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Undeniable Insights: The Collaborative Use of Three Professional Development Practices

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■ In this article we report on the experience of investigating reflective teaching and professional development by practicing what we preach. For one academic year we utilized, in teaching our own EFL classes, three professional development procedures—journals, videotaping, and teaching portfolios—that we have used as teacher educators with in-service and preservice teachers to promote reflective teaching and improvement. The common framework uniting these three practices is a model of reflective teaching that entails these characteristics: Each practice is data based; each is under the direct control of the teachers involved in professional development; and each allows teachers to build upon strengths as well as identify weaknesses. Although these procedures can all be used by teachers working in isolation, we maintain that their use with trusted colleagues in a collaborative approach to reflective teaching can definitely promote professional development.

In examining these three procedures, which we consider to be best practices, we each undertook professional development tasks, based on our work with university EFL students in Hong Kong. David compiled a teaching portfolio (read by Andy and Kathi). Andy and Kathi were videotaped while team teaching (and all of us viewed the video). And for two semesters Kathi kept a teaching journal (later read by David and Andy). In other words, there were two phases to our work together: the initial professional development activity and the subsequent sharing and discussion of the outcomes. (Because we are writing about what we did collaboratively as well as what we learned individually, references to ourselves as authors will vary between first-person plural and third-person singular.)

In this article we describe each practice and explain what we learned by using it. In the final sections we look at the underlying principles that make these practices successful, their use generalizable, and the resulting insights undeniable.

WHAT WAS OUR CONTEXT?

The specific context in which we used these three practices was our work teaching English to university students: David at the University of Hong Kong, and Kathi and Andy at Chinese University of Hong Kong. David compiled a portfolio, in part because the university administration was requiring some form of faculty accountability and the teachers in his unit had selected portfolios as the mechanism they would use. As the unit's director, David chose to compile his own teaching portfolio to provide an example for his faculty of both the process and the outcome and also to demonstrate his willingness to take the same risks as his colleagues. Kathi kept a journal because she was working in a new context in terms of the program and the students (their L1, their culture, their age, and their English proficiency levels). Andy and Kathi chose to be videotaped because they were teaching a new course (the content of which fell largely outside their areas of expertise) and because they were team teaching together for the first time.

In a broader sense, however, our context is much wider than that of university EFL teaching in Hong Kong. We were all experienced full-time teachers with teacher education responsibilities, and we wanted to improve our own teaching. Yet we had little time to engage in broad-scale teacher development programs (such as taking courses, observing one another's classes, or going to conferences). We therefore needed to engage in professional development activities that would mesh smoothly and easily with our ongoing responsibilities (as teachers, teacher educators, and administrators). In this regard, our needs were similar to those of professional teachers everywhere.

Our theoretical context is also broadly generalizable and begins with reflective teaching as our basic orientation. According to Pennington (1992), in reflective teaching, "teachers analyze their own practice and its underlying basis, and then consider alternative means for achieving their ends" (p. 48). In this approach to professional development, teachers "collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching" (Richards & Lockhart, 1994, p. 1). This kind of *reflection-in-action* (Schön, 1983) can lead to undeniable insights that come from the insider knowledge that only we as teachers possess. The three practices described below provided platforms for such reflection to occur.

Freeman (1996, pp. 91–99) has discussed three stances traditionally taken by authors of research on teaching: the behavioral view (teaching as doing), the cognitive view (teaching as thinking and doing), and the interpretivist view (teaching as knowing what to do). In our decision to practice what we preach, we have taken the interpretivist stance and tried to examine how it is that we learn what to do.

It might be assumed that teachers know the rationale for what they do in classrooms. However, as Richards and Lockhart (1994) point out, "Much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher," and "experience is insufficient as a basis for development" (pp. 3–4). For these reasons, there are certain benefits to teachers reflecting on their own teaching by keeping teaching journals, compiling portfolios, and being videotaped, each of which we will explore in the following discussion.

WHAT WERE OUR PRACTICES?

It is especially difficult to deny awareness gained through self-initiated data collection, and therefore practices based on such data collection are particularly powerful in promoting development. Below are descriptions of the three practices we used in addition to our later comments (from discussions and e-mail exchanges) about what we learned in doing so.

