

Critically Reflective Teaching: Excavating Assumptions and Practices

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Abstract: Mid-career faculty often seek to make paradigmatic shifts in their teaching. When these faculty come together for conversations about teaching, they frequently exchange stories. Session participants will experience ways to work with stories and analyze them to unearth unacknowledged assumptions influencing their pedagogical choices. In uncovering these “gateways” for new directions in growth, autoethnographic methods will be used to excavate assumptions and practices (the “roots” of practices and “routes” assumptions take) and to address the ways in which this work contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning. How can this work provide a substantive examination of our pedagogical practices?

Brookfield (1995) says we teach naively when we teach without going “assumption hunting.” Similarly Palmer addresses coming to understand the “outward bound” aspects of teaching by going “inward bound” to explore inner landscapes (2007/1998). As midcareer professionals ourselves or as faculty developers working with midcareer faculty, how do we move more deeply into the pedagogical paradigm shift from teaching to learning centeredness (Chickering /Gamson (1987), Barr/Tagg (1995), Wiemer (2002)) by bringing new awareness to our work like Brookfield and Palmer suggest? Åkerlind’s study (2007) shows faculty develop their teaching potential through five approaches—but missing is attention to articulation and analysis of frameworks undergirding our teaching that Brookfield, Palmer, and others call for. This workshop comes at the intersection of three lines of literature: (1) critical reflection, (2) paradigm shift in university teaching, (3) applicability of autoethnography. Roth (2005) writes, “Auto/biography and auto/ethnography already have histories as research strategies and tool kits in other domains, but have yet to be explored as such in education” (p. 3).

Participants’ Outcomes: Participants will (1) use a process for identifying critical incidents in their teaching, (2) apply a three-stage analysis framework for identifying assumptions, (3) build a template for pursuing implications of analyses for professional growth, (4) develop a plan for implementing the work in the careers and on their campuses.

Activities/Interaction Plan: Participants will be involved in working independently and in small groups to (1) identify a series of personal stories, (2) explore the details of selected stories with colleagues, (3) apply a three-stage coding system to their stories, (4) critically discuss findings and implications, (5) assess the value and potential usefulness of the process for work with faculty. They will receive an extensive annotated bibliography of sources.

Theme: Excavating foundations of pedagogical choices through identification and use of autobiographical critical incidents opens new directions for growth.

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EXCAVATING, CONSIDERING, ANALYZING (STAGE I)

1	2
3	4

Excavating: Mining the vein.

Who would have thought the stories would cling to him so? (Ibsen, Peer Gynt)

1. Recall two incidents involving you as a *student*. Something that shifted the ground you walk on regarding education.
2. Recall two instances where you were the instructor and had something happen that shifted the ground you walk on as an educator.
3. Recall something from within *your discipline* (e.g., a book, a theory, an event, a speaker) that reshaped the professional ground you walk on.
4. Write your name (first and last) with your non-dominant hand.

Considering: Telling what is found.

Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created (Morrison, Nobel Lecture).

Pick one story you have identified (from any quadrant) and talk with a colleague about it. Explain why that story is one of significance.

Why write your name with your non-dominant hand?

Analyzing, Stage 1: Giving the stories texture.

To pay attention is to 'stretch toward' in a kind of aspiration (Berry, p. 83).

Go back to quadrants and the five incidents. Look at them in another way to see what they might have in common.

Identify at least one—or more incidents to which the following apply using this code:

- * this was something unexpected—it knocked me off a usual course
- ! this was something unsettling—it made me uncomfortable
- % this was something discordant—it made me uncertain about how to proceed
- + this made me question or doubt myself – it made me unsure of my role or goal
- # initially this made me angry – it made me mad at myself or someone else
- @ this was something rewarding – it gave me confidence and/or comfort

Analyzing, Stage 2: Breathing between the lines.

We are all amateurs when it comes to understanding our place in the web of things...

The work of belonging to a place is never finished (Sanders, p. xvi).

Identify two of your incidents that have the most codings (potentially the most pivotal incidents). For each, characterize (1) the role of the learner in the story (e.g., powerful, initiating, submissive, engaged), (2) the role of the educator in the story (e.g., powerful, empathetic, distant), (3) the role of the instructional content in the story (e.g., not a consideration, foregrounded, not too evident, pivotal), (4) the role of context (e.g., not evident, influential, integral). Then, look across *all* stories to see what the characterizations of the role of the student

have in common? Do the same for the role of the educator, role of content, and role of context. Once you have done this look over the results, and consider what you have discovered as common elements across the stories for each.

You could also look over each of your stories to characterize process-oriented threads: e.g., role of listening, role of responding, role of sanctioning, role of acknowledging).

Analyzing, Stage 3: Scrutinizing what is discovered in the telling

In its heuristic function, then, narrative operates to deepen, complicate, and even dismantle our settled beliefs and not simply calcify them into the surface of mere dogmas (Gunn, p.35)

Critical incidents are those touchstone stories that have left their imprint on us, stories that when analyzed draw us deeper into the underpinnings of the choices we make in our work. Drawing on and adapting the work of Measor (1985), an analysis of the stories involves us in . . .

