

Rebecca Brown

NEH Seminar: Philosophers of Education

“A Call for Inter-School Collaborative Teacher Inquiry Groups”

July 28, 2017

Any educator can attest to how isolating teaching can be. I love teaching, and the daily work of engaging with students each day energizes me; but in a culture that often only allows for -- at best -- spontaneous, rushed conversations in the faculty room for 20 minutes while scarfing down lunch, engaging with colleagues in a meaningful way can sometimes seem like an impossible luxury. Even those with the best intentions can come to the end of a whirlwind of classes, look over to the stack of work to be assessed and the materials to prepare, and think to themselves, *There's no way I have time to collaborate with my colleagues.*

Perhaps the issue isn't one of timing -- maybe, like me, the reason you don't engage more often in meaningful, long-term teacher collaboration is that the details of the endeavor are too fuzzy. What are we supposed to collaborate on? To produce? How can people who don't know my class, my students, offer any real insight into my questions about teaching? Is it worth it, considering the energy it takes to coordinate schedules and follow through with plans, especially with no compensation to incentivize? And when the proposal goes beyond one school's boundaries -- when someone suggests, as I'm doing here, that teacher volunteers from multiple area schools should carve out time to meet routinely, the notion of collaborative inquiry quickly moves from the realm of taxing to quixotic.

But what if, as educators, we prioritized our own development as professionals, as a means not only of improving student outcomes, but also of revitalizing the work we do? What if, rather than looking at “professional development” as a supplement to what is naturally a solo endeavor, we really believed collaboration is essential to good teaching? And what if an inter-school collaborative teacher inquiry group could help us to solve those questions that nag in the back of our minds throughout the school year, even throughout our entire career?

If, as Howard Gardner writes, “the purpose of education is to nurture the appreciation of the true, the beautiful, and the good,” I would argue that such an appreciation is necessary to cultivate not only in our students, but in we teachers ourselves. After all, how can we challenge our students to appreciate what is beautiful if we are functionaries and not artists, automatons and not human beings who bring their experiences, beliefs, minds, and hearts to our work? Patricia Carini, in a talk entitled “What Would We Create?” from her collection, *Starting Strong*, writes about the fundamental need for teachers to view and treat our students as full and complex people. My point is that teachers need to view, and be viewed within their professional communities, with the same depth of respect Carini suggests. She writes,

I start with us, with persons. I start with the conviction that how we see each other, the view we carry of the person, profoundly influences what we see as possible for us to make of our lives and of society. It is an influence felt both individually and collectively; it finds expression in all our political and social arrangements. It matters greatly, therefore, to whom we accord the *status* of a person. [...] Whom do we know to have, *as we know ourselves to have*, hopes and fears, joys and struggles? Whom do we know to

have, *as we know ourselves to have*, the strong desire to have their lives mean something, the deep desire to add some measure of worth to the world? (100-101)

My argument is that we cannot improve instruction, develop the teacher, and improve student outcomes fully *within the confines of our own classroom or of our own schools*. We need long-term, collaborative teacher inquiry to break down walls that isolate teachers and separate different schools, and to shed light on our most persistent questions about teaching and learning.

Now, what do I mean when I talk about collaborative teacher inquiry? According to Kruse (1995), there are five interconnected variables that we can use to identify *genuine* professional communities: (1) Shared norms and values (which, I add, must include an interest in examining and unpacking our own philosophies of education); (2) a focus on student learning; (3) deprivatized practice; (4) reflective dialogue; and (5) collaboration. As for the “inquiry” part of our collaboration, that requires individual teachers to each formulate a strong inquiry question to guide their classroom research of the course of the school year. In helping teachers to devise their inquiry focus, I begin with the following questions:

1. What would you love your students to do better/get better at? Why this? What are they currently doing that interests and/or concerns you? Can you think of an experience with your students that highlights this interest/concern?
2. What would you love to do better/get better at in your teaching? Why this? Can you think of a teaching experience that highlights this desire?

And once teachers as individuals have brainstormed some possible responses to those questions, it is crucial for them to begin from the outset to articulate what beliefs or assumptions about teaching, learning, or the nature of human beings and our relation to the world underpin their ideas. This is the part where conversations between teachers -- especially those teachers less familiar with one's own daily practice -- is essential. Below I've included some examples of strong inquiry questions, ones that could fuel at least a year of classroom research:

- How much telling should a writing teacher do, in a group of struggling/passive students?
- What can I do in my position as teacher to instill in my students the joy of writing and make them understand that writing serves a lot of purposes that transcend advancing in school?
- Can journaling can help students to think more deeply, take intellectual risks in a safe space, break free of the formulas (intended to scaffold and strengthen their writing) that have sucked the life from their writing?
- Does the immediacy and individual nature of student-teacher writing conferences promote self-efficacy in student revision *more so* than written comments do?

Practical Matters/A Timeline for Enacting (this section to be developed over the course of school year)

1. Gather interested teachers through local network of schools; teachers need to be willing to meet once per month for the span of roughly 4 hours (monthly dinners tend to work well as a structure)
2. Establish inquiry question and preliminary methodology

3. Begin classroom research (formulating a hypothesis, testing it in the classroom, gathering quantitative and qualitative data on student learning)
4. Only after teachers have begun formulating their own hypotheses is it important for them to research what's available from other philosophers and practitioners to inform thinking; continue to connect back to these ideas throughout
5. Pair with a thinking partner over the course of the year who is interested in similar or complementary question (or who is in similar or complementary setting)
6. Continue classroom research -- this includes inviting thinking partner into classroom and vice versa
7. Over the course of the school year, produce a formal inquiry report documenting research: guiding questions, process, methodology, the evolution of teacher's thinking about the topic, and new practices adopted in response
8. Present findings publicly
 - a. Hold a "Symposium" for teacher research to share with all school communities involved
 - b. Award teachers with the most promising research (using outside panel of judges) with cash rewards at end of school year; do so with the help of sponsorship (more research needed -- possible sources to petition: Lynch Foundation, Boston Archdiocese, individual donors)

Further Reading to Aid in Facilitating Collaborative Teacher Inquiry Group:

Allen, David, and Tina Blythe. *The Facilitator's Book of Questions: Tools for Looking Together at Student and Teacher Work*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004.

Allen, David, Tina Blythe, Steve Siedel, et al. *Teaching as Inquiry: Asking Hard Questions to Improve Practice and Student Achievement*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004

Carini, Patricia. *Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, Schools, and Standards*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.

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Hirsch, E.D. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Vintage Press, 1988.

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Kruse, S. D., Louis, K. S., & Bryk, A. (1995). "An Emerging Framework for Analyzing School-based Professional Community." In K. S. Louis & S. D. Kruse (Eds.), *Professionalism and Community: Perspectives on Reforming Urban Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

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Montessori, Maria. *The Montessori Method*. CreateSpace Independent Pub. Platform, 2014.

Palmer, Joy (ed). *Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education: From Piaget to the Present Day*. Routledge, 2001.

Pinker, Steven. *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. New York: Viking, 2002.

Ravitch, Diane. *Reign of Error*. New York: Knopf, 2013.

Steele, Claude. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. Norton, 2011.