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Reflective Paper: Doctoral Seminar in Education

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Introduction

In Fall 2008, EDUC 805 was restructured to change the course from what previous doctoral students called “Professors on Parade.” The course still had the purpose of introducing students to various members of the College of Education and Human Development in an effort to help them develop their programs and start building those relationships that would help sustain them and guide them as they worked on their doctoral program and moved toward whatever goals they had set for themselves. But in addition to that, the professors that worked with the 805 class also wanted to convey a singular thematic idea to us: what it meant to be part of a community of practice. This was an interesting concept, as all of us sitting in that 805 class are part of many different communities of practice. On the first night, we learned that some of us were in the classroom, some of us were working in the government, some of us were in private industry and others (although this was the minority) were full-time students. We all belonged to several different communities of practice as defined by Etienne Wenger but now we were going to be a part of one larger community of practice – that of being doctoral students, albeit we would find our own smaller communities within this larger group. Our large class (nearly 30) cramped in a small room in Enterprise Hall was embarking on a group endeavor, to begin to understand in our individual various stages of development what it meant to be a doctoral student, what commitment we had made, where we were in our thinking, and what the next several years would be like. Some of us will make choices that will be a detriment to our chosen paths, others will struggle with balance, others will flourish but hopefully, all of us will end up with that coveted hood.

The following reflective paper is a synthesis of my thoughts after listening to the various presentations and completing a journal. In addition to my journal, which is being submitted, I

also took notes in class, which, although not submitted for a grade, did spark some of the comment here. In addition to that which I have noted, I will also fill in some of my background which I think may be relevant for your consideration.

My Communities of Practice

In order for you to understand how I thought about this semester, I would like to give you an idea of my various communities of practice or CoPs as I see them. I do realize that I may have more than these but I also know that I am trying to synthesize what I learned over the semester. According to Wenger, a community of practice has an identity defined by a shared area of interest. Membership implies a commitment to that interest and members have to have skill and expertise in that area. I believe that I probably belong to a CoP within my school's English department and in my International Baccalaureate (IB) English team where I serve as the team leader and as a doctoral student. I do think that the CoP that I function in as a doctoral student is a very fluid CoP as there is a large CoP to which all doctoral students such as our class belong and then smaller CoPs where some of us work together on projects and shared tasks, such as in one course. These smaller CoPs come and go over time depending on the need which is also fine by Wenger's definition.

Good Advice for Doctoral Students

One of the things that I liked best about this course was not only that many professors in the College of Education and Human Development were willing to give of their time and expertise but they were willing to provide the students in our class with good, solid advice. For someone like me who is a little further ahead than some of the other students, it was a chance for me to reflect on what I am doing and consider if I can be doing anything better or differently.

Dr. Isenberg's presentation was the first presentation to provide food for thought. Her points: know yourself, think about how you can get the most out of this program, learn what your passion is and figure out how disciplined it can be forced me to think about my major – international education, and actually got me to finish up the design of my program, consult with two professors to be the possible third person for my committee, and start taking steps about pursuing an internship in England for this summer. I decided that the little tedious matters going on in daily life and at my job required less of my energy than this program, which I am much more passionate about in the long run.

Another person that forced me to reflect on my actions and behavior in order to help my progress in this program was Dr. Earley. She started off her presentation with a question that just sent my head spinning, saying to our class, "If you are in a CoP but aren't growing as a learner, how do you become aware of that?" I think my personal issue has not been being aware. It's been doing something about it or disengaging from what makes me feel wretched earlier than I usually do. I don't think I always have known when it is the best time for me to cut my ties with either a CoP or an organization and then it causes me undue stress or adds more burden to an already crowded calendar. I have also had to deal with some rather toxic people in my life and cutting ties with them has been hard. Also, in my present job environment, I do try to be available to help lots of people; in my department at my school I am the most senior person available and not only have I been there the longest, but I also have the most teaching experience.

