still cover the content in breadth?

Interestingly, these conversations were positive, open, and did not deteriorate into gripe sessions or student bashing. Moreover, faculty were engaged in sincere conversation and not the posturing of individuals about their own favorite *solutions*. For example, Coleen's video tape prompted conversation about the quality of campus community for faculty and students. As the group viewed the tape, Coleen shared her frustration in trying to create a climate in her large classes where students would interact rather than sit as passive receptors. Most of her students didn't even know one another. How could she promote greater interaction and conversation among such a diverse group of students?

Students at San Jose State University tend to be older than the traditional student and have families and heavy work responsibilities outside of the classroom. They commute to campus and work at part-time or full-time jobs. Bill, a Teacher Scholar from the College of Social Science elaborated on these concerns:

> I would venture that most of us, or at least those of us with a little gray to sport, were in college in our undergraduate years where college was the focus of our energy, our time, and our lives. The typical student [at SJSU] today does not have that view of the university.

This reflection, based on his own educational experiences and recognition that the values, needs, and life circumstances of his students were somewhat different from that of a traditional view of college students, motivates Bill as he searches for understanding and provides an interesting simile,

> I can think of many of our students conceiving of San Jose State as rather like a gigantic supermarket or a shopping mall. It is a place where you go. You go there because there is something specific that you want to get. You go to the shoe store and buy your shoes. You go to the frozen food section, and you get your frozen peas, but, it somehow is not part of your socialization to linger—to discuss shoes with other patrons or to discuss recipes with the people at the check-out counter.

Bill's comments build on Coleen's concerns with the quality of campus classroom life and led to discussion of dilemmas faced in the broader social context. With the increasingly atomized, fragmented nature of society, our students often see each other as shapes passing on campus. How do we create opportunities for students to collaborate with us, not just in the classroom, but to work together, to learn from each other? How might we introduce them to one another and build the kinds of ties that, not only make for effective learning, but also enhance their experiences of university life? These tensions pose particularly difficult challenges to faculty in that the pressures presented by students' extracurricular lives necessarily fall outside of faculty control. Yet, this may be the most significant area to understand if we are to meet the needs of our student population whose academic life often ends at the campus gates.

Generated by shared observations and discussion of video taped classroom incidents, serious reflection about how to meet the educational needs of a diverse student body led to a far richer discussion about how to enhance university and life experiences for students. Reframing the problem and placing it in a larger social context, moved the discussion to consideration of the deeper issues posed by diversity on campus. Interestingly, group members worked to build on their own

understandings about and hopes for students at SJSU rather than compete for opportunities to complain about them. The second activity, teaching narratives, also begins with a teaching concern and through conversation leads to new understandings about students.

Teaching Narratives

Teacher Scholars often commented on the lack of a forum for sharing ideas and stories about teaching in other campus contexts. By spring most of the group found themselves in frantic schedules of committee meetings, classes, and research activities. An article by Gillespie, entitled "Claiming Ourselves as Teachers" was shared with the group. (Articles about teaching and learning are often circulated among members of the group.) Gillespie (1989) urges teachers to claim their stories and to engage in discussions about teaching practice.

As suggested by Gillespie (1992), Teacher Scholars were asked to recall stories of their teaching experiences. Participants were asked to tell a story about a time in their teaching when things went far better than they had planned, or perhaps, a time when they met with utter failure. As the group listened to the narrative accounts of teaching they asked for clarification, noted important words, phrases or metaphors used or suggested by the narrative, and identified high points of tension or the center of gravity of each story. This story telling and the ensuing conversations were valuable because they provide a unique glimpse into the Teacher Scholars' innermost hopes and concerns in teaching. As an example, I offer Julie's story:

> There are many times when I wish social work were a tangible science. I wish that there was only one answer. It is very difficult when you are working with people to arrive at a solution that is concrete, tangible. We were studying ecological theory. By comparing theories, I thought they would see where ecological theory fit, what kind of a theory it was, and recognize it in relation to other theories.
>
> They weren't getting it. A case study activity caused so much anguish I thought, *"What have I been doing all semester? Why can't they get this?"* ....Finally, I came to class one day and said, *"We are going to talk about the theory that you're working on this week. Here I am. I'm your client. I am an adult, a female, with this kind of problem. I have*

children and this is what my family looks like. I come to you presenting this kind of issue. Now, ask me three questions based on one of the theories. Talk to me."