Teaching Journals

Making daily entries in confidential journals can help us as teachers see where we divert from our lesson plans, what procedures seem to work well for the students, which activities are less successful, and so on. The journal can be a place to document questions that arise while our primary focus is on working with the learners rather than on analyzing our own behaviors and attitudes. Writing regular reflections in a teach-

ing journal provides a place for questions to accumulate, like taking the jumbled pieces of a puzzle out of a box and arraying them on a table.

While teaching in Hong Kong, Kathi kept a journal about her lower-intermediate speaking and listening classes. Each day she summarized the lessons, evaluated her own work, thought about future lessons, and so on. The ongoing practice of making diary entries led to several undeniable insights, including her growing awareness of the vocabulary explanation trap. She writes,

> My classes felt sluggish for the first month of the term. In spite of my teaching experience, my intellectual understanding of learner-centered classrooms, and my familiarity with the research on Asian learners' classroom participation patterns, I had trouble getting the students to speak in class. By writing in my teaching journal I realized that I was unwittingly running a teacher-fronted classroom by over-explaining idioms and vocabulary items. When I realized what I was doing by writing in my journal, I made a conscientious effort *not* to explain vocabulary items unasked—and if asked, I got the students to explain to their peers instead of doing the talking myself.

This example illustrates the fact that "much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher" (Richards & Lockhart, 1994, pp. 3–4).

David and Andy both read Kathi's journal. Of that experience, Andy wrote,

> I used to think that teaching and learning were primarily intellectual processes. However, reading Kathi's journal was a powerful reminder of the importance of teachers' and learners' feelings as factors that not only shape our teaching and learning, but also influence considerably how we reflect on those experiences.

He also noted that "reading Kathi's journal made me realize the value of keeping one. I have read many articles on the value of journal writing, but as always it is quite different to read about something and to read the thing itself."

David had a similar response:

> Reading Kathi's journal reinforced the insights that I gained into teaching and learning by obtaining accounts of teachers' work in a previous study (Nunan, 1996): first, that in order to understand fully what is happening in the classroom, one needs subjective accounts from teachers (and also from learners); and second, that the complex, evolving relationships between teachers and learners over time are crucial in identifying what it is that makes teaching successful. The relationships cannot be captured, either by the observation of a single lesson or by the analysis of external videotaped data, without the perspectives of the participants themselves. A journal (or an

audiotaped diary account) is an ideal vehicle for generating insights into the evolution of these relationships.

Bartlett's (1992) comments on the role of writing in teacher development are particularly pertinent in understanding the value of journal keeping as a professional development activity. He states that the best means of recording our practice "would seem to involve some form of writing" because "in writing, we begin not only to observe, but we take the first step in reflecting *on* and *about* our practice" (p. 209).

Teaching Portfolios

The use of portfolios is common in some professions (e.g., graphic design, art, photography, and architecture) to demonstrate one's work to potential employers and clients. In composition and English language teaching, student portfolios are popular alternatives to standardized tests for demonstrating achievement (see, e.g., Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 1993; Murray, 1994). Recently the idea of teaching portfolios as professional development tools has gained currency in language teacher education and assessment as well (Johnson, 1996).

Brown and Wolfe-Quintero (1997) define the teaching portfolio as "a purposeful collection of any aspect of a teacher's work that tells the story of a teacher's efforts, skills, abilities, achievements, and contributions to his/her students, colleagues, institution, academic discipline or community" (p. 28). Thus, a portfolio is a collection of artifacts through which teachers present their own professional persona. One's strengths as a developer of classroom materials, for example, should feature prominently in the portfolio. Other possible selections include students' test results, student evaluations of teaching, letters of recommendation, samples of students' work, syllabuses, and so on.

Johnson (1996) discusses the types of evidence that can be included in the portfolios of preservice teachers. Categories include (a) artifacts ("documents produced during the normal course work of the teacher education program"); (b) reproductions ("documents about typical events in the work of preservice teachers that are not captured in artifacts"); (c) attestations ("documents about the work of the novice teacher prepared by someone else"); and (d) productions ("documents prepared especially for the portfolio") (p. 12). These categories work equally well in portfolios compiled by in-service teachers.