But the question still remains: how do I courteously disengage from a CoP when I first become disenchanted instead of hanging on until I am really miserable? What does this have to do with my development of my sense of self? Does this connect to my idea of professional

responsibility? I see so many of the younger teachers around me without a sense of what it means to be professionally responsible and it grates on my nerves. There's a lack of concern for completion of a task, they get too close to students, there's a blurring of the boundary lines. But I'm not sure what to do about it. That's probably why I stay engaged, holding on even though I'm irritated and disenchanted. Maybe I'm still hopeful that the younger, more inexperienced teachers will have a breakthrough on their own and I will just be around to witness it.

This question will probably be one that will probably plague me for a while in my doctoral program. I may also have an idea that there is still the potential for me to learn *something*, for me to provide guidance, mentor, whatever. I do have a nurturing aspect to my personality. But then again, if I didn't, I probably wouldn't have been a teacher in the first place.

An additional issue that I have been forced to consider because of the presentations this semester is the idea of balance. This is a concept that I have often struggled with and it was Dr. Van Rooij that made me consider this topic. She asked the class during her presentation if it was possible to belong to too many CoPs or does the number not matter as long as each is professionally relevant and rewarding. In my mind, I thought the answer to this question had to do with balance. Dr. Van Rooij stated that research should be relevant and should inform practice and was speaking about her experience working on her doctorate and working with open source technology. CoPs need to be fluid and flexible and can end when they no longer function in the way I need them to. This is good. This semester, I am teaching four advanced IB English courses and one remediation course for FCPS, taking three doctoral program courses, work as a student reviewer on IJEPL, serve as a faculty advisor for People to People International at my school, and am the IB English team leader. I also have a relatively new marriage and a new house. I love being a doctoral student. Something about it stimulates me in ways I can't

describe; the only other thing that gave me the same stimulation was when I was occasionally going to a literary conference for a society I have worked with. But balance is something that is always difficult. I have a need to do everything well and have a hard time refusing a task. Relaxation is not my strong suit. The idea that CoPs can end when they no longer function as I need them to is something that I need to remember. It's funny sometimes; as an IB teacher, I live and die by something called the IB Learner Profile, a list of 10 traits that all IB faculty would like our students to strive for. One of the traits is *Balanced* and yet, this is the trait that I have the most trouble with myself. I'm hoping that over the next four years, throughout my doctoral studies, that I get better with this, but I think it may always be a struggle for me. I am attracted to so many things and like to have so many things on my plate at once. I get bored easily and need my mind to have many things to occupy it. I can't remember when I have not been like this; I like being crazy busy. But then again, there may be a fine line between being busy and being balanced. I may need to discover for myself what that exactly is. Or if I know, I do not yet have the ability to define it yet.

In addition to the professors, four doctoral students gave our class advice at near the end of the semester. It is always nice to hear from someone who is closer to where you are, not that the professor are not helpful; it's just that they may be further away from the actual level of where you are. The doctoral students answered questions about coming to the research question and really tried to drill into our heads the idea of saying "no" and getting the proposal and then dissertation completed because ultimately, it is important to finish the doctorate and move on the next stage in your life whatever that will be. A couple of the doctoral students also taught classes, a phase of life that I may be moving into and I will have to be very careful as I start

teaching on the college level, balance teaching on the secondary level, continue taking doctoral coursework and make time for friends and family.

One of the best pieces of advice that the doctoral students did give our class, however, was to read everything. I am definitely a big proponent of this. It is no fun to be ill-prepared for class and it is hard to have a good discussion when your classmates have not completed the reading. In my own English classroom, I hate when someone has not done their work and like it or not, it lowers my opinion of them that they do not consider my class important enough to take the time to do my work. The advice that the students gave about reading everything seemed to gel with what I am already learning; in one of my other doctoral classes it seems as if every time I read something for one assignment it leads me to something else that I must read or file or print out for later use or file for possible research for my dissertation or save to a stick. I guess you get it. I'm constantly reading something. My personal Amazon.com list is also being invaded by doctoral program books; some of my family has commented that qualitative interviewing technique books should not be pleasure reading. Rest assured, I have some other lighter fare on my Amazon list too.