As they started asking questions I would put on my other hat (teacher) and ask, *"Why are you asking her that question?"* We would work through the theories with the idea that you have assumptions, concepts and terms that help you understand the theory. A few complained, *"Why are you doing this?"* As we went through this I kept wearing both hats—the hat of the client and the hat of the teacher—saying *"Give me a rationale. If you are doing this consciously as a social worker how are you using the theory to guide your practice?"*

At the end of class they were exhausted but they finally got it. I think what I did was to put myself in their shoes. It is difficult to know what I need to do in order to cross over that threshold from something very abstract to something very concrete.

This story prompted lively discussion about how teachers in very different disciplines work to integrate theory and practice. In this way, Teacher Scholars were able to hear this same problem described from very different perspectives. The story provided a framework for discussion, by contextualizing it, thereby inviting participants to leave behind their own pet issues in order to devote their attention to a colleague's concern.

One Teacher Scholar commented that Julie's story reminded him of his own teaching frustration when students did not seem to "get it." He commented, "I too find that its best to put myself in the situation and create a scenario." He went on to say, "The thing that is meaningful for me is that Julie was sensitive from the outset that the connection was not being made." The Teacher Scholars, through this story gained insight into the lived world of Julie's teaching life. Bill stated:

I was impressed about how difficult it is to teach what Julie teaches. It is not just making that connection between the abstract and theoretical. She was trying to show her students that they were going to get out there, that they would sit across the table from somebody and try to offer something that is beneficial. She is putting them way ahead of the classroom. She is saying, *"You have heard a lot of things and at some point you're going to have to draw upon what you have learned."*

At this point Julie confessed, "As I was telling this story I suddenly

had the awareness that at some level they're scared. The student thinks 'What am I going to do? This is the real thing, real people, real consequences.'" In this instant, Julie's understanding of her students has been transformed through the telling of her story and the ensuing conversation with the group. This insight led to a conversation about an article circulated among the Teacher Scholars earlier in the year, "Good Talk about Good Teaching," by Palmer (1993). Palmer maintains that it is *fear* on the part of students, expressed in their silence, that is a result of their sense of marginalization in a society where they believe that "there lives have little meaning, that their futures are dim," and that no one cares about their plight (p. 11). The telling of Julie's story and the ensuing conversation led to a deep questioning of our tendency to forget the anxieties and apprehensions harbored behind our students' sometimes silent and unresponsive faces.

Looking Back on the Experience

As suggested by Schön (1987) and Shulman (1989), these portfolio activities did provide a heuristic for individual faculty to record and study their own teaching practice. Originally, I thought the activities themselves would be central to the creation of conditions for self-reflection. I use journals and cases with my own students as a way to promote this process. I have noticed, however, that although some students engaged in portfolio activities (journals, case studies, or videotapes) do make some interesting observations, serious self-reflection often proves elusive or minimal without discussion. Now, as Teacher Scholars' conversations about these activities came to the foreground, I mused over the value of the activities themselves. I began to see that something more important was happening. What was it about the conversations centered around these activities that made them different from conversations that occur in our own departments? These conversations consistently had a positive generative focus rather than falling into factional argumentation or student bashing. Why did the conversation following Coleen's videotape focused on meeting the needs of the diverse student body not fall into complaints about falling standards, set grading systems and horror stories of student failure? Why did conversation following Julie's story about

the teaching of theory integrated with practice result in a discussion of ways in which we might better support students rather than an exploration of contempt for students' lack of rigor and interest? I asked myself these questions as I noticed a different tone and quality to conversations among Teacher Scholars from those in other campus contexts. What was it that made their conversations special? Why had they been able to form a cohesive and trusting community within months when many departmental relationships often remain formal and tenuous after years? These questions led me to consider how the quality of community and the nature of conversation came into play in this project.

