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Easing Into the Academy: Using Technology to Foster Cross-Institutional Critical Friendships

Ryan Flessner

Julie Horwitz

Abstract

This article addresses the ways in which early career teacher educators can support each other as they enter the academic community. By utilizing technology as an instrument to engage in a cross-country critical friendship, the authors were able to engage in a dialogue that grew out of mutual interests and concerns. Through critical reflection, they were able to address the question: How can we, two early-career teacher educators, push ourselves and one another to more critically examine our teaching practices? In doing so, each “new educator” grew more confident in claiming one's voice as a sustainable critical friendship emerged.

Man am I nervous, never been to AERA, never seen what a presentation looks like and not really sure what I am doing. So of course I get to the room way too early for my presentation, what else is a new member of AERA, a new member to the academy, a doctoral student and junior faculty to do? (Julie, Autobiographical Narrative)

I'm a first-year grad student, and this is my first foray into the world of AERA. I've studied the program from cover to cover, meticulously planned the sessions I hope to attend, and I'm on a mission to learn everything I can at this conference. The first session I'm attending on my first day is about action research. Of course, I'm early. So is the approaching woman. We strike up a conversation, turns out she's a presenter, and we become fast friends. (Ryan, Autobiographical Narrative)

The above excerpts from our own autobiographical narratives represent the beginnings of a dialogue that has lasted several years. At the time, we had no idea what would come of our initial meeting. In this article, we explore a plethora of ideas related to our early conversations. For instance, as new members to the academy—Julie was a doctoral student, who also held an assistant professorship, and Ryan was a doctoral candidate with a teaching assistantship—we each saw the need for support as we attempted to develop identities as “new educators” and, more specifically, as “new *teacher* educators.” Leaving the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) that year, we made a commitment to continue working together. We returned to our respective institutions, over 1,400 miles apart, and our critical friendship was formalized. Little did we know that technology would play such a vital role in our collaboration or that our support structure would become so productive.

THE BEGINNINGS

Much has been written about the difficult transition from classroom teaching to the professoriate in schools of education (Dinkelman, Margolis, & Sikkenga, 2006; Ritter, 2007). In line with this body of research, we each found this transition challenging and isolating. Even though we felt support from a variety of mentors at our individual sites, we were both struggling to find our voices and ourselves in this transition. In both of our cases, there was a need to supplement the relationships we had with other, more experienced, mentors by engaging in a dialogue with someone who shared a comparable position and similar concerns about the start of an academic career. The project that follows allowed us a variety of mediums for discussion in which we could ease into the academy by trying out our academic voices in a safe and supportive environment.

As a result of our emerging friendship that began at AERA, we continued to communicate through phone conversations and e-mail interactions. Because our interests (teacher education, reflective practice, action research, self-study, etc.) aligned so closely, our discussions were very natural; they seemed “easy.” Our general personality match—we describe ourselves as possessing a quirky nerdiness—made our commitment to stay connected easy to actualize. Our conversations became part of our everyday lives, not just tasks on our to-do lists.

While these phone and e-mail conversations helped us nurture our friendship and collaboration, we wanted to more formally document our efforts in order to critically support each other's continued development and growth as we navigated the complexity of the academy. Technology

proved to be an essential tool in making our conversations more concrete and pushed us to become critical in our friendship as we studied our beliefs and practices. We began with a simple question:

How can we, two early-career teacher educators, push ourselves and one another to more critically examine our teaching practices?

However, this question turned out to be much more complex, inspiring, and essential to our professional growth than either of us could have anticipated.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As one branch within the field of practitioner inquiry¹, self-study has had an increasing presence in the field of teacher education over the past two decades. Emerging because of a variety of factors in educational research—the increasing presence of qualitative methods, the Reconceptualist movement in curriculum studies, the surfacing of international voices in the field of teacher education, and increased attention to action research (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001)—self-study “rejects the ideas that the only role for academics is to generate theories for others to consume and that academics should have a monopoly on knowledge production in education” (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001, p. 304).