The Presentations

I was admitted to the doctoral program for Spring 2008. Because of the plan to redesign EDUC 805, our admitted cohort did not take EDUC 805 our first semester and instead was held over until this fall. Because of this, many of us, including myself, are much further along in our program development than some of our classmates who are now only taking EDUC 800. In addition, I am also a little more advanced credit-wise because I had taken courses in the Certificate for Advanced IB Studies Program prior to being admitted that I am now using for my doctoral program. So, as I enrolled in EDUC 805, I was originally a little leery because I already

had developed most of my program and only had to get one more person to agree to be on my committee. When the CoP connection was unveiled, I looked at it as an opportunity for me to open up new questions that may relate to me and not only a series of presentations not related to my primary (international education) or secondary (teacher preparation) concentration.

For each presentation, I tried to think of questions that might be applicable to what I currently do or what I might want to do. This was easy with most of the presentations and I wrote accordingly. For some, the CoP idea got muddled but when it did, as in the case of the policy from research evening, there was an international angle for me to follow as in the case of the U.S. lagging in math and science and the issues surrounding that. The Timms study and how some nations have full-time math teachers in elementary classrooms while we do not have full-time math instruction until secondary school is interesting to me as our government and country try to compete on a global stage. Although many presentations were discipline specific, such as elementary education or mathematics, I tried less to focus on these aspects as I have my program of study finalized and tried to see what I could get out of the individual presentations in a broader sense. The reflective paragraphs below are a synthesis of those ideas.

Since I mentioned that I was interested in the Timms study, I'll start with the presentation concerning mathematics. When the presentation actually occurred, it was difficult for me, as I was one of those students who struggled with math in high school and often tell my students that I teach English for a reason. I am thankful for computer grade book programs and am one of those people who never use algebra in my daily life. Looking back now on the presentation, I can see the broader issues that Dr. Suh raised, the need for mathematics education to change in response to the demands of the world and those countries that are ahead of the United States in

the teaching of math and science. This touched upon my interest in international education and was not simply a math issue.

The fact that Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan outscored the United States in math and science leads me to ask what we are doing wrong and what is so different abroad. I am aware that how math is taught has changed dramatically over the years; just from listening to my own senior students I know that some things I learned are not taught anymore and other things are taught differently.

Another thing that struck me as interesting about the presentation was Dr. Suh's discussion about the state of math education and math educators. She said that many students have trouble with rational numbers and it is not algebra that gives students difficulty. I find this incredible, especially since I grew up in a tradition of math education that drilled and drilled rational numbers, fractions, and decimals until all students had them down solid. It was algebra that gave me the most trouble. I also remember Dr. Suh in a later presentation, about the National Math Panel, discussing the idea of persistence. She explained that students in other nations can execute this concept better than students in the United States. From my own experience teaching remediation, I know this to be true. Time after time, year after year, this is the biggest hurdle for my students who are struggling to pass the Virginia Standards of Learning English examinations. The students without limited English proficiency issues simply will not read the length of the passages on the test and thus will not take the time to read through and complete the many main idea and supporting detail questions with accuracy enough to achieve a passing score on the assessments. Some of my students will take the tests three, four, even five times before they achieve a passing score and then graduate with a high school diploma. This pushes the state SOL testing window to the very limit, putting stress on the students, teachers,

and parents who are all on pins and needles wondering if a passing score will be achieved and that student will receive the coveted diploma. This persistence issue is something that is very hard to get through to American students who are used to immediate gratification, live in the “me” generation, and think that the requirements of No Child Left Behind constitute Richmond’s personal assault on their civil rights.

Since I am on the topic of standardized testing, another presentation brought up an interesting idea that I’d like to mull over for a bit. In the presentation concerning policy from research, Dr. Burns said that at least 20 percent of students in the United States are not being taught to read effectively, due to a variety of causes including limited English proficiency, learning disabilities, educational opportunity, home language issues, and other problems. The definition of what exactly is the meaning of being able to read was also brought up. Is it being able to decode a word? To describe meaning? To comprehend a text with fluency? In my case, is effective reading the ability to pass the Virginia SOL examination? Is it the ability to carry on a productive life after high school? Does that constitute reading?

