Shifting the Culture of Higher Education: Influences on Students, Teachers, and Pedagogy

This article identifies a critical tension within the traditional higher education setting—specifically teacher education classrooms. Using the metaphor of a journey, the authors describe pedagogy and practice using inspirations from the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. Participation in a monthly inquiry group is the catalyst for shifts in roles, expectations, outcomes, and assessment. Documentation (e.g., photos, video, narrative) of teachers’ and students’ learning guides teaching and learning practices that include emphasis on relationships and content, extension of learning and retention of principles, and active engagement and thoughtful reflection.

You’re used to a certain culture—language and customs that are familiar and comfortable. After some deliberation, you dare to try something new, and you often feel clumsy and awkward. You yearn for a guidebook and ways to form easy alliances with others who feel equally awkward. As you immerse yourself in the new culture, sometimes you feel capable, sometimes you feel incompetent, but there is something compelling that makes you persist. One day, you say something in your new language and it’s the first time that you don’t have to think first and then translate your thinking. You just think and the ideas flow—and it feels wonderful! A thirst—one that you hadn’t been mindful of, despite years of sustaining your intellectual practice—has been quenched. It will
take many more conversations and experiences to feel totally at ease, but you’re committed to the journey.

Although American educators, researchers, and policymakers have studied the approach to early childhood education practiced in Reggio Emilia, Italy, for several decades, translating the principles and practices into an American context has been challenging. Few have considered how the approach might transform higher education pedagogy and practice, yet the explicit respect for and eagerness to collaborate with students as partners in the learning process strikes a chord with many who work in various contexts. The emphasis on relationships among and between students, families, teachers, and the community outside of the classroom provides a virtual passport—one that opens lines of communication, encourages documentation of individual and group learning, and celebrates the teaching profession in a way that crosses boundaries between in-service teachers and higher education.

From this notion of crossing boundaries and exploring new territory, we created an inquiry group—educators and professionals who work with children and adults in preservice and in-service settings. Meeting monthly since 2005, this group was cofounded by three individuals (including the authors) who participated in the Making Learning Visible project (Phase III) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education from 2002 to 2005. Inspired by the notion of democratic classroom practices and a pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2001), we dubbed the group the Democracy Inquiry Group (DIG). Our common desire to focus on democratic classroom practices and research our own teaching involved two specific questions:

- How do I bring my “A” game to students each week to ensure that they learn the knowledge base, skills, and disposition to become highly competent teachers? and
- How do I engage students as constructors and evaluators of their own learning to ensure that they mirror the kind of learning that is important to young children?

The concept of documentation (inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach) is the process and product(s) that drive the DIG agenda.

For this article, we have selected examples from DIG meeting transcripts, which illustrate the mechanics of DIG, that make the meetings meaningful. The documentation that we have included illustrates how our thinking was transformed due to our collective experimentation. The quotes that we have included exemplify DIG members’ thinking and understanding at one moment in time. These quotes have also contributed to shifts in DIG members’ thinking over time—specifically, shifts to a new landscape for us in our higher education teacher preparation classes.

**Reading the Road Map—The Role of Documentation**

My big question is: Am I bringing in my “A” game? I leave the class thinking, “That wasn’t that great.” Then I look back and I say that I met the criteria that [were] important to me and how I taught. But was it OK? —ST

What has been essential to the success of our group is the tool of documentation to communicate episodes of teaching for investigation and discussion. Documentation is a verb and noun, act and artifact. For the purposes of this article, documentation may be defined as: the systematic act of collecting, interpreting, and reflecting on concrete traces of learning (e.g., narrative text, video footage, audiotape, photographs, samples of students’ or teachers’ work). Documentation positions teachers as colearners in the classroom and provides insights into both theory and practice.

The DIG protocol entails bringing documentation to the DIG group and sharing concrete examples of our teaching and learning with the preservice teachers in our respective classes. These examples might include photographs, video clips, excerpts from class discussion, or student or teacher reflection. The documentation may be teacher and/or student generated. We employ
documentation in an open and visible manner with: (a) students, as documentation is gathered and created; (b) peers, as documentation is viewed and discussed; and (c) students, to focus on and revisit class sessions and to extend learning from one class to another. The cycle continues as we return to DIG with new questions and insights that emerge from the students who have had an opportunity to revisit documentation with feedback from DIG members.

Our inquiry group provides a location and a process whereby we methodically review eventful happenings with students to identify underlying learning and promising pedagogy. Meeting monthly, we engage a colleague as a facilitator to synthesize, share back our thinking, and maintain group focus to ensure that we all are personally challenged, supported, and collectively productive (Nimmo & Hallett, 2008). Drawing on the theory that all people learn in relation to others (Giacopini, 2007), we developed a protocol that began each meeting in small groups to share individual examples of documentation that were steps in the production of various research projects. The remainder of each meeting was either a presentation of members’ research or a larger discussion of evolving hypotheses. With our focus on teacher education, we have found that differences in perspective and experience within the group challenge us to explore multiple facets of teaching.