Although teachers' portfolios will be unique in terms of the items selected, there should be common elements as well. Minimally a teaching portfolio should contain (a) examples of lesson plans, syllabuses, tests, and materials developed by the teacher (artifacts); (b) a statement of the compiler's teaching duties, indicating the types of courses taught

(reproductions); (c) external data on teaching from students and colleagues (attestations) and the compiler's commentary on those data (a production); (d) a statement of teaching philosophy (a production); (e) a self-appraisal of one's strengths as a teacher and of areas for improvement (productions); and (f) a statement by a peer reviewer who has read the portfolio and can provide a second-party perspective on its contents (an attestation). Each exhibit should be accompanied by an interpretive gloss to explain why it was included (productions).

We claim that portfolios, like teaching journals, generate undeniable insights. What is it that makes the awareness gained from compiling a portfolio undeniable? First, teaching portfolios contain multiple sources of external data. The data themselves, particularly test scores, students' evaluations, and records of peer observations, confront the compiler with the reality of his or her teaching persona from the perspective of significant professional others. But just as importantly, in the process of reviewing, selecting, and explaining the items in a teaching portfolio, the teacher must face and interpret those data.

What is the value of compiling a portfolio? Apart from the fact that educational institutions are increasingly requiring teaching portfolios for accountability, creating a portfolio can be a valuable professional development experience. As Brown and Wolfe-Quintero (1997) observe,

> Portfolios allow teachers to present a rich array of the information that best represents their professional personas. The very process of developing a portfolio can help them to gather together their thoughts about their professional strengths and synthesize them into a cogent collage□.□.□.□. Because of the reflective nature of portfolios, developing one inevitably enlarges a teacher's view of what teaching is. (p. 29)

By assembling artifacts and reproductions, we present our work. In compiling attestations and productions, we re-present its value by synthesizing others' and our own views of our work.

Of his own experience creating a teaching portfolio, David wrote,

> By compiling a portfolio, I was confronted with aspects of my teaching that I doubt would have been revealed by casual observation or feedback from a colleague. On the negative side, I was confronted with the need to give more explicit instructions to my students, and to clarify more precisely for students my expectations concerning the submission of assessable pieces of work. On the positive side, my commitment to a learner-oriented philosophy was reaffirmed, although not always in comfortable ways.

Kathi and Andy read David's portfolio together and tape-recorded their discussion. Afterward, Andy wrote,

> Apart from ideas on what to include in my own portfolio, reading David's made me realize that, even if the compiling of such a document is not self-initiated but requested from on high, it provides an ideal opportunity to present our professional selves in a detailed picture. It enables us to show clearly the many different facets of being professional teachers and to demonstrate how we develop over time.

Videotaping

Videotaping has been used in teacher development for nearly 30 years, with teachers viewing videos of other teachers (Borg, Kelley, Langer, & Gall, 1970) and themselves (Paulston, 1974). However, it is still often used as an assignment (e.g., in a practicum setting) rather than in self-initiated professional development contexts.

The theoretical and conceptual bases for videotaping have been widely discussed. For instance, Wallace (1991) notes that video provides an "objective record of what actually took place" (p. 8) and describes it as "individualised training par excellence" (p. 11). Wallace also found in an earlier study (1979) that 87% of 87 in-service and preservice EFL teachers said that "seeing themselves on videotape had made them aware of habits and mannerisms that they were now trying to change" (p. 13). He concluded that the main advantage of video is that "it is a means of objectifying the teaching process and converting what is subjective and ephemeral into something that is experienced in common and capable of analysis" (p. 17). Recent technological advances and increased user-friendliness mean that it is now possible to simply point and press. Another advantage of video is that it can be viewed privately, with one or more colleagues, or by a combination of both.

We chose to watch a video of two of us (Kathi and Andy) coteaching, with David audiotaping and facilitating the discussion, observing, and taking notes. This process enabled us to set up a highly collaborative form of triangulation. During the discussion, we realized that the visual support of the video, together with our three-way freeze-frame discussion, appeared to trigger recall in a way that written or audio data alone might not have done. David's questions to Andy and Kathi paralleled the use of the stimulated recall technique in research (see Nunan, 1992, pp. 94–96), applied in this case to professional development.

Some of the strengths of video relate both to what it does and to what it does not record. Even though we viewed the tape 6 months after the initial recording, it led to vivid recall of what we had done as teachers and even of how we had felt during that lesson. Of particular interest was what the camera did not record—in our case, the difference between the way Kathi felt during and after the lesson—unsure and stressed—and how she presented herself to the class (and to the camera)—confident and calm.

