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Aimee Rogers

University of North Dakota, aimee.rogers@UND.edu

Lisa Ortmann

University of North Dakota, lisa.ortmann@UND.edu

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Using Self-Study as a Process for Teacher Inquiry into Classroom Diversity

Lisa L. Ortmann & Aimee A. Rogers

Author's Note

Lisa L. Ortmann, Ph.D., Department of Teaching, Learning & Professional Practice, College of Education & Human Development, University of North Dakota.

Lisa L. Ortmann is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education in the College of Education & Human Development at the University of North Dakota, in Grand Forks, ND.

Aimee A. Rogers, Ph.D., Department of Teaching, Learning & Professional Practice, College of Education & Human Development, University of North Dakota.

Aimee A. Rogers is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education in the College of Education & Human Development at the University of North Dakota, in Grand Forks, ND.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Lisa Ortmann, Department of Teaching, Learning & Professional Practice in the College of Education & Human Development, at the University of North Dakota.

Email: lisa.ortmann@und.edu

Postal Address: Dr. Lisa Ortmann; Education Building, Room 392; 231 Centennial Drive, Stop 7189; Grand Forks, ND, 58202.

Educators in our region of the country likely agree that although there is growing diversity in our public schools in terms of culture, race, ethnicity, gender-identification, primary language and other aspects of diversity, the diversity of practicing and developing teachers has remained relatively unchanged. According to a national report, 82% of all undergraduate degrees in education across the country were awarded to white students in 2009-10, three-quarters of whom were women (AACTE, 2013). In our region of the upper midwest, the statistics are closer to 96% white and 73% female (North Dakota State University, 2017). Although as a teacher workforce, there may be little visible diversity in our state and region, we have found varied and innovative ways in which new and practicing teachers work to be culturally responsive teachers. One of the ways good teachers work to build cultural competencies in our region is by building their capacity for empathy for their students. By taking the time to inquire further into the needs of one student, seeking out additional resources, and engaging in critical dialogue about the results of their inquiry, teachers build awareness, understanding, and empathy for students. In this paper, we will describe a self-study approach to teacher inquiry used in a professional development project to build cultural competencies for teaching. We will share two cases from the resulting efforts of the practicing teachers who, like many of us, work hard to address the needs of their students who struggle to find success in school, in a number of ways. We will also share our methods for conducting a self-study of teaching practice, and conclude with our recommendations for ways to use self-study as an equitable practice for educators at all levels.

Background

The primary goal of the broader project of which this work is a part was to support new and practicing teachers as they inquire into their own teaching practices so as to address the specific needs the diversity of their classroom community presents. The term “diversity” is often understood through the visible aspects of difference like race, ethnicity, or language. As teachers, however, we know that our classrooms can be diverse in many other ways, and each year what counts as “diverse” can be vastly different from the previous year. Cultural competency, or culturally responsive teaching, has been defined as “using the cultural knowledge, experiences, frames of references, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them” (Gay, 2013). But it can also be understood as the subtly nuanced ways in which teachers *lean-in* to their students, supporting their learning and development as best they can. This can look different from classroom to classroom because each teacher has their own subtle ways of inquiring, accommodating, or responding to the needs of their students.

For educators, developing our own cultural responsiveness involves addressing our attitudes, developing a culturally diverse knowledge base, honing our skills and practices for teaching diverse student populations, and our own teacher self-efficacy beliefs, or the confidence we have in our own abilities to teach diverse students (Siwatu, 2007). There are many things we can do as teachers to build our cultural competencies, however, in geographically isolated regions like our own, it can be a challenge to find ways to branch out beyond our comfort level. If we were located in an urban area, where the larger population affords us opportunities to collaborate with a wider range of communities, our professional development could be as diverse as our classrooms. As a more diverse

population of people grows in rural communities like ours, the resources and local community can be slow to respond. For example, as the English Language Learner population has grown in one local school district, resources, including money for programs as well as teachers with expertise in ELL education, are pooled together, thus creating an ELL cohort in one public school. When we send student teachers out to work in the schools, if they are not placed in this particular school, they likely will not have an ELL student in their classroom. This is a real concern in rural areas, and thankfully the research has shown there are important ways we can build cultural competency for teaching in spite of these challenges. The first way educators often think of to build cultural competencies is to travel more, or recruit a more diverse teacher candidate workforce. Although having a diverse personal history, or working in diverse communities has been shown to lead to improvements in cultural competencies for teaching, the truth is that these factors have been found to be *less* instrumental in teacher candidates' development of cultural competencies than other factors, like instructional approaches and interpersonal support (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). The quality of professional development, interactions with diverse families, critical reflection, and dialogue have been found to be instrumental in effecting changes in cultural competencies for teaching (Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2008). We are encouraged by the news that we can respond to this challenge the best way we know how: by becoming better informed, responsive professionals and teacher educators.