**Higher Education—Immunizations Required**

When I first began teaching preservice teachers, I envisioned myself as a guide along the path of our semester-long journey together. I decided upon the course materials and activities, and welcomed student input to enhance the quality of the plans I had made. The phrase “facilitator of learning” hummed as the undercurrent of my planning from week to week. –LF

What values and consensual set of beliefs sustain the dominant, traditional approach to education? Most educational settings reflect a hierarchical social order that does not represent democratic values in the most general sense. Students assume passive roles in determining the content, pedagogy, and requirements of a curriculum. Teachers are recognized as the possessors of knowledge and expertise, and administrators determine how to structure the larger learning community. Students have only limited opportunities for participation, and their input is marginal and primarily advisory (Brown & Campione, 1994; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Salomon, 1993; Slavin, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). The curriculum and student responses to a course focus primarily on individual learning and outcomes (Edwards, Gandini, & Nimmo, 1994; Nimmo, 1998; Scardamalia, Bereiter, & Lamon, 1994; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).

Teachers of teachers do not usually view themselves as perpetuating a traditional educational approach as transmitters of knowledge, as the person in the classroom with all the answers, but this is the way that most educators were taught as children. Teacher educators are unwittingly inoculated as they travel the path to a terminal degree. Most teacher education programs are organized with the assumption that each faculty member brings skills and a knowledge base that must be passed along to students. There must be few deviations from established standards and practices required for licensure. Each faculty member is left alone to meet with students in a tightly scheduled series of meetings, each meeting dedicated to a specific topic as identified in the syllabus distributed in the first class. The syllabus, semester and weekly time blocks, and the linear progression toward a college degree create a culture of higher education where everyone involved knows the language, can read the signs, and shares the same expectations for the roles, rituals, and responsibilities in a classroom.

Students need not question the material they learn, since the teacher is responsible for making sure that learning is taking place. –LF

At one end of the higher education pedagogical continuum is a traditional transmission approach to teaching. Practice is assumed to
be clean—free of discord and impurity. At the other end are methods and a philosophy that confer on students all essential decision-making and that discount faculty expertise about what constitutes valuable learning. Practice is assumed to be messy—rife with experiences that potentially dilute the intended content. Many faculty members would locate themselves somewhere along this continuum. They employ methods that feature constructivist teaching strategies, grouping of students, and inviting students to respond to ideas through assignments, prearranged discussion topics, and course evaluations (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hubbard & Power, 1999; Weinbaum et al., 2004). Faculty members are proud of how they research content, analyze class meetings, adapt teaching methods to address student interests, and ensure that essential subject matter is covered. This does not alter the reality that the entire course—readings, assignments, assessment, discussions, and activities—is considered the responsibility of the faculty member (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Kohn, 1999). The ideas, resources, and data that inform faculty members as they prepare their teaching are not commonly shared with students.

Normally, I would routinely review the experiences of one class before planning a new class session. I would arrive at class each week with plans that I believed honored the reactions of the students and that incorporated their interests into the topic for the week. But I had no systematic way of engaging the students with me in this reflection on their learning. In making plans that incorporated student ideas, I had no organized method to actually involve the students. –BR

Reflection on teaching a higher education course is almost always made in private by the faculty member between class sessions or at the end of a term. Opportunities to share philosophy and pedagogy with colleagues are rare, usually only a portion of a department meeting or the initial discussion during a retreat to deal with institutional or department business. There may be occasions for discussing general course content to build the sequence of learning experiences that constitute a liberal arts major or that prepare students for a profession, but there are limited opportunities for faculty to question their academic decisions or to systematically examine their teaching over time.

Travel Has Its Rewards—Inviting Students to Join the Journey

Documentation in the seminar was not a set of artifacts, photos, videotapes, and written reflections collected at the end of the semester, nor was it confined only to understanding how children learn. Instead the documentation was shared and discussed throughout the semester as part of a process in our learning to teach. –BR

Documentation is a cycle: Materials are collected and analyzed, documentation is taken back to participants for their evaluation and input, and new interpretations are recorded for continued analysis. Sharing documentation with students posed the question of what role students had in determining the content that is essential to their learning. If students used documentation of an earlier class meeting to discuss a topic in greater depth, should we move ahead with this topic or cut the conversation short and proceed with a planned activity? What would such a shift to expand a topic do to our syllabus? If students learn best when invested in a topic, how do we capitalize on their desire to build on ideas?