Self-study is unique to the field of practitioner inquiry in that the work comes, primarily, from teacher educators working in a university context. In this setting, self-study researchers search for tensions between their educational philosophies and their practice. Such *living contradictions* (Whitehead, 1989) lay the foundation for systematic study of one's teaching practice. Hamilton and Pinnegar (2000) note, “From self-study we can evaluate individual practices, understand teaching better, change our practice to respond to the needs of our students and, most importantly, create practice that stands as an embodied testament to our belief” (p. 238).

Although self-study presents a powerful avenue for examining practice in order to challenge the status quo (Anderson, 2002), for more closely aligning theory and practice (Russell, 2004), and for addressing issues of equity, diversity, and social justice (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2006)—to name just a few of the possible benefits—it does have its critics. For example, some scholars (i.e., Fenstermacher, 1994) question the validity of a methodology that positions an individual as both a practitioner and a researcher in the same setting. Many (e.g., Eraut, 1994) see this insider status, or *emic* perspective (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), as a unique point of view that should be privileged; however, others call this positioning “jumbled and problematic” (Huberman, 1996).

In addressing this issue, self-study scholars have defended the power of insider positioning while noting that the term *self-study* may be misleading. For instance, Loughran states:

Self-study carries a tacit message that suggests individuality. However ... self-study inevitably requires involvement of others so that the learning outcomes are much more than personal constructions of meaning; self-study must go beyond personal reflections of practice so that the learning about teacher education practices might truly resonate with others.' (2005, p. 6)

In order to avoid the isolation of self-study and to ensure that data and findings are robust, Loughran and other scholars (e.g., Pine, 2009; van Swet, Smit, Corvers, & van Dijk, 2009) push those utilizing a self-study methodology to engage in collaborative partnerships with *critical friends*.

Critical friends are those individuals entrusted with the responsibility of pushing back on the unintended assumptions or biases in our research (LaBoskey, 2004). They should be willing to present alternative viewpoints, to pose thoughtful questions, and to provide critical feedback (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Schuck & Russell, 2005). Critical friends allow self-study researchers to step back from the familiarity of the situation in order to “assess everyday practices with fresh eyes or to question assumptions ... [and] ways of knowing” (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 130). These trusted colleagues might be fellow instructors, students, parents, or anyone else who can advocate for the successful completion of a project (Costa & Kallick, 1993). As McNiff and Whitehead explain:

The kind of constructive, unsentimental feedback you are looking for will probably come from people who are sympathetic to what you are doing but are also aware of the need to challenge your thinking, especially in relation to your own assumptions and established ways of thinking. (2006, p. 158)

Although the term “critical” often carries negative connotations, it is important to remember that in addition to playing the devil's advocate, a critical friend should also provide empowerment to the researcher by facilitating the learning process (Lomax, Woodward, & Parker, 1996). This facilitation of the learning process might manifest itself through the posing of alternative representations of data, by way of suggestions for further data analysis or by acting as a sounding board for the researcher's initial claims and ideas (Anderson et al., 2007; Schuck & Russell, 2005). This collaborative work is difficult and can often lead to hurt feelings², yet:

... in the company of others who care about us and about good work, we can know the comfort of support and the challenge of learning. In a world of big buzzes, self-study friends listen carefully to small shifts, which is how ... changes in teaching occur. (Bass, Anderson-Patton, & Allender, 2002, p. 67)

PROJECT DESIGN

For this study, we conducted six on-line chat discussions (Guilfoyle, Hamilton, Pinnegar, & Placier, 2004), shared several written reflections and engaged in numerous phone conversations. To begin the process of collaboration, we exchanged multiple e-mails in order to identify common curiosities and what we had in mind in terms of a collaborative, technological project. Our initial conversations were simply used to decide how we would construct a professional relationship across two institutions and over 1,400 miles:

I was thinking that maybe this summer (my classes end on May 12th) we could pick a few books ..., read them, and have an on-line discussion (Didn't you say you have access to some type of blackboard program?). Then we could go through our postings to look for themes or applications to our work as teacher educators. (e-mail from Ryan, April 25, 2005)

After about a month of “conversation,” we decided to have on-line discussions based on common readings about self-study and reflection. Julie's university was using WebCT at the time, and we were able to set up a space where we could record our discussions and contain all of our notes and reflections. Julie worked with her university's technology department to get Ryan access and information related to the technology.

