Reflections From a Teaching Time Capsule

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Reflecting on the past, present, and future of my praxis I ask myself, “What more can possibly be said about teacher research? How can I possibly contribute to the vast body of literature out there?” All I have is my own story. All most teachers have is their own story. In this paper I have discovered that this is in itself a contribution to the literature. Through this paper I have learned that qualitative research is as individual as the individual. We are NOT numbers as in quantitative research. Teacher research is particular and unique but not less insightful. Opening up to autobiography was a frightening concept for me. Teachers must take the risk of autobiography in their own action research. This is what I learned throughout this journey-my journey of participatory research. I constantly wondered what can of worms I was going to open. After years of critical theory study at the master’s level in the borderlands, and during my doctoral studies, I began the practice of systematic inquiry during a course I was taking called Pedagogy of Instruction for a Diverse Society. As I systematically reflected on my actions in the classroom and the practice of my own teaching, it occurred to me that a time capsule would serve as my metaphor for the work I was doing because I needed to look both into my past teaching experiences (autobiography) and present (context) in order to see the future (informs instruction) of my praxis. I imagine that inside this time capsule is a collection of stories about my teaching experiences that I can tap from time to time in order to reflect and this is what informs my praxis. I began to see the linearity of my metaphor of a time capsule and had to merge this continuum with what I imagined as concentric, reflexive circles; what the literature calls reflexive participatory research.

Autobiographical Reflections

I am a former high school English teacher of both Hispanic and Anglo extraction. I taught at a border high school that is geographically located at the southernmost region in New Mexico. The population at our school was 99% low-income Hispanics of Mexican decent and primarily newcomers (immigrants) and undocumented families living in trailers in the desert sands of southern New Mexico, where a small mountain and a train track separate the U.S. from Mexico. The border patrol is more visible here than the local sheriffs department.

Reflections on Santa Teresa High School

If we look into my teaching time capsule, we would see that I began teaching on an emergency waiver at Santa Teresa High School in the 1995-1996 school year. I was hired as the G.R.A.D.S teacher. G.R.A.D.S is an acronym for Graduation, Reality, and Dual-Role Skills for pregnant and school age parents. The school was looking for someone with experience in working with children and the importance of nutrition for pregnant and nursing teenagers. G.R.A.D.S. came out of Carl Perkins monies in the Family and Consumer Science department that espoused proper nutrition for these young girls and their children. New Mexico has the second largest teen pregnancy rate in the nation. I loved that job. I always believed in educating women first in families and I’ve even spoken in Peru at their national conference for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) on the subject. I grew up in a feminist household during the Feminist Movement. My mother who served as a feminist role model for me raised three professional women all on her own.
We truly believed in our mother and supported her efforts to rise from the barrio. Then I taught these teenage mothers in southern New Mexico and I really began to see the importance of an educated woman. When I saw the following quotation by Chittister (1998) in a calendar for daily thoughts, I feel that I found the thought that literally defined those years for me. She says,

> It takes an educated woman to maintain a quality home. It takes an educated woman to raise healthy, well-nourished children. It takes an educated woman to raise the educational level of an entire family. It takes an educated woman to be an agent of social change (Chittister, 1998).

While I was working with pregnant teens, I made every attempt to be a positive role model for these young ladies. Here is where I learned to give young adults the space they needed in order to grow to be responsible adults. As I worked more and more with school-age parents on empowering themselves and their families, I, too, began to feel like Chittister’s agent of social change. This southern New Mexico school district was determined to address the issue of teen moms and I got the program on its feet. However, due to congressional pressure, Clinton changed the welfare laws the second year I was there and I helped these girls transition to the new, more stringent policies. As I reflect on those years, I think to myself, “Talk about killing the messenger.” I did manage to keep the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children Program) van to continue visiting the school on a monthly basis delivering checks to the girls so that they could buy milk, cheese, and juice - a very noble gesture on the part of our government.

