

Talking Practice: The Debriefing Session in Multicultural Teacher Education Curriculum

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ABSTRACT: This article provides an initial theoretical discussion of some student and instructor narratives from an action research project in a preservice secondary English methods course. The course attempted to take up a concern for promoting dialogue around race, class, and gender within a notion of curriculum as the construction of culturally significant domains for conversation. Particular attention is focused on the planned debriefing session immediately following the preservice students' first practicum experience, seen as an important opportunity for bridging theory and practice. The paper draws attention to the complexities and tensions for students and instructor alike during these debriefing sessions. The article discusses an expanded role for the instructor within the constraints and possibilities of the debriefing session as one discursive site in the conceptualization of any program-wide agenda for multicultural teacher education.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet articles présente une amorce de discussion théorique sur des récits de vie d'étudiants et d'enseignants tirés d'un projet de recherche-action à l'intérieur d'un cours avant-stage sur les méthodes d'anglais au secondaire. Le cours tentait de répondre à la préoccupation d'encourager le dialogue sur la race, la classe et le sexe, à l'intérieur de l'idée d'un programme d'études, comme étant la construction de domaines culturels signifiants pour une conversation. Une attention particulière est portée sur la séance planifiée de témoignages, suivant immédiatement la première expérience pratique des étudiants, vue comme une occasion importante

de réunir la théorie et la pratique. L'article fait ressortir les complexités et les tensions, autant chez les étudiants que chez l'enseignant, lors des séances de témoignages. L'article traite du rôle élargi de l'enseignant, à l'intérieur des contraintes et des possibilités d'une séance de témoignages qui constitue un terrain de discussion dans la conceptualisation de l'ordre du jour de tout programme élargi de formation des maîtres en milieu multiculturel.

In his review of the literature pertaining to the preparation of teachers for multicultural settings, Larkin (1995) writes, "as teacher education programs attempt to respond to the increasing cultural diversity of our society, the traditional preservice teacher education curriculum is one of a number of areas that will need to be broadly reconsidered" (p. 1). For Larkin, a key element in this reconsidered curriculum is the creation of discursive opportunities where all education students would "explore honestly and discuss openly their own feelings, values, and attributes relating to race, class, and gender, and other difficult dimensions of multicultural teaching" (p. 5). However, recent writing on preservice teacher education shows how difficult and complex these discussions are because they not only require of instructors and teacher candidates alike a personal and emotional engagement with issues of privilege and oppression, but they also disrupt students' understanding of teaching as a technical and apolitical undertaking (Rosenberg, 1997; Sleeter & McClaren, 1995). In addition, they introduce perspectives on practice that cannot as yet be grounded in the students' own experience of teaching, and foreground the shifting cultural politics of the preservice classroom itself as a site of power, resistance, and negotiation (Britzman, 1997; Shor, 1996).

This paper is drawn from an action research project centered in an 18-week secondary English language arts methods course taught over two terms (Graham & Young, 1998) where each term consisted of nine weeks of faculty-based coursework followed by a five-week teaching block. The course attempted to take up Larkin's concern for promoting dialogue around race, class, and gender within Applebee's (1996) notion of curriculum as the construction of "culturally significant domains for conversation"

(p. 49). A conversational domain can include "many different kinds of experiences for students to share, and many different voices, including those of the past as well as the present" (p. 38) each derived from a "selection of topics or issues out of a larger tradition" (pp. 37-38), in this case past and present traditions of English as a school subject (Applebee, 1974) and of anti-racist/multicultural education (Banks, 1994; Dei, 1996; Ghosh, 1996).

The paper describes and comments on the effort to take advantage of the unique opportunity presented in the course when the students returned to the university classroom after their first five weeks of student teaching. At this crucial juncture for students, after having been required for the first time to transform knowledge about teaching and learning into actual classroom practice, two one-hour university classes were given over to what Ladson-Billings (1995) calls "the planned debriefing session" (p. 749).¹ The intent of those classes was to have students construct a deeper retrospective understanding of their experiences informed by the theorizing of race, class, and gender that had occurred in classroom conversations prior to the teaching block. By specifically focusing on the planned debriefing session the paper draws attention to many of the complex, situated, and ethical aspects involved in raising the awareness of students and instructors alike to the tensions and struggles involved in creating an identity for oneself as a particular multicultural teacher.

