

Teacher Research as a Means to Create Teachers' Communities in Inservice Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers' professional development programs should fulfill three key requirements: updating, innovation and research. Therefore, universities should make plans to respond to those parameters. In addition, a common concern among teachers and educational authorities nowadays is the development of students' competencies. In view of this, classroom teachers and universities have stressed the need of thinking about teachers' competencies and ways to facilitate or bring about teacher change and better teaching performances. In this article, I will refer to teachers' communities or teacher study groups as a way to foster teacher development and teacher research.

In learning how teachers endeavor in study groups we can connect what is done in inservice¹ programs with classroom research projects proposed by themselves. In working with other teachers we may

¹ An inservice program is understood as a systematic and sustained work over a lengthy period of time in which school teachers are engaged, following their initial professional certification. That work intends primarily to improve teachers' professional knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to make the teaching job more effective and to get some sort of merit.

discover that we have similar queries, but we go about handling them in different ways. It is hoped that as a result of teachers' dialogue, school-based communities of teachers will emerge with the purpose of strengthening their professional skills and exploring innovations in their classrooms.

Teacher Research

Experiences in guiding teachers to do action research and to share findings in different forums have shown the value of incorporating research into inservice programs. As emphasized by Beach (1994), rather than simply making casual reflections on teaching and learning, teachers employ a systematic set of research procedures for studying their own or others' teaching or their students' learning processes. We depart from the assumption that teachers are more likely to adopt the role of researchers if they collaborate with colleagues. Based on the input provided in inservice programs in the area of qualitative research, I can assert that teachers can collaboratively plan projects with peers and university faculty.

We can now acknowledge the value of teacher research for both the school-based

teaching community and the university-based research community. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) claim that the “unique feature of the questions that prompt teacher research is that they emanate solely neither from theory nor from practice, but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two” (p. 6). Wells (1994) notes that teachers may “improve their practice and increase their understanding of its theoretical underpinnings” (p. 25). As can be seen, the practitioners’ personal theory is given due value in teacher research.

Wells also stresses that teachers have come to value research that both grows out of, and has as its purpose to inform their own classroom practice. Teachers also give significance to research that is rooted in the specific contexts, which are relevant to their concerns. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, they are coming to see that, far from being an activity, which is only carried out *on* teachers and students by others, research can be an activity that they themselves perform as an integral part of the work of teaching.

The gains for the teacher community when teachers integrate research in their teaching job are diverse. Teachers become more active and work cooperatively with colleagues and students. They also look for connections between theories and practice and become more accurate and analytical observers.

Teacher research is probably best understood through joining a community of practice and working with others who have acquired some expertise. At present,

however, such communities are relatively rare in our context and those of us who have embarked on this form of professional development need to know much more about the territory to be explored and of the tools and procedures that will be of most use to us.

Following Wells’ (1994) views, it is necessary that we continue questioning the educational emphasis on competitive individual achievement and move towards the creation of academic communities that enable teachers to continuously reflect upon their teaching job. The ideal situation is where a whole school staff, or a majority of its members, plan together and undertake inquiries in relation to an agreed theme.

Teachers’ Communities

Clift (1994) notes that communities may be defined by proximity, by commitment to a particular set of goals, or by work role. To belong to a community one may or may not be located near other members, nor do members even need to know each other. Proximity and acquaintance are less important than a shared worldview.

As noted by Clift, within and across communities there are similar and dissimilar values, norms, goals, and rituals. When we begin to interact with community members, similarities and differences emerge. Since we have tended to focus more on the individual construction of knowledge than on the social dimension, we have to begin to learn more about the communities involved in teaching and

learning to teach English.

Following Clift's analysis, if categories of knowledge for teaching English are formed, reformed, constructed, reconstructed, and rearranged as teachers interact with others in and out of their classrooms, what contexts facilitate knowledge construction within the field of English? How can we examine and evaluate the social, psychological, political, and personal forces that foster change or serve to maintain the status quo? Which of these inquiries are best conducted by participants? Are inquiries conducted by those external to the situation? How does membership in the community affect the questions one asks and the evidence one counts as valid? Is a new discourse community likely to emerge if participants from diverse discourses work together? We must begin to think across systems and across discourses as we raise the same questions over and over, in order to search for the creation and evolution of teachers' communities.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) make the point that "if teachers are to carry out the systematic and self-critical inquiry that teacher research entails, networks will need to be established and forums created by teachers so that ongoing collaboration is possible. These networks begin to function as intellectual communities for teachers who, more typically, are isolated from one another" (p. 9). The alternative I foresee is the maintenance of the inservice community—mostly gathered at the university—as the larger forum where common concerns are raised by outsiders

(university experts) and examined by both teacher educators and classroom teachers. Additionally, smaller communities or teacher study groups can emerge with the intention of inquiring teaching practices.

Genuine school-based communities of inquiry involving the English teachers of several schools can be organized as the inservice program is in progress. It is hoped that as a result of the creation and evolution of study groups, teachers continue beyond the end of the external support provided by the university. If that is possible, we will also have to think of follow-up strategies to maintain communication and relationships between the university and the schools.