After a few glitches, we were able to begin our discussions. Initially, the WebCT system worked wonderfully; however, at one point, the system was down. Therefore, we moved to have a discussion on Instant Messenger on MSN. While this worked as a Band-Aid, we learned that these conversations were not saved, and we had to cut and paste to a Microsoft Word document to make sure we did not lose the record.

In order to manage our on-line chat discussions, we decided to utilize pieces of a protocol from Johnston, Anderson, and DeMeulle (1998). Prior to and during our initial meeting on-line, we discussed—through phone and e-mail—the logistics of creating, capturing, and sustaining an on-line dialogue. We discussed how to avoid interrupting each other, what to do if family members needed our attention during one of our conversations, and how to provide time to process and reflect in the midst of all the typing. These ideas will be explored further in the “Results” section.

After much trouble with passwords, learning to save the transcripts, and figuring out where to post reflections, we were off to explore the world of building a critical friendship through technology. Before each session, we read common texts about teacher education, reflection, and/or self-study (e.g., Duckworth, 1996; Feldman, Paugh, & Mills, 2004; Valli, 1992) and posted reflections so that we could be prepared to engage in a thoughtful conversation. Our discussions lasted anywhere from 1 to 2 hours and consisted of focused discussions on our readings, a continuation of a thread from a previous meeting, or tangential information that took interesting twists and turns along the way. During these conversations, we were steadfast in maintaining a focus on our research question: How can we, two early-career teacher educators, push ourselves and one another to more critically examine our teaching practices? Below, we provide an example of the content of these conversations.

Julie: I feel like we have a good working definition of reflection, and a working idea of why we think this is important. ...

Julie: I guess I think it is a balance to know the “why” but also the “how”. ...

Julie: We have read a lot of theory and research about reflective practice but not a lot about how to help new teachers learn to be reflective educators. ...

Julie: I know we need to be clear about “why” we want this to happen but I have been thinking about the “how” also.

Ryan: You make an interesting point. If we were to do this, where else would you look besides cases? Journaling, dialogue, etc.?

Julie: Journaling, role playing, dialogue, I don't know and I wonder what is out there to learn from and back up why we are having students engage in these activities.

Ryan: I just had a thought ...

What if we presented a few ways—cases, journaling, etc.—and then asked students to create a reflective exercise to present to the class (this could be done in groups especially with huge numbers like you have in your classes). ...

Ryan: They might generate things we haven't even thought about.

(Transcript from on-line chat, June 7, 2005)

We hope that this brief glimpse into our conversation gives the reader insight into the content of our discussions as well as the format. At the end of each on-line session we would save the transcript and have a quick phone conversation to arrange times and readings for our next meeting.

Data Collection

Because our six conversations occurred on-line, we automatically captured these interactions through written transcripts that were held in the chatroom within the WebCT system. Having a written record of our discussions meant that we did not need to transcribe our exchanges after the fact. This was a wonderful perk to our research design. We did not have to spend countless hours transcribing. Instead, we had instant transcripts that we could review prior to our next meeting. This critically reflective review of the transcripts allowed us to simply pick up from where we left off, if we were so inclined. This was helpful in keeping our conversations moving forward. On the WebCT system, we also kept an ongoing reference page in order to record what we were reading.

Between on-line discussions, we utilized e-mail as a form of data collection (Hoban, 2004). This tool allowed us to communicate with each other when we had thoughts, questions, or just couldn't wait for our next conversation to explore an idea. These e-mails were printed and held with other artifacts from the study.