Articulating a Framework for the Course

The task of rethinking an approach to the content and delivery of the English methods course was influenced by the work of Applebee (1996), who views curriculum as a way of helping students "enter into culturally significant domains for conversation" (p. 49). Drawing on the work of Grice (1975) and Mayer (1990), Applebee believes that for the conversation to be effective two conditions must obtain: "all participants must honor a tacit agreement to cooperate in carrying the conversation forward" (p. 52), and that conversations will continue to work "only as long as the various contributions are relevant to the common direction or purposes" (p. 52). In order to make provision

for a curriculum that is both co-operative and effective, Applebee delineates four characteristics of effective curricular conversations having to do with the "*quality, quantity, and relatedness* of the topics of conversation, and the *manner* in which the conversation is carried forward" (p. 53).

However, Applebee's suggestions for structuring curricular conversations must always be tempered by taking into account local conditions and specific constraints. For teacher educators these constraints often have to do with the nature and extent of the students' prior life and teaching experiences, with the timing and length of faculty-based coursework, and with the well-documented findings on the sometimes negative impact of the practicum on the preservice teachers' attitudes and morale (Zeichner & Liston, 1990). In addition, Britzman's (1991) work reinforced for us an appreciation for a complicating fact, running parallel across the university and the school as sites of teaching and learning, that the students' sense of themselves as emerging professionals is often highly volatile and contradictory, since they are *both* students *and* teachers at the same time, a liminal existence that often proves difficult for many students to inhabit successfully.

Applebee (1996), in explaining how different kinds of classroom structures tend "to support or inhibit the development of conversation" (p. 67), makes the distinction between the *formal*, the *enacted*, and the *received* curriculum. The formal curriculum is represented "in lesson plans, syllabi and textbooks" (p. 68); the enacted curriculum represents "the transformations that take place" in the teachers' and students' "interactions around the formal curriculum" (p. 68); while the received curriculum "reflects how the students make sense of the curricular conversations in which they are engaged" (p. 68). In addition, although Applebee believes that curricular domains do "have a shape and structure that is planned rather than accidental" (p. 109), we wanted to leave sufficient room for spontaneous changes in direction, for the discourse conventions to be flexible enough so that the students didn't receive the impression that their conversations had to lead them to a narrowly predetermined goal. The overall aim, then, was to construct a curriculum that contained material and experiences

consistent with Applebee's concerns for significant conversations of high quality and quantity, conversations that would honor the students' need for method or technique, but technique warranted on a sound theoretical base. Central issues of relatedness and manner were addressed through efforts to establish conditions where *personal connections* could be made and pursued as the students moved from their faculty-based deliberations as a form of "dramatic rehearsal" (Dewey, 1939, p. 755) to the everyday realities of classroom life.

Concretely, in order to initiate this process at the beginning of the first year of this redesigned curriculum, the students were provided with articles from the professional literature on the problems and possibilities of introducing and teaching multicultural literature in the high schools (Fishman, 1995; Beach, 1995). Fishman's article was selected because she exposes the dilemmas and struggles of a white, middle-class female teacher trying to move towards curricular selections that more adequately represent the culturally diverse backgrounds of her students. Beach's article (1995) explores the way in which all readers of literature inevitably read through their own "cultural scripts" (p. 87), a situation with crucial implications for prospective English teachers as they attempt to make visible their own cultural scripts and as their own role as a broker of cultural scripts is perhaps challenged by the students they encounter in the practicum.