Methods

Developing pedagogical “cases”

In our courses in teacher education, we often use case-study pedagogy as a method for bringing in issues and opportunities of diversity. In the past, we have written hypothetical “cases”

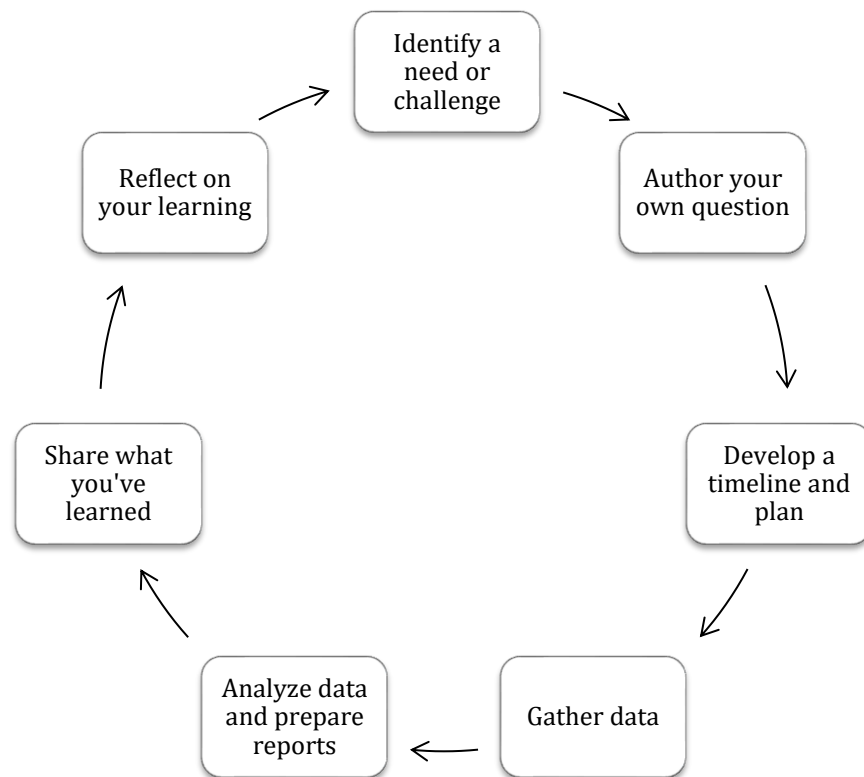
to be read by our teacher candidates, and then led them in discussions of the scenarios we anticipated they might one day face as teachers of diverse students. This case-based pedagogy approach has been found to initiate critical reflective dialogue regarding issues of student equity in schools (Powell, 2000). Although research on the use of case-based approaches is minimal, with most published in the early 2000s, it has been shown to present a way for teacher candidates to imagine student experiences unlike their own. Due to the fact that we are not located in a large, urban area, we believe the case-based instructional approach offers a form of access to some of the opportunities and challenges diversity presents in teaching. However, we recognized that the cases we used as teaching tools could be problematic--they were written from one perspective (our own), on imaginary students, and could unintentionally present biases or stereotypes. To address this problematic nature of case-based pedagogy, we formed a partnership with local school teachers to work together to develop better cases more grounded in the local realities of diversity here in our region of North Dakota. During the professional development, each teacher-participant engaged in a reflective self-study inquiry project into a question they had about their own teaching practices with a student whom they identified as “diverse,” with respect to the majority of students in their classrooms.

The self-study process

After reading selected chapters from a text titled, *Self-Study Teacher Research: Improving Your Practice Through Collaborative Inquiry*, by Samaras (2011) we led the teacher-participants in an informational professional development session where we shared both statistical and anecdotal information regarding the changes our local community has experienced in terms of cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic diversity in the past 10 years. This led to critical dialogue around what “counts” as “diversity” and other sometimes problematic terminology we use as educators when talking about the challenges demographic changes have presented in schools. We then presented a modified model of the Samaras (2011) self-study process (see figure 1) as a framework for how we

planned to proceed with the remaining professional development. We explained that the final “report” for this project would be a written document detailing their inquiry complete with student background information, a variety of student and classroom data, a brief summary of what was learned, and identification of further questions or next steps. We also shared with them our hope, with their permission, to use these final reports as pedagogical cases in our teacher education courses.