Before our initial on-line discussion, we each shared reflections from our individual teacher journals (Hobson, 2001) in which we examined our histories as educators, explored our current positions and explained why we wanted to be involved in this project. These reflective pieces helped bring us onto the same page, provided us with an additional piece of data and reiterated the fact that we had many overlapping interests. Our motives were similar as were our questions and concerns. For example, on May 19, 2005, Ryan reflected:

I want to first start with my purposes for participating in these exchanges. We started to do this the other day, but I don't think we documented all of our thoughts. So, here are my purposes:

1. To engage in the processes of reflective practice and self-study in order to uncover my own personal biases and assumptions in hopes of better understanding and living my own educational philosophies.
2. To explore and utilize technology as a mode of reflective discourse.
3. To navigate my situation as a teacher educator—to dissect issues of power, vulnerability, etc.
4. To collaborate with a critical friend.
5. To read, write, publish, and present reflective self-study work.

In addition to data listed above, we collected additional classroom artifacts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004) from each of our universities. We shared our syllabi, assignment descriptions, and any other materials we would be using with our students.

As a final piece of data—one that brought closure to this chapter of our work together—we each wrote autobiographical narratives (LaBoskey & Cline, 2000) of our initial encounter at AERA to see how our perceptions were similar or different. These pieces allowed us to examine how these initial perceptions might (or might not) have contributed to a successful collaboration.

Data Analysis

Practitioner research, in general, and self-study, more specifically, is a messy process (Mellor, 2001). Although we present the following research report as a linear progression of neatly planned events, this is a false representation of what actually occurred. A recursive process of data collection and analysis (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) was utilized as we conducted and reviewed our on-line chat conversations, wrote about our experiences in our teacher journals and through our autobiographical narratives and discussed our project through e-mail exchanges. This constant movement in and between the data sources could never be captured effectively on the written page. We, therefore, present a more linear representation in order to facilitate the writing and reading of this piece.

Prior to data analysis, we organized each of the pieces of data into *chronological files* and/or *genre files* (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Chronological files were used to keep transcripts of our on-line chats organized by date. Genre files helped us distinguish between other documents such as teacher journal entries, autobiographical narratives, and classroom artifacts. Within several of the genre files (e.g., teacher journal entries), chronological subfiles were used to organize the data.

Once the data set was organized, we utilized Yin's (1994) conception of *pattern matching logic* to review the various artifacts. In describing pattern matching, Yin (2006) states, "One possibility is to stipulate some pattern of findings at the outset of your ... study. Your analysis would then consist of ... pattern-matching the collected evidence against the initially stipulated pattern" (p. 118). While we were looking for themes to emerge as we sifted through the data, we also knew that two key ideas had permeated our discussions. These included (a) technology as a tool for self-

study research and (b) putting the “critical” in critical friends. In an effort to capture data related to these two themes, pattern-matching logic proved useful.

In addition—and because new and interesting themes introduced themselves as we engaged in the pattern-matching process—subsequent passes through the data were conducted. During these additional readings of the data set, *open coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was utilized to “examine the text ... for salient categories of information supported by the text” (Creswell, 2007, p. 160). Through the process of open coding, we identified several additional themes. These included ideas such as support when entering the academy, cultivating relationships amongst teacher educators, and frustrations with “systems” that impact the educational process. In the end, we decided that a majority of these themes were beyond the scope of this article. However, it quickly became apparent that the concept of “support when entering the academy” wove its way in and out of our conversations on multiple occasions. For that reason, we have added this concept as an additional theme to those listed in the previous paragraph.

In the following section, we document the results of our study. In doing so, we highlight each of the three themes noted above: technology as a tool for self-study research, support when entering the academy, and putting the “critical” in critical friends.

RESULTS

As stated previously, our data analysis began with two predetermined themes. These included (a) technology as a tool for self-study research and (b) putting the “critical” in critical friends. As we became further immersed in the data, a third—essential—theme emerged: support when entering the academy. These three themes are explored below by highlighting specific instances from the various data sources.

Technology as a Tool for Self-Study Research

Just as Johnston et al. (1998) found in their collaborative self-study, we needed to step away from the content of our conversations at first to explore the technology and to create frameworks for successful conversations. We needed to develop norms and rules for interaction. We knew, from our discussions at AERA, that we had common beliefs about participatory decision making. Thus, it was important to make sure we had rules for engagement. Building on the work of others (e.g., Hoban, 2004), we decided to begin our conversations by exploring how a long-distance collaboration would work. Because we would be unable to “see” one another while utilizing the on-line chat technology, we needed structure to communicate those different aspects of a conversation that we could not see.