When I ask myself through reflection why I became a teacher, I think this particular teaching position presented itself and I was truly inspired - I seized the opportunity. I felt that I had the chance to become that agent for change for generations of mothers and this appealed to me. I wanted literacy to play an important part of my curriculum and I taught these school-age parents the importance of 1) the continuation of their own education and 2) the importance of reading to their babies. I saw literacy through an intergenerational approach. But things changed for me after two years when the state department was coming through to accredit us. I was pursuing a Masters in TESOL and I felt that literacy was what these young women needed. However, the Family and Consumer Science funding didn’t see eye to eye with me on that. So the school’s principal moved me to the English department where I was protected from the accreditation team. I had to temporarily abandon the family literacy program I had initiated and that was painful for me. Letting go of projects that one starts is commonplace in education. One never knows how the next program director/educator will handle your former program. My undergraduate years were from Speech/Drama, Television/Film (Louisiana State University-Baton Rouge). So, I moved over to join the bards in the English department and I taught literature to Mexican American teenagers.

I followed Jaime Escalante’s (Stand and Deliver) lead and tried to do so in a culturally responsive way. I introduced students to the works of Sandra Cisneros, Gloria López-Stafford (my mother), Denise Chavez, and Pat Mora. I attempted to use meaningful literature for my students in culturally responsive ways. In our high school English class, my students and I placed a drug lord, Julius Caesar, in the barrio whose gang had backstabbed him because of his greed and ambition. We studied universal themes in this desert setting. By going to graduate school and studying critical theory during my years as a high school teacher, authors like Freire and Nieto began to influence my personal philosophy of education. About teaching in the slums of Brazil, Freire (1987) said, “I
taught them grammar based on what they were already writing, not from a textbook. And I also used readings from very good Brazilian authors” (p. 28). I remember that this simple statement had a profound impact on my praxis. I really and truly began to see the light and attempted to incorporate this crucial concept into my teaching.

The next two years afforded me the opportunity to work with a computer in the classroom and I received great training from two Challenge Grants. I learned to juggle one computer with thirty kids (Stafford-Levy & Wiburg, 1999). I also took the computer off my desk and put the kids on the machine. What a radical notion! I was the talk of the school. The last year that I taught high school, I was assigned the journalism job because of my strong tech skills, my willingness to let the kids use the expensive equipment, and my relationship with my students. These simple concepts allowed me to work on the school newspaper and the yearbook. We were quite successful and we had good readership, too. Being a journalism teacher taught me that you must be performance based, project-based, and be able to trust your high school students with cameras and the computers - a tall order. We also brought in stories and poetry from the neighborhood that further increased our readership. We were addressing literacy through authentic materials and this was a wonderful feeling. We had a great sense of accomplishment and this empowered our students. This also made concrete for me what Freire had been teaching all along -- the use of authentic materials!

My fifth and final year in this southern New Mexico school district was spent as a curriculum facilitator for two school faculties (a middle school that served as a feeder school to the high school where I taught). The job of this facilitator was to provide support for teachers with the district’s mandatory performance assessments. It had been mandated from the district’s administration that the teachers become project based (ASCD) and some of the teachers resented this imposition. My job was to smooth over the relationship between central office and my colleagues at the high school. Here’s where my work with teachers began. Diplomacy and people skills were a must for this position. I not only had to be diplomatic in making sure the teachers were actually doing the projects, I had to gather up all the products and document their participation. Some teachers really resented the “extra” work.

Here’s where the concept of constructivist approaches to teaching became concrete for me. These products weren’t additional work but rather supplemental. I really saw project-based pedagogy in action. As teaching professionals we know this type of learning means much richer forms of assessment. This is especially critical for second language learners in this border community. I witnessed John Dewey’s framework (Starnes, 1999) of experiential education. What I was doing embodied “Dewey’s ideas about four aspects of education: the relationships among teachers, learners, the curriculum, and the community; the ways learning occurs; preparing students for full lives as citizens and individuals; and reflection and evaluation” (p. 2).

These performance assessments weren’t “add-ons” but rather experiential learning for students so that teachers weren’t so bound to the textbook -- again Freire’s idea of letting go of the textbook. I’m reminded of the movie “To Sir with Love” where a young Sydney Poitier throws the textbook into the trashcan of his rowdy inner-city Liverpool classroom-- a classic image in my time capsule and an indelible part of my memories about teachers and teaching.