Additionally, in what has by now become a standard practice in many teacher education courses, and in particular English methods courses (Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995), the students were invited to keep a *learning log* in which they could record at greater length some of what transpired in their time in class together and in their experience of the practicum. As well, the students were asked to research and write a paper on a topic of their own choice and were encouraged to pursue more fully in this paper issues arising from some of the many classroom conversations that had been left "dangling" or inadequately addressed through the inevitable constraints of time. Finally, and

crucially for our investigation, the two initial class meetings after the fall practicum block were deliberately set aside as an occasion for collective reflection and debriefing and as a prelude to the upcoming work of the winter term.

Working in association with these readings and assignments, issues of relatedness and manner were pursued in the class by the instructor's commitment to continually revisit the way in which the themes of culture and identity made themselves manifest in classroom conversations around the craft of teaching and the nature of curriculum as a social and political construct. Classroom talk made consistent demands upon the students to continually justify and open up to rebuttal their own presuppositions around the nature of curriculum, culture, and teaching with a view to developing a more thoughtful personal framework for practice.

The Importance of Practice and Opportunities Lost: The First Debriefing Sessions

In order to make the debriefing sessions more manageable, the instructor split the class in half so that a more hospitable atmosphere for discussion might be possible. This arrangement involved creating two groups of around 12 students. At the beginning of the session, the instructor reminded the students about its purpose, namely, to provide an opportunity for them to articulate some of their observations and experiences of their teaching block that they felt comfortable sharing with the group.² Even though each student took the opportunity to speak at some point in the conversation, as the excerpts from the learning logs and from the instructor's reflections show, some students spoke more frequently and with more power than others, a circumstance that in the eyes of their classmates was interpreted as dominating the conversation and hence creating a less conducive atmosphere for sharing their experiences.

In general, much of the students' talk in these debriefing sessions appeared to be focused on their engagement with the school experience on two levels: first, on the level of professional survival – their ability to complete the teaching block and to maintain order; and second, to cover some of the content and to

establish personal relationships with students and co-operating teachers. While the technical parts of the first term's coursework were seen as valuable and they appreciated the opportunity to talk about their experiences, students did not voluntarily return to comment on either the assigned readings or on the previous discussions of culture and ethnicity as meaningful to their recent practice.³

Learning log entry from the first session

• ***White female, early 20s***

I found this experience [the debriefing session] to be very helpful in terms of hearing what everybody else had to say. I found it comforting to know that I was not the only one who had some problems. I felt that I needed to share an experience that I had on my block, but it didn't seem like the right atmosphere in the classroom. During my block, on the second-last day, one of my grade eight girls left me a suicide note in her journal.

Learning log entry from the second session

• ***White male, early 20s***

We were "debriefed" of our teaching block "experiences" today. [The instructor] stated that it was important for us to share our experiences, opinions, and insights that we may have had, formed, or created during our five-week teaching block. I was somewhat "unreserved" in my opinions and observations that I had during my block. My main observation was the vast span of total student apathy that I saw running rampant [sic] in today's public school. Sure, even I had a "gem" class that was generally willing to work and cared (even marginally) about what we were doing in class. But, for the most part, my students couldn't give a s... about what we were doing.

Learning log entry from second session**• *White male, early 20s***

We just finished our first methods class after the holidays, and there was some really good discussion around our student teaching experiences. Everyone seemed to feel that they had gained immeasurably from their time in the schools, and I'm no exception. However, I don't know if I envy you your position, [instructor's name]. We all know so much, or at least think we do, and we are all so opinionated. I do not make this comment because things didn't go well, as a matter of fact, I believe things went very well and everyone seemed interested and involved. It's just that I really felt I was walking on eggshells. We students are really critical and cynical about others for some reason.