This presentation made me consider the idea of assessment of reading, particularly the Virginia reading SOL and the skills needed after high school. I am going to describe a student I currently have, using a pseudonym. Ling has been in the United States for nine years but has not passed out of ESOL and is not able to pass a regular English course during the regular school year. She has had attendance issues in the past which has made it difficult for her to keep up with her school work. In addition, outside of school, she does not speak English but speaks her native language, Mandarin Chinese. She has taken both Virginia SOL English assessments (reading and writing) multiple times and is accommodated with a Chinese dictionary but has not passed. What Ling struggles with is functional, cultural English, the English that native speakers

use every day. These are the words that are not in dictionaries but come through continual use practice with the language. Because she does not use the language outside of the classroom, her improvement with the language has been stagnant. I have a moral struggle with passing her because I do not feel she is capable of functioning after high school in English. The fact that she has also not passed out of her ESOL class and has not passed either Virginia English SOL adds an additional layer to my argument. There are some who argue with my reasoning for keeping Ling back, saying that her age (20) is sufficient reason to consider giving her a diploma.

Luckily, Richmond takes the final word out of my hands because both English SOLs are required in the Commonwealth of Virginia for a standard high school diploma. Does Ling have the ability to read based on the ability to decode? Yes. Can she describe meaning? Sometimes on her own. Sometimes with assistance. Can she read a text with fluency? It depends on the text. Can she pass the Virginia SOLs? Not yet. Does she have the skills to lead a productive life using English? Not yet.

Since I am in the realm of assessment and testing, I probably should mention Dr. Pierce's presentation. Her presentation on research-based assessment hit a completely different nerve for me as I teach students who have failed the Virginia SOL English examinations and it is my job to remediate them to retake the test. Unofficially, it is my job to do whatever (including teaching to the test) is necessary so that they have every chance possible to walk across the graduation stage in June. Every year, I need to account for my students' success or failure including providing what tools were used to remediate students, number of absences, and final grade in the my remediation course. Dr. Pierce's quote, "The field of education changes as slowly as religion and the law," is quite true in my eyes. On one hand, it is not best practice to teach to the test but on the other hand it is expected that I have as high as possible pass rate, if not 100 percent. In

fact, some of the tools provided to me are really set up so that the only way of remediating students is to teach to the test. They drill specific skills that the student may have missed or are deficient in and if you are truly differentiating instruction for your students, you are doing individualized remediation plans with individualized deficiency areas where students drill to improve those areas. Another part of Dr. Pierce's presentation dealt with formative assessment, something that I continually do in my remediation class so that I can adjust for each student. This is the new FCPS buzzword this year and department chairs and administrators (including mine) were given books about how to do this. Dr. Pierce had said in her presentation to us that, "Formative assessment is not available from publishers" and I agree with that. You cannot follow a model or a worksheet to complete formative assessment with students. Formative assessment is continuous and unannounced.

Probably one of the presentations I looked the most forward to was the presentation concerning international education. Because this is my primary concentration, I looked at this presentation as an extra class in international education and thought of myself as a sponge where I could sop up additional information. This is my passion. One of the major questions that I consider each day is: How does culture impact student learning? This question is something that the field of international education considers an essential question. Currently, in American schools, 22 percent of students have one foreign-born parent. Given that statistic, I believe that teachers must be culturally-sensitive instructors and be able to deal with linguistically diverse students. Sadly, some educators are ill-equipped to deal with the students that are seated in front of them. The requirements of No Child Left Behind require teachers to adapt to students who may be transient, have limited school experience, or have different school experience. In addition, in some areas of the world, children are affected by war, natural disaster, political

turmoil, and other forces, and education must also be considered for those children. How do they get educated so that they later become productive adults? How do they overcome trauma? How does education fit in with relief and other aid organizations that go into areas of crisis? In my own classroom, I have had students who came to my school from war zones. I also currently have students (girls) who are now seniors in high school but because of Taliban in Afghanistan, did not have access to schooling until they came to the United States five years ago. These are the types of students that I love learning about and working with.