When students narrow the lens to determine aspects of a larger topic, we learn what our students want and believe that they need to know to develop as professionals. Identifying and pursuing specialized knowledge is the foundation of continued growth and professional development. Our role as faculty is not to sacrifice essential topics required in teaching teachers. With shared recognition of important issues identified from each class topic, faculty can adjust the course accordingly. We may elect to maintain a focus or to build new knowledge that we know is equally pertinent, but we can also recognize student passion and decide to revisit an issue later in the course.
Observation, Documentation, and Reflection

Accountability in the Democratic Classroom—Proof of Citizenship Required

The way students and teachers can be sure of learning occurring or not occurring comes in the form of the grade. That, alone, is often the only lasting visible reference to learning that transpires in a classroom, and it occurs in private exchange between teacher and student. –LF

Can we use documentation with our students to engage them in determining how coursework should be evaluated? Democratic classrooms are difficult to define and sustain against a landscape of higher education traditions, standards, and systems of accountability. As a field, higher education has yet to determine assessment strategies that simultaneously support faculty members as colearners, acknowledge the central role of students in determining their own learning, and meet standards of competence. Higher education pedagogy tends to rely on strategies such as reflection or observation. We have found that the systematic use of documentation promotes an emphasis on formative, as well as summative, assessment, and serves to empower the learning group.

The collaborative rubric was eye opening for me. As the professor, I am often working off of my subjective, internal rubric for certain assignments. Creating a rubric together gave the group a common understanding of what was expected, not just from me, but from the group. –LF

Documentation makes it easier to pry away from conventional approaches to evaluation. We need not abandon our roles as experts in content areas and in the epistemology of adult learning. With students engaged in determining the content of their education, we can frame the conversation around what they believe they have learned and how they think that they can best express their learning. This opens the door for students to evaluate, for example, the value of an assignment according to how well it propelled their learning. Although students may participate in the process by determining how they would evaluate their achievement, it is the job of faculty to define the criteria for a quality product or performance. Input into evaluation communicates to students that they have a role and a responsibility for determining the success of the course. By identifying how an assignment may best support their learning, students learn the value of self-evaluation that is intrinsic to continuous professional development.

Seeing Something Up Close—Pass the Binoculars

The students were able to comment on the documentation of their work, add salient information that I may have overlooked, and help determine the most useful direction for our next discussion. –SCS

Every teacher ends the day with feelings of satisfaction or concern for the degree to which she accomplished what was intended for teaching and learning. During DIG cycles of documentation and discussion, we learn what our students and peers render the most valuable learning from instruction that we prepare. This is essential, as we no longer depend upon our expertise alone to craft our instruction. One DIG member reflected:

Using documentation allowed me to share contributions made by students and to facilitate the building of a collective understanding of teaching and learning. Each week, documentation made visible the dynamics of the class. At the start of an in-class project, we took photographs of students working through a problem. The images taken over time helped us to realize how one student’s suggestion became a foundation that others used to connect ideas. In reviewing the videotape of another project, the students were able to recall and identify the traces of many individual contributions. The images told the story of how their success was the result of input from each member of the group.

This exemplifies a typical realization on the part of the instructor that came about because of the systematic process of documenting ordinary
learning moments with her students, sharing
them back with the students, and then bringing
the documentation to our inquiry group for fur-
ther reflection. Multiple perspectives often gen-
erate new questions and challenges in a manner
quite similar to the traces of contributions men-
tioned in the above quote. The explicit act of
making our teaching public has a ripple effect—
similar to a still pond after a pebble has been
tossed into the water.

When we return to the inquiry group, we
wrestle with the tensions in this new educational
terrain. There are no guides for this approach
to teaching. We are on an uncharted journey
marked by unusual schedules for teaching week-
to-week, new expectations for contributions from
our students, and innovative definitions for the
roles of teachers and learners. Where syllabi,
schedules, our personal experiences as students,
or our institution’s trajectory to graduation had
been our maps in the past, the untidy dissonance
of learning while teaching is now guided by
examining documentation. Collegial questioning
and shared inquiry makes it possible to explore
assumptions that underlie our practice. Carefully
selected and prepared documentation frames our
confusion, communicates our excitement, and
establishes a shared lexicon among colleagues.
We reaffirm goals not yet attained through past
methods and are able to trace our pedagogy back
to concrete examples of teaching and learning.
This allows us to increasingly model teaching
practices that we hope will extend from our
students to the children that they will teach. Over
time, we believe that our teaching progressively
becomes more democratic.

Enjoying the Trip as Much
as the Destination

The journey we have taken as a pair of higher
educators and members of DIG has generated
many snapshots—literal and symbolic. Along the
way, our inquiry group has become similar to
a conversation table where we practice our new
language in an attempt to become more adept
at communicating with others. Monthly meetings
with peers prompt us to practice mindful teaching
as we notice ordinary moments and step back
to look closely at our own and our students’
learning, made visible through documentation.

Through documentation, we are grounded in a
dialogue that engages every voice. It is the central
tool that brings our “A” game to our students each
week. It allows us to employ reflection and inter-
pretation of our teaching to create spaces for all
participants to reflect and take responsibility for
his or her own learning. Moving out of isolation
into an arena with colleagues who research ped-
agogy and practice, we move closer to our con-
cept of democracy, where participation benefits
individuals and the larger group. “Observation, docu-
mentation, and interpretation are educational
instruments and fundamental elements in our
work to understand the epistemology and history
of learning processes” (Giacopini, 2007, p. 8). As
we navigate this new landscape of educational
practice, no other instruments have proven more
valuable, or have been such a reliable source of
inspiration.

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