

Descriptive Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to integrate the lessons which I have learned, the knowledge which I have gained, and the perspectives which I have developed through my Tuesday evening EDUC 805 classes, from the assigned readings, from my own readings and from my personal perspectives and experiences.

Each week, the class enjoyed guest speakers who discussed their experiences, insights and research in a variety of fields of education. Topics included: science education; instructional technologies; international education; publishing and presenting; special education; and, education policy, to name a few. One evening, five doctoral students, in varying stages of their programs, discussed their areas of interest, their progress, and their experiences. All speakers enthusiastically answered numerous questions from the class.

There were also two group projects in this class. The first was a reflective writing on the idea of Communities of Practice. I was teamed with four other students and served as the recorder for our group. This was our first experience with a cooperative submission assignment in the class. In the second project, the same teams worked together on the building blocks for the final synthesis papers. Specifically, we discussed the weekly lecturers who had had the most influence on each of us; and, we reflected on why this was so.

My own experience is varied. I am a retired Naval officer with my bachelor's degree in mathematics and my master's degree in computer technology. I served my country for over 20 years as an oceanographer and computer specialist. I have been to all 50 states and have lived in twelve different states, including Alaska and Hawaii. I have traveled to over 50 countries and I have lived in Germany, Wales and Canada. While on active duty, I had extra employment as a math instructor for several universities, including the University of Maryland in Germany and the University of Alaska. It was in those evening and weekend classrooms that I discovered my love of education. Since retiring from the military, I have been employed as a high school math teacher at an independent school in Virginia. I also teach undergraduate online math classes. I have been interested in mathematics education for some time and hope to make some valuable contributions to this field.

Analysis, Application, Interpretation

At the beginning of the course, I was still reeling with excitement that I had gained admission to the doctoral program at GMU. I had no idea what to expect from the speakers. However, I quickly learned that the enthusiasm and sincerity which was displayed that first evening was not an isolated phenomenon. It has been repeated, in individualized ways, every week since. This was my first exposure to the idea of a Community of Practice (CoP) in the field of education. Although I thought I understood what this terminology implied, I really did not know the full thrust of it until I had had the opportunity to reflect over several weeks of exposure to the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) faculty. Each evening, the class encountered a new speaker, a new topic, and a new perspective. However, this was not a chaotic jumble of a variety of speakers. The class instructor kept the idea of emerging scholars alive in her weekly discussion. She also discussed how each of the speakers was related to something which we already knew or to which we had already been exposed. This tactic made me feel more connected to each presenter, even if their topic was not of great interest to me.

But, this tying together was not just a method to introduce each speaker; it was an overarching principle of the CoP, as I would recognize a little later.

The enthusiasm, the welcoming spirit and the sense of inclusion was there week after week without fail. Each lecturer expressed their involvement in the education CoP in her/his own way. But, the message is clear that the door is open to me, too.

My group members and I concluded that the lectures offered practical suggestions to us for methods of research, collaboration and publication. As was noted in our second group submission, several of us chose the same individuals as a focus for our synthesis paper, but we varied on what we pinpointed as the most influential aspect of their presentations. We all agreed, however, that the energy of the first evening set the bar incredibly high. Both Dr. Peters and Dr. Regan gave us useful, practical suggestions for conducting research. This was useful even though, I, like most of my classmates, have no idea what my dissertation topic will be. Research seemed like such an enigmatic term, conjuring up a mental picture of a laboratory with smoking and bubbling vials of chemicals accompanied by the obligatory thunder and lightning. After Dr. Peters and Dr. Regan explained their research in detail, I think the entire class breathed a sigh of relief that this was something we could do and it was not so enigmatic after all.

Only after several weeks did I begin to tie things together and realize that, although the fields of education may seem disparate, in reality, they are all interconnected. They comprise the CoP. It was the lectures by Dr. Earley and Dr. Anderson which showed me how diverse areas in CoP can be importantly linked together, that the entire CoP is woven together through a web of inter-relationships. Policy is based on knowledge and processes in a community; in turn, policy directs everything. It is a circular relationship in which improvement is assured as inputs are refined and knowledge expands.