Now my question is, “What does a teacher in the public schools do to reflect? Is reflecting a luxury?” As a university supervisor for student teaching I spent a lot of time in the public schools and I would wonder if teacher reflection after a lesson is immediate, later, much later, ongoing, or not at all. Do other professionals tap into their symbolic time capsules in order to reflect too? Like all good teachers I remember that I reflected all the time when I taught high school. I taught three
classes that were 90 minutes long and I had a 90-minute planning period. This was a great structure with plenty of time for the reflexive process of reflection and planning. How do elementary school teachers reflect on their praxis when classes are 45-minute periods and the 4-6 core courses/subjects they teach—every day! Between shuffling kids in and out of classrooms in this hustle bustle world, I wonder if they use a systematic approach to inquiry.

Stigler and Hiebert (1999) in The Teaching Gap takes a look at the teaching practices of Japanese, German, and American math teachers. In it, the authors find that the Japanese, who outscore most countries on the TIMSS (The Third International Mathematics and Science Study), use lesson study as part of their reflective process. Teachers look at each other’s lessons for help, collaboration, and receive input from their peers. Often these lessons are video recorded for teachers to self-evaluate. Another type of lesson study that is available for teachers is the concept of a Critical Friends Group (Bambino, 2002). Here, teachers collectively examine and discuss how to “improve both the students’ work and the teachers’ approach” (p. 25). Critical Friends members give and receive feedback to improve teaching. This process helps teachers look more deeply into student assignments and their responses to them. “Critical Friends Groups have been the catalyst for changes in the teaching, learning, culture, and climate of learning communities in a great variety of schools” (p. 27). Here is yet another systematic approach to teacher inquiry.

Conclusion

From feeling like an agent of social change to teaching in culturally supportive and responsive ways, my time capsule holds the tales and life experiences of this teacher who attempted to better understand the reflexive process of teacher inquiry and reflection. In Dewey’s (1929) Sources of a Science Education he argues that one of a teacher’s most important responsibilities is to inquire into and investigate educational problems. Kincheloe, Slattery, and Steinberg (2000) cited that, “writing of the ‘teacher as investigator,’ Dewey saw teachers as the most important determinants of the success or failure of the school; in fact, he saw no other way to produce viable educational research” (p. 267). This is the vital premise of action research in teacher education.

This reflection into my time capsule has expanded my own concepts of how I teach and the process of reflection and action in my teaching. This inner dialogue and journey of introspection has taught me that a teacher-as-researcher cannot get caught up in the notion of contributing to the literature. Instead, the core of this stance is developing a systematic approach to inquiry and reflection. At the heart of our praxis is the student. Freire (1998) reminds us “we must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not anti-scientific” (p. 3). This love he speaks of is for our students, not to parent them, but to love them with “constant intellectual rigor and the stimulation of epistemological curiosity, of the capacity to love, of creativity, of scientific competence and the rejection of scientific reductionism. The teaching task also requires the capacity to fight for freedom, without which the teaching task becomes meaningless” (p. 4). This concept of loving our students inspires me to be a better teacher. In order to be a better teacher, I must understand and deconstruct my own teaching through the reflexive process of teacher inquiry. My time capsule metaphor serves me well, framed within Freire’s (1987) statement that imagination and intuition “means to be strongly present, to have your feet firmly planted on the ground, in such a way that foreseeing the future becomes a normal thing. You know the present so well, you can imagine a possible future of transformation” (p. 186). This transformation hinges on the process and introspection within teacher research.
In this paper, I have attempted to share with other professionals the many events in my life that have contributed to my development as a reflective practitioner. It’s almost a story of my coming of age as a teacher. As I seal my time capsule now, I know that it will be opened time and again so that I reflect and gain insight as to what informs the way I teach. As I put my capsule away on my already heavy bookshelf and I think of the experiences that are within it and the volumes of literature that surround it, I wonder what new experiences will be in there when I open it again. I can’t help but ask, “What memories will reside inside my time capsule in the future?” “Where will I be as a teacher then?”
References