Also under the auspices of international education is IB education. As an IB teacher, I have built my entire English curriculum around the concept of international-mindedness, the idea that we are not only living in our little area of the world but must be aware of the larger world and community around us in order to function successfully in the global community. Every text I teach has guiding questions that force students to consider how the characters and/or issues in the work play into the concept of international-mindedness in some way or build upon the idea. What are the implications of Richard's in Shakespeare's *Richard III* thirst for power? How does it affect his relationships with other people? This is a man who destroyed every relationship with everyone else around him in order to become king and being internationally-minded requires students to consider relationships, to think about how other people in other places may feel, what their lives might be like, what their culture might be like. The one really interesting piece to this entire idea is that children/students often cannot explain the "why" in their culture; they often carry it with them in an unconscious way and it is the burden and task of educators to understand and be responsive to it. These are the questions that I get passionate about, that drive my interest.

When the two doctoral seminar classes combined to view the poster presentations, we were shown a very different way of presenting research and comparing scholarship. Previously, I had only been familiar with presenting research via Power Point presentations or through reading conference papers as I have been involved with the Arthur Miller Society, a literary society dedicated to Miller's life and works, but the poster presentations gave me another way of comparing qualitative and quantitative research. There were two presentations that particularly stood out to me. First, the presentation concerning differentiation by Drs. Scruggs and Mastropieri was interesting in that I use differentiation techniques daily in my own classroom and there were quantitative results that were tied to student achievement. The study that Drs. Scruggs and Mastropieri was also interesting to me in that I am eventually interested in looking at limited English proficiency students in advanced academic settings and what teachers do to make them be successful. Differentiation strategies, such as the ones tried by Scruggs and Mastropieri in their research, may be interesting to look at when I begin my own research.

The second poster presentation that was interesting to me was not exactly a poster presentation because it was done via Power Point but it was done by Dr. Nasser. Dr. Nasser focused on preparing English as a foreign language teachers in Palestine and some of her observations, including the perception of the Arab teachers that learning English is a window to the rest of the world when movement is restricted in the Palestinian territories was especially interesting to me. This fit in with my interest in international education as language is being considered a bridge between cultures; conflicted parties, both Arab and Jew use English to deal with the outside world.

Another idea that Dr. Nasser brought up that I was not aware of and would like to learn more about is the idea of intentionality in teacher preparation. She said that teachers needed to

have an understanding of intentionality and the changes they go through during their studies. In thinking back to my own teacher preparation many years ago, I don't believe this word was used. I do believe the concept of scaffolding was taught but the word 'intentionality' was not a word that was connected with something I do without even thinking about it. That in itself is a funny (strange) idea to me in education – terminology over time. So many things teachers do such as scaffolding, educators have been doing for years and only within the last seven or eight years, the term has come into common practice. The teachers who have been in the classroom for a while know these techniques and have been doing them for years, even if they don't know the current, politically-current name for the practice. Best practice is still best practice.

Conclusion and Next Steps

It's now the end of the semester and as I look back on the back on the various presentations, I suppose you are wondering if the redesign of the doctoral seminar course using a framework of understanding Wenger's communities of practice was a good idea. By putting the course under the auspices of communities of practice, the College of Education and Human Development set up its own community of practice in the form of this course section. For the semester, our group of nearly 30 studied various disciplines within the College of Education and Human Development, we engaged in collective learning and through our journals and this reflective paper, we had practice with that learning. For some of us, this community of practice also allowed us to make connections that will help us as we develop our programs and establish our committees. As communities of practice are fluid and can end when the learning or research no longer serves the participants, our collective community of practice will end at the close of the semester. So the answer to your question is yes, the redesign of the course was a good idea. For me, who already has a program and committee pretty much in place, this format allowed me

to expand my thinking to other, broader ideas that affect my doctoral program, my person, and issues that I may be interested in pursuing further. The professors and others who spoke to our class not only were gracious in giving their time but spurred me to think, read, and ask questions. These are skills that I know I need to continue in order to be successful while completing my program, writing my proposal, and eventually writing my dissertation.