By far, the speaker who had the most impact on me was Dr. Ndura. She was incredibly inspiring and tenacious. Her journey through oppressive gender and cultural barriers, the murder of her husband, and physical hardships of her life are more than most people could bear, I think. Yet, she refused to be held back and she refused to be silenced and she refused to be relegated to a role in which her considerable talents would be wasted. I am very interested in multicultural education and I have much to learn. I read Dr. Ndura's articles before class and thought I had a good understanding of her points. However, after her spellbinding talk, I was driven to read them again, and, much to my surprise, I learned much more from them. As I wrote in my reflection that week, I could hear her voice saying the words I was reading. I could see her hand gestures and facial expressions. The words now had a personal quality, an increase in value to me. I now see that her compelling personal story is interwoven into her articles. Before I had that knowledge, of course, it was something which I could not discern. There was an undeniable and palpable intensity, but its source was unknown when I first read them.

Dr. Ndura's explanations of Burundi culture were the gateway to appreciating her viewpoints. We cannot fully understand human action unless we consider both the meaning making of the people who are involved in it as well as knowing its situatedness (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). Some statements in Dr. Ndura articles may lead some readers to become defensive or argumentative. However, once I had a rudimentary understanding of her culture and her views about Western culture, it was easier to understand her views.

Once I had awareness of that, her other points about the importance of a teacher understanding a student's culture in order to build connections between students and teachers instead of having them coexist in educationally parallel universes became clear. Multicultural education is designed to encourage acceptance of diversity in others while advocating the maximization of each individual's potential; unity and diversity are complementary not exclusionary (Gay, 1994). One can fully appreciate, understand and respect another person's culture without forsaking one's own. And, exaggerating the extent of cultural differences among ethnic groups might be as detrimental for school policy as ignoring those which are real; most people participate in a wider and more universal culture than the one in which they have their primary group attachments (Banks, 2006). Dr. Ndura echoed these views by stressing that conflicts in the classroom can be resolved through communication and cultural understanding.

As is the case with many women, I have qualms about my ability to make meaningful contributions to the education CoP. Many women, even those from privileged backgrounds and who attended prestigious colleges, still feel uncertain about their abilities (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1997). When I verbalize my accomplishments and then express self-doubt, it does seem somewhat incongruent, even to me. However, achievement does not guarantee self-esteem (Belenky et al., 1997).

Dr. Baily's research in India showed that education is built on the knowledge which is gained from exploration of diverse cultures. This exposure can create an understanding and a degree of freedom which will allow individuals to maintain one or more cultures and at the same time help them become contributing members of their respective countries and the world at large (Baker, 1983).

As I would imagine most doctoral students felt at the beginning of the semester, I wanted to get practical information on how to proceed in doing research. Several lecturers gave extremely valuable information on research. I wanted to know how to get published. So, Dr. Sprague was a revelation.

She was straightforward and to the point. She gave me a step-by-step algorithm for publishing scholarly work. I sat up and took notice. She was not talking about ethereal things which could happen, or a thought process, or feelings. She was telling me the way to get an article published. Do this, then do this, and then do this. Although she never once mentioned mathematics, I felt that I was being encouraged to contribute to the published wing, so to speak, of the education CoP.

As the weeks rolled by, I continued to be amazed at the CoP in which I now consider myself to be a member. This leads me to enlightening reflection.

Synthesis, Evaluation, and Reflection

I have come to realize several important things about the education Community of Practice at GMU. They are as follows.

Culture is something which a person develops through participation in the rituals, beliefs, and norms of local communities of practice, and through which a person acquires different subsets of cultural knowledge and related behavior patterns (Erickson, 2002). The Community of Practice has a culture. It is welcoming, diverse, encompassing, dynamic, and all interconnected. This is not the culture at

other universities with which I am familiar. Backbiting, savage competition, and lack of cooperation rule the day at some institutions. I am not interested in stepping on anyone on my way to make a contribution. I think the contributions are far more important than the name attached. Although, I do want my name attached, of course. I am just not willing to turn feral in order to accomplish that.

A CoP must be an active entity, not merely a sharing organization. The lifeblood is the constant searching for and sharing of information. Positive action is also required to make progress. I am still thinking about how I am going to do that and continue to do that. But, I know I am at the right place.

No one ends up in the education CoP by accident of fate. It is a deliberate decision to become an active participant. It is reasonable to believe that everyone in the CoP wants to be in the CoP. In strengthening the community of educational research, the sharing of ideas is essential, of course, as is the sharing of knowledge, contacts and processes. However, sharing is not enough. We all must view ourselves not as by-standers but as active participants. This was Dr. Ndura's closing commentary as she asked us to join her in her quests.