Figure 1. *Self-study process, adapted from Samaras (2011)*



Once we were all comfortable with the aims of the professional development, we then led teacher participants in a writing workshop to develop a researchable question they could address using their own knowledge, skills, and resources. We emphasized how to bring the self-study inquiry beyond mere reflection on past and current experiences, to instead problematize teaching practices, and seek out “critical friends” who could offer

divergent perspectives. Thus, the self-study approach, "...envisions teacher educators, preservice teachers, and inservice teachers learning together as they examine and explore dilemmas of teaching, inquire into questions of practice, and develop and refine their beliefs about teaching and learning" (Samaras & Freese, 2006, p. 29).

The remaining two professional development sessions were structured similarly: we presented content on a variety of topics within the realm of cultural competencies for teaching, and then hosted a writing workshop where participants shared progress on their self-study, and met together in critical-friends groups to problem-solve any barriers to their progress. The following two cases offer examples of the kinds of self-study projects teachers created through this professional development experience.

Results

The teachers selected a range of student issues and needs for their self-study. Some of the teachers' questions fit more into what might traditionally be considered an issue of diversity, whereas others did not. However, the benefit of this range is that it works to expand our understanding of diversity to be grounded in the real issues and students that our local practicing teachers are dealing with. Here we briefly summarize two of the cases created by our teacher participants. In order to highlight the range of experiences of our participants, the first case represents an elementary-level teacher's inquiry into a 4th grade student's mental health and nontraditional family structure, while the second case represents a high-school math teacher's inquiry into an English Language Learner (ELL) student's recent transition to the United States.

Case one: Mrs. Miller

Mrs. Miller is an experienced fourth grade teacher. After our first session, Mrs. Miller selected her student, Kevin (pseudonym), because she was concerned about his recent

behaviors in class that exhibited signs of high anxiety and stress. She wondered if there might have been factors in his home-life contributing to these behaviors, and wanted to learn more about what she could do in support of Kevin's success.

Student information. Kevin had attended the same elementary school since kindergarten and every year prior to fourth grade, has had a behavior plan. However, Mrs. Miller was hesitant to put Kevin on a behavior plan this year because, in her years of experience, she had seen both positive and negative effects of behavior plans. She wanted to see how Kevin would do in her class without one. Kevin's previous behavior plans focused on self-initiative, specifically getting started on his schoolwork in a timely-matter, building independence, and controlling his body and voice while in class.

Teacher efforts. Once she began her self-study, Mrs. Miller uncovered some important additional information regarding Kevin's behavior. Kevin's parents are divorced; his mother is remarried, and Kevin is close to his stepfather. Kevin alternates homes weekly, moving between living with his mom and stepfather, and with his dad. During her self-study, Mrs. Miller began to notice variation in Kevin's behaviors and class preparation from week to week depending on where he was staying. Through reflective journaling, and analysis of weekly progress reports completed by herself and the music and physical education teachers, Mrs. Miller was able to confirm this pattern. She decided to inquire further by speaking with Kevin's mother about it, where she also learned that Kevin's stepfather, who was in the Air Force, would soon be deploying for six months, causing a lot of anxiety for Kevin at home as well.

Teacher conclusions. At the conclusion of the self-study, Mrs. Miller held a meeting with Kevin’s mother and biological father. In her description of this meeting, Mrs. Miller reflected on the difficulty of conducting a civil meeting between a divorced couple. She wrote:

As the meeting progressed, mom did most of the talking and when the time felt right, I asked dad what his thoughts were after both mine and mom’s comments. His demeanor at the meeting changed when he was given the opportunity to share without being interrupted.

She then concluded with a bulleted list of her own “reflections after the meeting” which exhibited continuous inquiry and problem-solving in support of Kevin. Specifically, she mentioned the creation of a behavior plan that outlined expectations clearly, so as to support communication and consistency between the two homes. She also wondered if Kevin’s mom was aware of local support groups available for families with deployed soldiers.

Case two: Ms. Fisher

Ms. Fisher is a high school math teacher who teaches an Introduction to Algebra class for English Learners (ELs), some of whom are New American immigrants and refugees. Ms. Fisher registered for the professional development because she was facing challenges with regards to teaching this class, specifically because as a whole, there are approximately eleven languages spoken by the students in the class. She identified her student, Carl (pseudonym), for her self-study, as she had already done a lot of work on her

own to try to respond to some of the particular challenges he presented as the only Spanish speaking member of the class.

Student information. Carl is a 15-year-old freshman who was born in the United States, but lived most of his life in Mexico. Having only recently moved back to the United States, Carl was struggling with the transition in terms of making peer connections in class, communicating in the English language, and not responding verbally to Ms. Fisher's questions or directions. Ms. Fisher reported that Carl did not seem to interact with anyone else in her class. One of her concerns was that as the only Spanish-speaking student in the math class, Carl felt isolated. Some of her additional questions for her self-study included: "Is Carl happy at school?" "Is Carl transitioning well into school being taught in English?" "Is Carl learning what he needs to be in class?" "Does Carl understand what I am explaining in class?"