A reimagined model of teacher development to foster teachers' communities

The creation of teachers' communities as part of inservice programs demands careful revision of the model that leads its practices. When referring to the need of a reimagined model of teacher development, I propose a careful revision of inservice arrangements and place the inservice community at the center of the model and as the generator of teacher study groups. As shown in the following diagram, inservice practices have to be redefined to create a teachers' community that gets together to attend lectures and workshops, and to reflect upon common concerns. Parallel to university meetings, teachers would meet with other colleagues to work collaboratively in doing action research. This would imply the creation of teacher

study groups. This process can be sustained by other colleagues and by university staff who would act as facilitators rather than providers of knowledge. In doing so, the relationships between teacher educators

and classroom teachers would be changed. Roles and strategies would be revised and reflection would be the cornerstone to enhance dialogic inquiry.

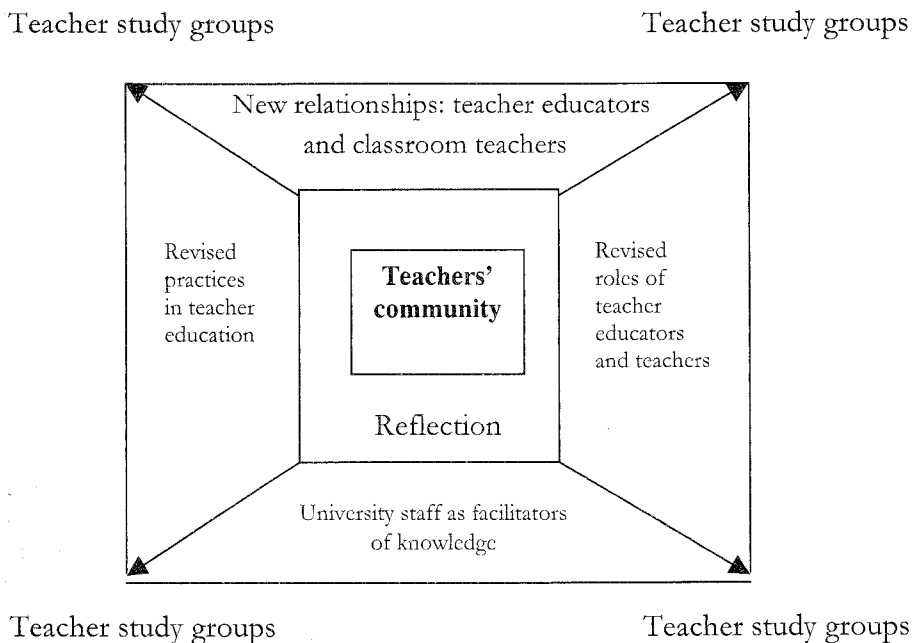


Figure 1. Overview of a reimagined model of teacher development

This reexamination of the inservice model would entail the consideration of three issues highlighted by Marshall (1994) and which I would call conditions: How are schools and universities going to confront fundamental questions of knowledge, power, and resources if new connections are to be made? In connection with this issue, Marshall asks: What new strategies and new assumptions are required on the part of universities? What time and resources do teachers have? In the second issue he asks: In what ways will teacher-generated knowledge about their teaching be different from university-generated knowledge about teaching? The third issue,

and the most troubling, is this: In what ways will providing opportunities for teachers to reflect on their work make that work more meaningful and effective?

The last condition presented by Marshall makes us think about follow up and the sustainability of inservice gains. When teachers are engaged in the programs, they feel energized and renewed. But when they go back to their schools, the structure of the school may not allow them to continue their work. This implies that in the process of generating teachers' communities we would have to examine the conditions that enhance change sustainability.

Teacher Study Groups

For Birchak et al. (1998), a study group is “a voluntary group of people who come together to talk and create theoretical and practical understandings with each other. This talk integrates theory and practice, sharing and dialogue in powerful ways.” (p. 28). A study group creates a sense of community among teachers. It supports professional development and focuses on transforming teaching through dialogue and reflection. These features make me understand study groups as centers of interest that emerge from the academic community set up by inservice programs.

My assumption is that three types of study groups identified by Birchak et al. can come out from inservice programs interested in fostering teacher research: school-based groups, topic-centered groups, and teacher research groups. School-based groups are composed of educators within a particular school; topic-centered groups gather educators from different schools who are interested in the same issue; and teacher research groups are made up of educators who discuss their systematic, intentional classroom inquiries.

Adopting the role of external facilitators, teacher educators will suggest some strategies for study group structure, organization and members' roles. Nonetheless, structures will remain flexible and open-ended.

As study groups meet without direct intervention of teacher educators, teachers have to look for alternatives to facilitate their work. Birchak et al. (1998) draw our

attention towards the complexity of study groups: “Study groups are complicated by their nature —people of varied experiences coming together to learn from each other in an environment where there is no agreed-upon “expert” to provide definite answers. A further complication is that educators are often unaccustomed to learning from others who are at similar points in professional growth. In this context, the need for a facilitator becomes apparent” (p. 54).

Conclusion

The formation of study groups has great potential in school sceneries not only as a support system for teachers who are inquiring, but also as an option for staff development. Based on a constructivist model of learning, study groups offer teachers the opportunity to talk and think together. This arrangement also presents teachers the chance to look at their own beliefs, which guide their practice and lead to new explorations.

As study groups evolve, we will examine the features that characterize their creation and growth. Attention will also have to be given to teachers' perceptions and beliefs as well as to the effect study groups have on school practices and teacher change. Additionally, if school-based centers of inquiry in which teachers conduct research as part of their professional activities are our ultimate goal, we will have to look beyond the university classroom or the forming network generated by the inservice program. We will have to look at the institutional context in which the teacher works.

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