Transcript of instructor's notes**• *First and second sessions, Jan. 6, 8, 1997***

I wanted to get a small group where everybody could come and have a chance to talk about their experiences in student teaching Many of them said that the whole experience of the five-week block was overwhelming in the sense that everything happened at once. Discipline problems, meetings about students, preparing for the next class when you really didn't understand what just went on in the class you completed I asked them at one point if they had changed their mind about what it means to teach and to learn. There was a huge silence, because I suspect that they thought this was one of those "professor-type" questions, but I hoped they would interpret it as more than that. Finally, the stories seemed to polarize around those who had experienced a junior high placement with the senior high experience. Many noticed that the junior high school teachers seemed to be younger and more idealistic, perhaps because they realized the kids were "off the wall" and that they were all "in this together." Stories from secondary school were of gossiping and back-biting and departmental jealousies, very much like the Dan Lortie stuff from the 70s Nobody, but *nobody*,

mentioned issues of race, gender, or culture. Nobody mentioned any of those issues. I deliberately didn't bring them up because I wanted to see if they would come up on their own, but all they seemed worried about was accountability issues, reluctant students, student apathy, and that "I-dare-you-to-teach-me-anything" attitude When I asked them about literacy and the content of their lessons, they said yes, they tried this and they tried that, but it seemed like nothing could happen until things like discipline were in place So here are some of the various tensions they are working under, but I don't know if I did anything at all worthwhile here, they all just sounded so whining and I sounded so prof-like.

These selected responses to the initial debriefing sessions dramatize a number of interrelated challenges. They illustrate in the students' talk their desire to articulate "feelings" and "opinions" grounded in the immediacy and raw power of their initial exposure to the world of practice. This talk bears little connection to the instructor's agenda of exploring the relation of culture and identity to the teaching of English language arts, or to the way in which that content might inform an analysis of those experiences. These instances highlight the potential for conflict in the instructor's role, particularly when an instructor elects to adopt the role of facilitator in the Rogerian, nondirective sense of the term.⁴ The instructor's reflections show a familiar tension between his *espoused* hopes for the debriefing session and its *enacted* function by the students. By neglecting to function in his role as *dialectitian*, a role in which as Crusius (1991) states, "if the challenge from the outside does not arise spontaneously in class discussions, then it is the teacher's task to pose the questions that will bring it into play" (p. 86), the opportunity to make and strengthen fruitful connections to larger issues of curriculum, culture, and identity was allowed to slip away. What little probing into these issues was attempted was met with the passive resistance of polite acquiescence since these were not the issues that students thought important or would risk discussing, at least not there and not then.

Changing Practice: A Revised Framework for the Course

The instructor's role-conflict in the first debriefing sessions resulted from placing an overextended set of expectations on what were, after all, only hour-long conversations in an 18-hour course. Despite the generally lukewarm reaction to the professional articles themselves in class discussions and in the students' responses in their learning logs, the instructor was reluctant to reject the idea of a conversational framework for the course out of hand but rather wanted to reintroduce Applebee's ideas of quality, quantity, relatedness, and manner in a more expansive way. Consequently, in redrafting the formal curriculum for the second academic year, the articles by Fishman and Beach were replaced by a chapter on orientations to curriculum from Eisner's *The Educational Imagination* (1985), an article by McEwan (1992) entitled "Five Metaphors for English," and a chapter by Sleeter & Grant (1988) on race, gender, class, and disability. These readings were designed to expand the students' acquaintance with a range of political and ideological positions within the field of curriculum studies and English language arts education. The requirement that the students keep a learning log was omitted as a concession to "reflection and its resistances" (Carson, 1997), since the students had indicated that it was difficult to maintain their commitment to write when they were being asked to keep similar logs by three, and sometimes four, other instructors. They claimed to be, in effect, "logged out;" and it was difficult not to agree given the often perfunctory and ill-considered nature of much of this writing. However, the essential element of reflection on experience was maintained by introducing a post-practicum autobiography, a document where the students were invited to subject their espoused beliefs about identity, race, class, gender, and disability to the test of experience and to use these categories as a way of describing how the practicum impacted on their beliefs and on their attempts at teaching for cultural diversity. These multiple occasions for reading and writing now formed the conversational and rhetorical matrix of the course, not with the expectation that the instructor would somehow "get it right this time," but rather with the hope that the curricular conversations could be expanded more

profitably by relying on the spoken and written, informal and formal dimensions of discourse as a social event and practice.