Teacher efforts. Ms. Fisher reported on six action steps she took during her self-study to inquire further into Carl's engagement in her class. She rearranged her class into peer-groups so Carl was always connected to others. She allowed Carl to go get breakfast after she called attendance, and bring it to class so as not to be tardy. She reviewed his educational plans and English literacy assessment data more closely. She arranged a meeting with Carl, his family, and two ELL teachers from the school. During this meeting she learned that Carl was socially isolating himself throughout the school day, not just in her math class. Together, the team developed a list of additional efforts they could all agree to in order to help Carl succeed, which included two additional actions for Ms. Fisher; asking him how he is doing and waiting for a verbal response, and bringing in a paraprofessional to work specifically with his group each day. She also gathered additional

information on Carl to help her gain a more complete picture of him. Some of the data she included in her case study: his scores on an English language proficiency screening test, some assignments completed by Carl, a student questionnaire that included information about his interests and his family, and a poem that Carl wrote about soccer.

Teacher conclusions. Ms. Fisher felt the self-study process led her to gain a deeper understanding into Carl's experiences, and believes that with consistency and patience, Carl will begin to feel more connected in school. She plans to continue to collaborate with his ELL teacher, incorporate his love of soccer into her communications with him, keep in touch with his parents, meet with Carl's other teachers to see if they are finding any other successes, and work on getting Carl access to a Spanish-speaking translator for part of the school day.

Discussion

These two cases represent the range of questions and issues the teacher participants shared during our professional development, demonstrating to us that issues of "diversity" in our local classrooms are indeed, diverse. Through engaged and thoughtful work, classroom teachers reached beyond simplistic answers or quick-fix solutions when they inquired into the lives of their students, and their own teaching practices. Both of these cases have pedagogical potential for our preservice teachers. Kevin's case will be an interesting one for us to share with our pre-service teachers as even though our students are familiar with varying family structures, we don't believe that our teacher preparation program does a great job of preparing our students to handle and manage family relations. Mrs. Miller's deeper exploration of Kevin and the root causes of his behavior provides a great example of the importance of looking beyond the behavior to the antecedents, an

important empathy-building skill. Carl's case is a great example of the power of self-study and what teachers and other professionals can learn when their own concerns about students guide their inquiry. Ms. Fisher's effort to see Carl as a complete person, rather than just another ELL student in her math class, helped to inform her professional practice.

The self-study process emphasizes the role of critical-friends in accessing alternative viewpoints, additional information, or specialized resources (Samaras, 2011). In our professional development sessions, we brainstormed different sources of information about students and where within the school, school district, and community this information could be found. Many of our participants were either not aware of some of the personnel or resources available to them, nor had they considered how to access these resources during the constraints of the school-day. In our final session, the teachers presented their work with the group, and many of them shared how the self-study process contributed to their own sense of confidence that their efforts would make a positive impact on their focal student, and on their ability to successfully support students with similar issues more efficiently in the future. In addition, they felt better informed about where to go within their school, the school district and the greater community for additional information about future students.

Although we felt like our brief professional development went well and that it was well received by the participants, we wonder about the longevity of the lessons learned for our participants. As this professional development was not connected to a graduate degree program, or the school and district-based goals or initiatives, we wonder how much of a lasting impact this work may have had. Our three sessions were packed with a lot of information as well as important processing time for teacher participants, we would have

liked to have had more sessions, but any more sessions would have become too big of a commitment for a 1-credit professional development. As we continue to support teachers in building cultural competencies that include an inquiry framework, we wonder how we can continue to partner with schools to align our efforts, so that we are not operating in the side-lines.

Conclusion

As educators, increasing our cultural competencies so we can reach more of our students, and in more authentic ways, is an important goal for all of us. In regions like ours, with less visibly recognizable diversity, developing these cultural competencies can sometimes feel daunting. However, it is important for us to remember the many ways diversity can present itself in the classroom. One year diversity might present itself in a large population of ELL students, while another year it could be that one of our students is dealing with a new family structure due to divorce, military deployment, or medical illness. These less visible aspects of students' lives are only understood through professional inquiry, and only accepted as part of the "normal" makeup of our classroom through building empathy. The creation, and subsequent use of, individual student cases like the two presented here can also work to facilitate important dialogue with our colleagues and teacher candidates around the realities of classroom diversity in our region. The self-study process can support new and practicing teachers alike in their efforts to inquire into student concerns, uncover hidden solutions or additional resources available to them, and build their capacities as culturally competent teachers.

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