David wrote of the experience,

> What was intriguing, in listening to Kathi and Andy discussing their lesson, was just how much they were able to identify of what was going on in the lesson that was not immediately apparent from the raw footage itself. It was interesting to note the connections they made between what was revealed (and masked) by the video, and other aspects of the lesson. The video showed the two teachers co-constructing the lesson as it evolved, from the raw materials provided by their lesson plan. In this sense, the teaching act appeared almost as a form of art.

One example was the way Andy and Kathi alternately occupied the space in the lecture theater, moving into and out of the teaching zone in the teacher-fronted portions of the lesson, giving and taking the floor, without any explicit verbal cues, by being sensitive to the goals of the lesson and to each other's nonverbal signals. As Kathi described team teaching when watching the video, "It's funny: it's so much like learning to dance."

WHY DID THESE PRACTICES FIT?

We believe these three practices worked for us for many reasons. We undertook them voluntarily, so there was a sense of ownership and commitment. They also stemmed directly from and built upon our teaching and our other work, so they did not create distractions. And although these practices were time consuming, they did not seem to compete for time in our busy teaching days; instead they grew out of and complemented our regular work. Thus the processes of recording and reviewing data about our teaching seemed organic and natural rather than forced or extraneous.

As noted above, each of these practices entails some form of recording. In ethnography, "recording is used as a tool for description and analysis, not just as a mnemonic device, but more importantly as an *estrangement device*" (van Lier, 1988, p. 37). The usefulness of such a device is that it "enables the ethnographer to look at phenomena *with detachment* [italics added]" (van Lier, p. 37). Each of these three procedures provided us with distancing mechanisms, allowing us to examine our teaching dispassionately. Like ethnographers, in the process of recording data based on our teaching, we too become distanced from it and therefore less ego-involved in maintaining the status quo and thus more open to insights and change.

Furthermore, the longitudinal nature of journal keeping and portfolio compilation allowed us to trace development over time. We believe the videotaping experience would have been even more valuable had we continued with it in a longer course. (The seminar we taped lasted only

2 weeks.) Finally, the three practices described in this article are data based and self-directed; therefore, we could not deny the insights they generated.

We also benefited from sharing the results of our efforts. The collaborative dimension helped us learn from discussing one another's products as well as from viewing them. Lortie (1975) referred to teaching as the *egg carton profession* because the walls of classrooms become boundaries that separate teachers as they each occupy their own insulated niche. Engaging in teacher development in such isolation can lead to what Wells (1994) has called "the loneliness of the long-distance reflector" (p. 11). In this regard, we benefited not only from our initial use of these three practices but also from our communal discussions about them.

HOW GENERALIZABLE ARE THESE PRACTICES?

Ultimately, all professional development is a matter of self-development. Just as teachers cannot do the learning for the learners, teacher educators cannot do the learning for preservice or in-service teachers. We believe the self-selected use of any of the three procedures described above can lead to powerful professional development, especially when the data are shared with trusted peers.

As we stated at the outset, despite their differences, these three procedures share a number of key principles. First, they are all connected directly to practice and can help teachers do their jobs better. They also enable teachers to build on strengths as well as to identify weaknesses. Each of these procedures can operate under the direct control of the teacher—both in the initial choice to participate and in the techniques used. If the results of these practices are shared, they allow for the emergence of multiple collaborative perspectives on teaching. They involve rewards (in terms of information, knowledge, and satisfaction, if not in the currencies of release time or money) for the teachers involved. Each procedure has considerable potential for ongoing reflective professional development because each encapsulates these principles.

We believe, both as teachers and as teacher educators, that successful professional development must be ongoing, sustained, and self-directed. As Lange (1990) notes, the phrase *teacher development* is used "to describe a process of continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers" (p. 250). The term *development* is specifically used "to suggest that teachers continue to evolve in the use, adaptations, and application of their art and craft" (Lange, p. 250). We also believe that the sustainability of professional development initiatives will be maximized if they incorporate these characteristics. As Nunan and Lamb (1996) point

out, "reflecting on one's teaching, and, in the process, developing knowledge and theories of teaching, is an essential component" (p. 120) in the lifelong process of professional growth.

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Interactive Group Journals: Learning as a Dialogue Among Learners*

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■ The interactive group journal (IGJ) is a new way of looking at and using journal writing in the context of teacher education. The IGJ is a written document that takes the idea of reflective practice and merges it with social interaction by recording active dialogue among peers in a journal format. This type of journal captures the ideas and synergy of a

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