Sergiovanni (1994) suggests that how we come to view community relationships determines how we lead our academic lives, what we learn, the way we come to interact with one another in our institutions, and how we conceive of our professional practice. He makes a distinction between communities built on trust and shared goals, *gemeinschaft* based on a "we" identity, and those communities based on *gesellschaft*, an instrumental "I" identity (Tönnes ([1887] 1957, in Sergiovanni, 1994). Communities that are based on *gesellschaft* face cultural ramifications that are accompanied by "...loneliness, isolation, and feelings of being disconnected from others" (Durkheim, [1897] 1951). Palmer (1993) calls this sense of isolation in the university community the "pain of disconnection" (p. 8) that creates a deep sense of dissatisfaction and alienation in academic life. We do talk and discuss issues in our own departments and academic units, but bureaucratic requirements and retention, tenure, and promotion responsibilities often lead to highly politicized work environments where conversations and relationships can become strategic in nature (Boice, R., 1992; Menges, R. & Mathis, C., 1988).

The various philosophic and methodological camps within disciplines can often lead to factionalization of groups where open and supportive discussions may be jeopardized by individual posturing to make one's point. In such an environment there can be a breakdown of mutuality. Benhabib (1989) claims, this mutuality may "shrivel" in a culture given to "indifference and extreme atomized individualism" (p. 27). Such a conception of the university community, based in

gesellschaft, fails to encourage and promote the creation of a cohesive, discursive community.

A community that is disposed toward a concept of *gemeinshaft,* on the other hand, contributes to the development of shared ideas and trust. Sergiovanni claims such a community is the result of the bonding together of people that results from a "... shared conception of being" *Gemeinschaft* (1994, p. 6). Noddings agrees, stating that open, flexible and responsive interpersonal reasoning, guided by a valuing of relationship is needed in the creation of a caring community (1991). Within such a context, individuals may release their own need for control and strategic positioning in discussions and open themselves to real give-and-take in conversation with others. When conversation is across disciplines we are not so quick to assume that we know the meaning of our colleagues' words. It is through such an intersubjective relationship with others that we are able to encounter new possibilities, and create true understanding through reflection.

Why did this particular discursive community result in positive exchanges and trusting relationships, *gemeinschaft?* How had this group developed into a community where conversation and critical self-reflection flourished? Don't we have conversations all of the time?

Bernstein (1983) cautions us not to confuse "idle chatter or a violent babble of competing voices" (p. 2) with a true conversation. Unlike conversations where persons form their counter arguments as they wait for their peers to finish talking, true learning conversations are extended dialogues where intersubjective judgments and agreements lead to the establishment of a shared sense of relevance. Such conversations provide opportunities for the creation of understandings that value the tacit dimensions of human judgment and imagination.

Gadamer (1975, 1976) suggests that when individuals approach a conversation with the intention of learning and coming to understand others, they find themselves transformed by it. When we genuinely open up to the conversation by listening and allowing the conversational text itself to speak and assert its viewpoint, we are able to confront the "otherness" of the text and hear its challenge (Gadamer, 1976, p. xxi). I began to sense that these conversations were different in that group members really listened and considered their own as-

sumptions about practice against the backcloth of what others were saying.

Teacher Scholars' conversations focused on a particular context or event/incident structured around portfolio activities, such as the teaching narrative or the videotape session where faculty peers represented diverse disciplinary camps. In this way, everyone in the group was freed from the hair-splitting of disciplinary arguments and was committed to focus on their colleague's unique context and concerns. Through this sharing of the "mutually exclusive worlds" of individual participants in the conversation, they were free to merge in true understanding (Gadamer, 1976, p. xxxix). Juxtaposing each participant's necessarily limited vision against a peer's distinct and contextually bound experience provided for each to be present in the give-and-take of a focused yet open conversation, thus allowing each to push the limits of his or her own meanings in ways that might better promote critical self-reflection.

Language and meaning are not the purview of either speaker in a conversation but are created in the negotiated space between speakers where the mediating attributes of conversation help reveal intersubjective and historically situated understandings. Without the mediating power of conversation, faculty might continue to be deprived of opportunities to expose their ideas about what constitutes good practice to the test of a process of open discussion over time. Burbules (1993) claims that such conversations are not merely based on lively interchange about a topic but, a commitment to our conversational partners or group. Teacher Scholars' conversations, conducted over a full academic year, allowed individuals to come to see one another in more complex ways, helped establish friendships, fostered a sense of concern for one another, and was responsible for the creation of a shared history. Teacher Scholars' conversations tended to become less technical in quality and took on a more metaphysical tone over time with discussions touching more on the inner lives of teachers rather than mere techniques for teaching content. Palmer (1993) believes that good teaching "depends less on technique than it does on the human condition of the teacher." For example, Julie's consideration of her students' fear came into focus enabling faculty to consider their powerful role as teachers, their students' anxieties and ambivalence