For instance, we found, initially, that our ideas took quite some time to type onto the computer screen. This caused two problems. First of all, we often talked over one another, at times even trying to carry on two different conversations. This happened because we were unsure if the person had finished an idea. When no communication came, we simply started typing a new idea. However, it was often the case that someone was simply in the midst of typing a lengthy comment.

Julie: So this is a little weird ... I wish we could see when the other person is typing. ... I also think we need to be comfortable telling the other person that we are not done yet and that we want to finish our thought

b/c normal conversations don't always go back and forth. (Transcript from on-line chat, May 16, 2005)

A second problem was that these long pauses caused us to wonder if the other person was still connected to the chat, still engaged in the conversation and/or distracted by family members or colleagues. "You still there?" was a common phrase early in our conversations. Because of these concerns, we discussed the need for clues to let the other person know when we were done with a thought or when we were still thinking. We developed a structure, based on our readings and our conversations, in which one period meant we were done with a thought. To avoid the long gaps as we typed lengthy responses, we decided to post partial ideas followed by three periods. This symbol alerted the reader to the fact that the writer was still typing (but wanted to put something on the screen for the other to read). The passage that follows shows the reader how Ryan broke his ideas into several posts to allow Julie an opportunity to digest bits and pieces of his thoughts as he documented them within the chat context:

Ryan: I guess it all goes back to the concept of the living contradiction ...

Ryan: If we find something that negates our philosophies ...

Ryan: We need to change those practices OR redefine our philosophies ...

Ryan: I don't think it's bad to rewrite philosophy ...

Ryan: I think that's the purpose of self-study ...

Ryan: We don't ALWAYS have to change ...

Ryan: Sometimes there's a reason to rewrite our ideas and beliefs.

(Transcript from on-line chat, May 31, 2005)

This structure seemed to work well, but it still created humorous confusion at times:

Julie: They will be contained as well as realistic..

Ryan: Uh-oh, that's two periods! What does that mean?!

Julie: It means I can't type.

(Transcript from on-line chat, May 16, 2005)

Later in our conversations, we decided to add one further communication strategy. As our conversations deepened, we often found that we needed time to think or reflect on something the other person had said. Yet, silence (or inactivity on the screen) proved uncomfortable at first. Therefore, we needed to create a strategy to communicate that we needed time to think about a comment that was made. We decided on the following:

Julie: That was a lot. I keep starting to type an answer but feel like I need to think a little first.

Ryan: I know what you mean. It's great to have these discussions, but sometimes "think time" is important. It's another thing we should document.

Julie: I agree. Maybe we need to have a symbol for "give me a minute, I need to process."

Ryan: That's a good idea. Any ideas for a symbol?

Julie: ===== Just a few = signs in a row.

Ryan: Good...

(Transcript from on-line chat, May 24, 2005)

Yet, even this thinking time didn't always allow the space we felt we needed to reflect on our conversations. At one point, the following exchange took place:

Ryan: The one thing that's difficult ... is that we're kind of putting ourselves on the spot ...

Ryan: We don't have time to really reflect on what we type ...

Ryan: Sometimes we come up with interesting ideas (like today) and other times ...

Ryan: I feel like we touch on a need, but can't get to it because of the nature of this dialogue ...

Ryan: Do you know what I mean?

Julie: I think so ...

Julie: Maybe one of our "assignments" will be to read and write a quick write about the transcript before the next time we meet.

(Transcript from on-line chat, June 9, 2005)

While all of these structures may seem trivial or obvious, they facilitated the use of technology as a tool for our self-study research. Delineating ways to avoid talking over one another, communicating that we were done with an idea, and asking for time to reflect and process were essential as we became comfortable with the technology and with our professional conversations. We now turn to the content of those conversations.