Select at least two of the common elements to work with.

- Roots (analysis and beginnings of interpretation)
 - Claims – for each, what is an underlying claim/s you see being made about the educational process?
 - Challenges – for each, what challenges to the claim/s are present in the stories?
 - Consequences – what are key consequences of the challenge/s to the claim/s?
- Routes (interpretation)
 - Dimensions – what themes emerge from what you see in the articulating claims, challenges, and consequences?
 - Relationships – consider the relationships between/among learners, teacher, content and context. What additional themes emerge here?
 - Action – what immediate actions did the incident lead to for you? What subsequent actions did your immediate actions lead to for you? What more sustained actions did those subsequent actions lead to? What current questions or actions continue to be part of your repertoire?
 - Roots behind the routes – given your work on roots and routes, what do you learn about the *origins* of your claims (i.e. what sociocultural, public/private, internal/external forces underlie those claims)?

Beginnings [are] elusive things. Just when you think you have a hold of one, you look back and see another, earlier beginning, and an earlier one before that . . . [there is] the problem of antecedents (Jordan, p. 98).

Autoethnography

Auto/biography and auto/ethnography already have histories as research strategies and tool kits in other domains, but have yet to be explored as such in education (Roth, p. 3).

Definitions

a research method that utilizes the researcher's autobiographical data to analyze and interpret their cultural assumptions (Chang, p. 9)

. . . culture as a product of interactions between self and others in a community of practice (Chang, p. 23)

What makes autoethnography ethnographic is its intent of gaining cultural understanding (Chang, p. 125).

Project Planning – A Framework

Chang (p. 61) says there are three planning questions that need to be addressed in laying out a project: Why? What? And how?

- Why: to understand underlying assumptions that influence my relationship to/with students, colleagues, research projects, etc.
- What: to use critical incidents in my work as data for collection, analysis, and interpretations.
- How: bounded recall, description, pattern relationships, relational implications, analysis of impact, examination of roots, implications for action, written and integrated essay

Project Progression – A Blueprint

[Stories] give messages and instructions; they offer blueprints and ideals, they issue warnings and prohibitions. And when they no longer serve, they disappear (Stone qtd. in Haroian-Guerin, p. ix)

In considering the overarching progression of the project, the work follows three strands

- What?
 - The data (the storytelling)
- So What?
 - The analysis (Stages 1, 2, 3)
 - the identification of essential features, the analysis “urges you to stay close to the data and ‘work on them’” (Chang, p. 127).
- Now What?
 - The interpretation
 - “‘How does it all mean?’ ‘What is to be made of it all?’” (Wolcott qtd. in Chang, p. 12).

Meaning does not reside in the text, but in the reading and writing of it (Chang, p. 127).

Autoethnography's Roots

Quite unexpectedly, my curiosity [about autoethnography] turned into a foray into postmodern philosophy and critical theory, reflexivity and voice, various vague approaches to autobiographical inquiry, validity and acceptability, defenses and criticism, and a wide range of published narratives, the typical product of autoethnography (Wall, p. 2).

For a review of literature: anthropology, sociology, literary studies, communication studies, linguistics, psychology, history, philosophy, structuralism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, pragmatism, and more.

Approaches to Evaluation of the Work

Richardson discusses using “crystallization” as a standard in place of triangulation – “the central image is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach . . . [this] deconstructs the traditional idea of validity” (p. 13). She describes five criteria for addressing evaluative and constructive validity: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impactfulness, and expresses a reality (pp. 15-16).

'All there is to thinking,' he said, 'is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren't noticing which makes you see something that isn't even visible' (McLean, p. 92).

Five Starting Points for Further Discussions

1. “Stories are fictions” (Denzin, 1989, p. 41).
2. “A story that is told is never the same story that is heard” (Denzin, 1989, p. 72).
3. “To narrative ideology, the world is Bakhtin's concept of ‘heteroglossia’” (Pagnucci, p. 50).
4. “The analysis of linguistic data makes use of hermeneutic understanding” (Polkingham, p. 7).
5. “. . . stories may be constrained by cultural conditions” . . . and the stories “may be liberated by critical insight and engagement” (Rosenwald, p. 265).

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ANALYZING (STAGE II)

	Story #1	Story #2	Statement of common element
Role of learner			
Role of teacher			
Role of content			
Role of context			
Other notes or questions			

ANALYZING (STAGE III a)

Common Element in Stories One and Two	Claim	Challenge	Consequence - As a result of claim and challenge, I found myself...
Learner			
Teacher			
Content			
Context			
Other notes or questions			

ANALYZING (STAGE III B)

Look at the charts on the previous two pages:

<p>Themes that became evident</p>	<p>Relationships that became evident</p>	<p>Immediate Subsequent Sustained Current</p>
<p>Actions:</p>		

EXCAVATING ROOTS

Look at claims and actions: what can you say are some of the potential origins of those?

TRANSFORMING ROUTES AND ROOTS

What actions would help you further understand, mitigate, sustain, or transform the roots and routes of pedagogical choices?