I can always learn something from a field which is not in my area of interest. For example, I do not have the patience for early childhood education or special education. Yet, research in these two fields may well be applicable to older children. One of my main concerns about the level of mathematics ability in my high school and undergraduate students is the elementary skills which should be learned in middle school. So, middle school research can be directly applicable to my area of interest. I have learned not to turn a deaf ear to a topic which may seem to be unrelated or not useful in mine.

I am on a lifelong journey now and I will perpetually be anxious to see what coming next. I expect to be surprised. I hope to be surprising.

There were no lecturers this semester who were math education specialists. I hope to rectify that in a few years. Now, I am gaining confidence that I can.

I continue to experience a range of emotions from excitement, happiness, anxiety, anticipation, uncertainty and a very healthy dose of deer-in-the-headlights. I think this is normal. I would be somewhat concerned if I was not confused, anxious and a little unsteady. However, I am not on a solo journey. I am already in a very active mini-CoP with several of my classmates. We read each other's reflections. We send each other email on sources we have found. We share ideas. We meet at the library. We share our hopes and our fears and our class choices. I've already promised to help several of my classmates with quantitative research and they are going to help me with qualitative. These are not just some fleeting associations which we make to get through a semester. We are thinking long term. Perhaps, we can help each other with our dissertation topics. Perhaps, we will share sources. The whole idea is a cooperative environment of learning and contributing. Beyond classmates, I have a great CoP of experts to give me guidance. And, they are ready, willing, able and anxious to help.

Last, but not least, I still have a long list of questions. As some of them are answered, I think of more questions to add to the list. The more I learn, the more I see there is to learn. I think I will always have a growing list of questions. But, I am confident that while I am learning ways to get them answered I am also learning how to answer them myself and learning how to help my colleagues answer their questions, too.

I have come to the realization that over the last several months I have been shown small parts of a large picture. This is analogous to sitting too closely to a television set and all you can see are the little pixels, but not the overall picture. Each speaker has given some hints about the interconnections between the parts of the picture. But, the picture keeps evolving. The interconnections and inter-dependencies are still there. After several weeks, a part of the picture started to come into focus, as if I was backing away from that television set and seeing more than the pixels, seeing a meaningful pattern. I could see that each week, I learned more about the overall CoP and some of the picture pieces which contribute to the whole. I began to view each of the practitioners who gave us their time on Tuesday evenings as very inter-related. This picture of the community of practice is coming into focus for me. I certainly appreciate the discrete little parts, I could appreciate the validity, interest, work and passion of each speaker's research but only recently did I truly start to tie them all together. I saw the inter-connections, of course. But, recently, I really started to see them.

Conclusions

My EDUC 805 class has been a voyage of discovery and self-discovery for me. Although I will not miss getting home at 10:30-11:00 each Tuesday evening, I will miss the class. I have decided to view this as the beginning of a journey, not the end of one small trip. I will have classes with the same classmates and I will undoubtedly have some of our presenters for my instructors. Still, it is time to stop and reflect on the lessons and the personal growth over this first semester as a doctoral student.

I recently read my first reflection for this class and I remembered all the questions I had and all the uncertainty I was feeling about a gamut of things. Some of them caused me to smile because I had worried over nothing. Some of them are still concerns for me. But, as I read through all of my reflections, I could see the progress I was making, even though it was not apparent to me at the time I was writing them. Each week, I was seeing more of the whole picture, seeing the connections between seemingly disparate parts of the CoP, seeing the interweaving of the tapestry of the education CoP. It seems much clearer now. I chide myself with wondering. I did not see this back in January. These days my head is full of thoughts about what I am going to learn in the Summer semester and how I can apply the knowledge which I have garnered here in my future learning.

I have no joy about this class ending because I have learned so much and have made good friends with several of my classmates. I greatly enjoyed the collegial atmosphere and the generosity of the speakers with their time, their information and their advice. But, more importantly for me, I can see how much I have learned and how I can now see much better how all the seemingly disparate parts of a CoP are inextricably entwined, mutually supportive, and mutually dependent. It is so much more than a big group of people with a common interest in education. I am anxious to be more active member and to start contributing.

In truth, this all still has an ethereal glow to it. I still think that I am going to wake up and realize that this has all been a lovely, ambitious dream. I am starting to grasp that this is really happening, that I really am part of this vital and vibrant community and that I have taken the first steps in my life's big, big adventure. And, I have landed at the best place possible for me to pursue my dreams of improving mathematics education. I am part of a CoP which will help me and guide me and the community to which I will contribute. I really am an emerging scholar. What could be better!