As this short excerpt from the instructor's audio-taped reflections after the debriefing sessions make clear, the suspicion among the students themselves that some were posturing in front of each other and the instructor still exists as perhaps an inevitable and ineradicable aspect of any institutionally-sanctioned opportunity around difficult personal and professional issues. Yet we believe this excerpt comes close to capturing some of the richness and resonance of Applebee's quality conversation, a claim that we examine further below as we conclude briefly by teasing out some of the provisional implications of this work.

Instructor's notes

• *Debriefing Sessions, Jan. 5, 7, 1998*

One student stayed behind today and was just wondering, as he put it, he didn't want to express this in the formal session, but he told me after class that he wondered just how much the social constructing of an image many of them were doing. Maybe these sessions are just another stage for them to perform on Another student said that she felt that her getting-to-know-you games she played with her students increased her sense of comfort, and maybe helped her gain a measure of acceptance and respect from her students. So she really put on the agenda for us how all teaching is a form of self-disclosure; but another person thought that the students who were having trouble at school maybe were uncomfortable with the extent to which self-disclosure was a part of "doing school," part of the game, so to speak Many of them said that their approach was Grant and Sleeter's human relations approach, that if you didn't get the human relations aspect of it going, then very little else was going to happen. The only woman of color in this section told us of the success she had getting her students to write. She claimed that as a woman of color she had an advantage when it came to working with these kids that her white co-operating teacher simply didn't have. She backed that up by saying she could share her experience as a mother and

as a parent and as an immigrant with many of the students that were there. She called it a kind of bonding that happened between them because they could see her as a woman of color in a position of some success A young white, middle-class woman said now isn't that interesting. Her school was hugely multicultural in its makeup yet she could find no teachers of color or even of another racial background That brought out another story from a young white woman who asked her students if they had ever experienced racial tensions at school. They were taken aback by that question, but they said yes, I guess we have. The whole school was shocked last week when there was a stabbing which they said wasn't racially motivated but was in fact motivated by love Another story told about an Aboriginal boy who got the kids all stirred up about something. The student said she didn't want to be politically incorrect, but it was clear to her that the kid had played the victim card in much the same way that O.J. Simpson's lawyer played the race card in that trial. She wasn't sure exactly why he was playing the victim card The man of color said that very often students of a different race or ethnicity knew that racism was simply waiting, and I quote, "waiting for an opportunity to show itself." It was always already there and it goes into hiding, but it's always there waiting for that opportunity to rear its head. They did mention, though, in connection with the comments of the woman of color, that it had better not be the case that only people of color can be effective multicultural teachers Many of them spoke of classrooms that are divided along lines of gender, race, and ethnicity into various cliques and ethnic groups that huddle together in various parts of the classroom. Building bridges between these groups and having them talk to each other was very difficult. One young woman said a student came right out and said to her, "I know what you're trying to do by having us work in these collaborative groups with different folks, you are forcing friendships on us. You are forcing me to be around somebody that I don't like."

Discussion

We wanted to inquire into how Larkin's concern for promoting dialogue around race, class, and gender and Applebee's view of curriculum as conversation might play out in the planning and delivering of this preservice methods course. Within the overall conception of the course as an *ongoing* series of conversations around the nature of multicultural English teaching, our particular experiences with the debriefing sessions has reinforced for us the idea of teaching as "risky business" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). First, we are reminded that to take part in a genuine conversation involves the mobilization of a number of well-developed social skills, for example, the reciprocal obligation to co-operate and to concede (Walton, 1989), and to refrain as far as possible from dropping what Nash (1997) calls "conversation bombs: the dumb bomb, the hostility bomb, the self-interest bomb ... and so forth" (p. 186). Thus quality conversations of the kind envisaged by Applebee and others are by nature clearly fragile under any set of circumstances; their success in preservice courses is made more uncertain when we take the contingencies and constraints under which this work is done in many faculties of education. For example, in our case these final-year certification classes met for two hours, twice a week for nine weeks in the fall and winter terms, barely time to understand the practical intricacies of unit planning let alone to form a clear image of oneself as a multicultural teacher. We should not be surprised when preservice teachers exhibit so many different forms of compliant and passive/aggressive behaviour. As Larkin (1995) writes, "by this point in their educational careers, most students are quite capable of producing whatever academic responses are required 'to get their multicultural tickets punched'" (p. 6).