Support When Entering the Academy

While we both had colleagues around us, it was energizing to work with someone over 1,400 miles away who had similar beliefs about teacher education, who was curious about similar topics, and who was willing to engage in discussions that weren't always comfortable but that we knew would ultimately make us better educators. While we were energized, the initial conversations were awkward and formal. Over time, though, we created a safe space to share our thoughts and to make ourselves vulnerable.

One example of this vulnerability emerged as we tried out our academic voices. In the world of academia, both Ryan and Julie had preconceived beliefs that we needed to “sound smart.” We eventually came to realize that we simply wanted to develop our own academic voices. In our conversations, we felt safe practicing “sounding smart” and sharing when we didn’t feel smart.

At one point, Julie reflected on the process of “practicing” our academic voices:

Julie: I think, for me, a huge part of this process we have been going through is finding the words I want to use as a teacher educator ...

Julie: by dialoguing with you I have been able to “hear” what I sound like and see if that is in line with what I believe ...

Julie: I can test it out before I go to my students.

(Transcript from on-line chat, June 9, 2005)

At another point, we reflected on a time when we had been made to feel “unsmart” by a comment from a veteran of the academy. In that moment, the experienced educator had stated how ridiculous it was that some teacher educators actually grade their students’ reflections. The following conversation ensued:

Julie: ... but she is the one that said “imagine some people are using rubrics for reflection” and ... well, I use rubrics for reflection, so it made me feel stupid.

Ryan: I think that’s something we’ve both been battling with ...

Ryan: How do we create the structures to support reflection without delineating exactly what is to be done?

(Transcript from on-line chat, May 24, 2005)

Each of these excerpts points to the idea that new entrants into the academy need time and support to critically examine their positions as teacher educators, as scholars, and as individuals within an institutional structure that may feel isolating and competitive. Furthermore, the opportunity to expose one’s insecurities and vulnerabilities was a much-needed outlet for both of us as we struggled to make sense of our roles at the university level. While each of us knew that we needed support when entering the academy, we also knew that simply providing professional pep talks wasn’t sufficient to grow as teacher educators. In the following section, we examine the ways that we pushed ourselves to reflect deeply about our work by playing the role of critical friend for one another.

Putting the “Critical” in Critical Friends

As described in the literature review above, critical friendships can provide crucial feedback for those engaging in self-study research. As McNiff and Whitehead explain, critical friends need

... to be prepared to offer critical feedback, to enable you to see things you have perhaps missed, or to find new directions. It is their job to help you to see whether you are extending

your thinking and developing new insights, or whether you are doing research to justify and continue your existing assumptions. (2006, p. 159)

From the outset, we made a commitment to push each other. We knew that our discussions would be fruitful only if we could move beyond the niceties of professional dialogue into a place where we could truly learn from one another. An early e-mail from Julie captures feelings we both shared:

[B]ut how (and this comes to the rigor of self-study research) do we make sure we continue to push each other's thoughts and not simply agree with the other person? Although we agree about a lot, how do we avoid the comfort and push each other to new ideas? (Julie, e-mail, May 20, 2005)

As our conversations progressed, we got to a place in our discussions where we were able to question each other, to really push ideas and explanations, and to not just make the other feel good or smart. Using phrases like “tell me more about this” or “I am going to push you here” allowed us to warn the other that we weren't yet convinced or didn't yet have a clear understanding. We also asked questions in an effort to force the speaker to justify a claim:

Julie: ... I think testing hurts children.

Ryan: I'm thinking about the word “hurt.”

Ryan: How do we justify the difference between what we believe is best and what “hurts” children?

Julie: Maybe I do use that liberally but I believe bad teaching hurts children's chances to succeed.

Ryan: Again, I'm being picky ...

Ryan: What is “bad teaching?”

Julie: This is hard. I don't know what good teaching is. ...

(Transcript from on-line chat, May 31, 2005)

This type of conversation was difficult at times. We often had to step back and evaluate the effectiveness of our pushback. Were we pushing each other too far? We had to remember to keep in mind how fragile we were as neophytes within the academy. In the following excerpt, we reflect after a particularly difficult conversation:

Ryan: So, I'd like to go back to a point you made a few sessions ago ...