about their own personal and professional futures and the fears teachers harbor of not being able to connect or relate to the lives of their students. Rather than focusing on simple pedagogical concerns such as how to make class lectures clearer, or how to enable students to distinguish various theoretical perspectives, the conversation was reframed to address complex concerns grasping the wholeness of the teacher-student relationship. Only by knowing "the truth about our own condition can we hope to know the true condition of our students" (Palmer, 1993, p. 11).

Conclusions

What was it about this particular community of conversation that focused attention on understanding the ideas and viewpoints of others? How can we come to be able to talk about our ideas about teaching in enough depth and over enough time so that we can come to recognize our real strengths and develop a commitment and draw from the talents of our colleagues? How can reflection be moved beyond the individual ponderings of good teachers to a community of conversation where teachers can not only express their conceptions of teaching in discussion and reflection with others, but go beyond mere technical elements of classroom practice to the richer dimensions of human understanding?

First of all, such conversations can not be evaluatory. The context for Teacher Scholar conversations is cross-disciplinary, therefore angst about ramifications in the retention-promotion-tenure process are minimized. The conversations build over the course of a full year. Burbules (1993) sees that the significance of such a dialogic relationship is that it "catches us up in the spirit of exchange" where "trust can become an unquestioned background condition, something that might need occasional reinforcement, but that most of the time literally goes without saying" (p. 37). Conversations situated in a context of trust and support reduce the fear of personal and professional risk. In such a context faculty may expose areas of concern or even weakness in true collegial conversation.

Participants in the conversation must be open to really consider and be concerned about the ideas and dilemmas faced by others.

Portfolio type activities (videotape sessions, teaching narratives, classroom research) can become a heuristic device, helping to situate the conversations in ways that evoke civility and trust among participants, quieting individual posturing. Although the activities, in and of themselves, may not foster in-depth reflection, discussions generated by a community engaged in such activities are likely to incorporate elements of true conversation and community (*gemeinschaft*).

Implicit in such a community is a quality of respect built on a sense of mutuality involved in true conversation. Such respect can sustain the relationship even in face of sharp differences in knowledge, value, or belief. Burbules (1993) and White (1990) concur, stating that this trust is tied to the belief that one can depend on the goodwill of conversational partners. This is especially true in cases where there is a sense of risk.

I have described how such a community of conversation has been established across disciplines, but how do we go on to create such conversational communities within our own departments and units? How do we develop communities based on *gemeinschaft*? How do we bridge ideological camps so that we can listen to one another and acknowledge that meaning is created among speakers and not merely vested in one person's perspective? Although our work with Teacher Scholars is cross-disciplinary, what we have learned may be useful in creating contexts that will promote critical self reflection and a community of true conversation within units. We have learned that a context must,

1. allow for temporal space for serious and ongoing talk about teaching in conversations that extends over time,
2. promote a shared sense of community based on commitment, respect, and trust-*gemeinschaft*, where personal risk (particularly of evaluation and competition) is limited,
3. include a conversational focus, (in this case portfolio activities) that allows individuals to stand back from their taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching and enter into a shared inquiry into the meaning and significance of the event at hand, and
4. foster participation where it is acknowledged that conversation is intersubjective, contextually focused, and where meaning is created within the negotiated space between speakers.

The SJSU Teacher Scholars express their excitement, concerns, frustrations, and hopes for their students and the university, and ponder the tensions that exist on a diverse urban campus. They do this in extended conversations over the period of a full academic year, thereby creating a shared history, commitment to one another as people, and develop friendships. They juxtapose their own visions in the give-and-take of conversation with that of their colleagues. In this way they continually press their own limited understanding against the views of their peers thus recreating meanings and gaining better understandings about what it is to teach. Creating such opportunities for conversation and community among faculty is imperative, not only to the personal and professional growth and reflection of individual faculty, but also for the growth of the higher education community at large.

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