In addition, instructors committed to "building into programs opportunities for the open, honest, tough, and respectful exchange of ideas and attitudes which matter in multicultural teaching" (Larkin, 1995, p. 7), must be willing to constantly re-evaluate and reconsider the impact of their own manner, style, attitude, and role (Nash, 1997). Needless to say, this work is difficult, edgy, and requires the same commitment to engage in forms of reflection and self-disclosure as we so often demand of our

students. This kind of willingness may not come easily or be felt necessary by many instructors; but to hold a social reconstructionist view of education means to agree with Ladson-Billings (1995) that the teacher educator "must develop prospective teachers' critical abilities, their ability to critique education *their own* and their students'" (p. 749) [italics added]. This commitment often means the difference between creating an environment where risk is respected, and one where maintaining control and authority are paramount. In Nash's (1997) pithy reminder, "*practice the virtues you want others to emulate*" (p. 187).

In addition, another major contingency is the ethno-cultural composition of the class itself and the extent to which the presence or absence of diverse student voices in the student teacher cohort can contribute to the probability of quality conversations. Over two academic years, during which the instructor taught four sections of the methods course involving around 100 students, there were no visible minority students in year one, and three in year two: a woman and man of color and a Canadian Aboriginal woman. While a number of tensions were clearly present in all of the debriefing sessions alluded to, we would claim that the presence of ethno-culturally diverse voices in the latter session contributed much to its success as a quality conversation and as a catalyst for more thinking and talking. Although the instructor's reflections cannot do justice to the richness of that conversation, they do document the general respect the students showed each other and do give a sense of the range, complexity, and thoughtfulness of their current thinking on culture and diversity.

Out of the 28 students in that particular section, 18 went on to research and write a formal paper in which they explored in depth curricular issues in English teaching related to notions of race, gender, or ethno-cultural diversity. Finally, our experience of the debriefing sessions reported here has served to raise a number of interrelated issues that are emblematic of our collective work as instructors of preservice teachers, as curriculum developers, and as action researchers. In particular, it has underscored for us the important truth in Smits's (1997) theorizing of the relationship between conversation and teacher

inquiry as it relates to the development of *phronesis*, or practical judgement, in our students and in ourselves. Consequently, we have offered these preliminary descriptions and insights derived from our experience with the planned debriefing session as a contribution to the professional conversation around an important discursive site in any program-wide agenda for multicultural teacher education curriculum.

NOTES

1. One student's perception of the significance of this experience was captured well in a subsequent study in which she comments,

Most of what I learned was practical in terms of I tried this, it didn't work, or I tried this, and wow it was real chaotic and boy, did that feel good! It worked, they learned Until you *try* it, it's not *real*, let's put it that way. Until you try it yourself it has less meaning. Up until that point ... it's a good idea. After you've tried it and you've either fallen flat or soared ahead, then you can use that.

2. Here we have tried to remain as faithful to the spirit, if not to the exact words, of the instructor's reminder to the students. As will be seen, it is only in hindsight that this reminder assumes a crucial importance to the events and responses described by students and instructor alike.

3. While no claims can be made that the student voices included here represent the opinion of the majority, they have been included for the way these comments and other like them forced us to challenge many of our own assumptions about and hopes for, the debriefing sessions themselves.

4. Interestingly, Masson's (1988) criticism of Rogers nondirective approach is particularly relevant here.

No person really does any of the things Rogers prescribes in real life ... [if] he [did] he would have the same reactions with people he would have in his real life, which certainly do not include 'unconditional acceptance,' lack of judging, or real empathic understanding So if the therapist manages to do so in a session ... this is merely artifice; it is not reality. I am not saying that such an attitude might not be perceived as helpful ... but let us realize that the attitude is no more than playacting. (p. 232)

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