Ryan: We need to look at our comfort levels here ...

Ryan: I've done a lot of pushing ...

Ryan: I've played devil's advocate ...

Ryan: I've jumped to conclusions and made assumptions ...

Ryan: And I've done it all on purpose in attempts to push your thinking ...

Ryan: However, I don't want to get to a point where you're questioning your abilities or your credibility. ...

Ryan: So, why don't you talk through that a bit ...

Ryan: Was it too much today?

Julie: I really appreciate you pushing me and feel really comfortable with you doing this ...

Julie: but you definitely hit a part that I struggle with and have throughout my career as both a teacher and teacher educator ...

Julie: I think women go through this so much more than men (at least those I know) of questioning our ability. ...

Julie: I keep waiting for someone to realize I don't know what the hell I am doing and that I am just faking it ...

Julie: now I know this is not true ...

Julie: I do know a lot ...

Julie: but I think these situations force me to question my ability.

(Transcript from on-line chat, May 31, 2005)

Over time, we saw a marked change in our discussions. We moved from the awkward formality of our initial conversations toward more thoughtful conversations in which we learned when to push one another and when to tread lightly. This ability drastically changed the quality and depth of our conversations. We forced one another to question assumptions, to back up claims with evidence, and to speak clearly about what we truly believe about teaching and teacher education. It was this level of conversation that allowed us to move from a professional dialogue to a study of ourselves as teacher educators hoping to improve our practice, address our living contradictions, and begin to build a body of work that would stand as a testament to who we are as people and as professionals.

CONCLUSION

We believe we are stronger, more thoughtful teacher educators who are committed to the work of self-study as a result of our engagement in this project. As our careers continue to progress, we have taken the time to truly reflect on who we are as educators, what we believe about the preparation of future teachers, and the work necessary to truly study one's self and one's work. We believe it is imperative that teacher educators have critical friends (whether near or far) as pillars of support, but more importantly as colleagues to challenge assumptions, to clarify ideas and beliefs, and to offer alternative lenses as we move forward in our work and in our research. Especially as “new teacher educators,” we feel it is essential to develop what we call *parallel mentors*—those who are at similar points in their career trajectories and share common experiences, questions, and concerns.

We found that the action of making our thoughts public in the technological forum helped us develop a level of comfort with a colleague within the academy. This relationship pushed us to study our philosophies and the ways in which we contradicted these philosophies as we carried out the work of preparing future teachers. Our dialogue allowed us to then use our voices in productive ways in our individual settings. All of our courses now have strong critical reflection components as a result of our depth of interrogation into definitions and practices.

An important piece that will require further study lies within the limitations of e-mail and Internet-based critical friendships. In their collaborative study, Schuck and Russell (2005) noted, “Electronic mail itself is ... an obvious constraint on the quality of our communication; had even one face-to-face observation and discussion been possible, we expect the quality of our critical friendship would have improved considerably” (p. 113). We agree with this claim, and we hope to address this issue as we continue our work together.

We do, however, believe that our study adds to the current literature base by noting the importance of critical friendships *between* those new to the academy. Rather than highlighting a traditional mentoring model—the relationship between an experienced teacher educator and a junior faculty member—our work draws attention to the collaborative possibilities of the *parallel mentoring* that emerges as two novices examine their entrance into the field. As others have found, graduate students and early-career professors often find it difficult to transition from classroom practice into the university setting. We perceived the need to “sound smart” as we entered the ranks of the professoriate. Our critical friendship allowed us to explore our voices, our beliefs, and our practices in a safe environment. Yet, this environment was more than just safe. We learned to push one another, to ask hard questions, and to critically analyze our words and our work. We hope to continue this work as we grow our professional relationship and widen our circle of contacts in the field of self-study research.

Notes

¹See Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007), Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006), and Zeichner and Noffke (2001) for further elaboration of the various conceptions of practitioner inquiry.

²See Schuck and Segal (2002) for an interesting account of “hurt” in self-study research.

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