Changing Directions: One Teacher's Journey

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Abstract: This article chronicles the journey of Lauren, a sixth-grade teacher, as she participates in the Action Research Model for Teacher Development; an action research process built upon a traditional action research model of planning, acting, and reflecting that incorporates opportunities for teachers to collaboratively reflect with peers to develop their own individual practice. Case study methodology was used to explore Lauren's experiences and perspectives through the action research process. Analysis of the data revealed Lauren progressed through stages along a trajectory of development that led to intentional change in practice. Through the process Lauren recognized the need for change, reframed her practice based upon new understandings, reexamined her practices, and intentionally restructured her practice. Peer and self-reflection embedded within the action research process were instrumental for Lauren to critically reflect on her practice as she changed practice.

> *This action research project has taught me to improve my teaching by trusting the students more. I have sixth graders and they, at times, can be very complacent and unmotivated. Allowing them to have input in their writing tasks gives them a sense of interest as well as a feeling of leadership. (Lauren, May, 2013)*

This article chronicles Lauren's journey as she participates in the Action Research Model for Teacher Development; an action research process built upon a traditional action research model of planning, acting, and reflecting that incorporates opportunities for teachers collaboratively reflect with peers to develop their own individual practice. Lauren (second author) is a 6th grade teacher in an urban high needs school district with students representing diverse ethnic, academic, and economic backgrounds. At the time of the study, she was participating in a year-long action research project with other teachers in her district. Kim (first author) served as a mentor throughout the process. In this article, we first identify steps marking changes in Lauren's reflective thoughts and actions during her participation in the action research model. Next, we examine those steps within a framework of reflective practice to understand how this process afforded opportunities for Lauren to make meaning of actions and intentionally change practice.

The Action Research Model for Teacher Development

As a tool for professional development for teachers, action research fosters teacher empowerment and collaborative learning communities through classroom inquiry. McNiff and Whitehead state: "Action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask, 'What am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?'" (2006, p. 7).

Built into the action research model is the importance of reflection. Professional literature has long touted the benefits of reflective practice in teaching (Dewey, 1933;, Schön, 1983; van Manen, 1977; Zeichner, 1987) and education scholars have maintained for decades that teachers who engage in reflective practice will positively impact students (Abell & Bryan, 1987; Freppon, 2001; Jay, 2003; Norlander-Case, Reagan, & Case 1999; Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston 1996). "The central idea in research literature is that through reflection the teacher better understands and extends his/her professional activity, and that reflecting on teaching problems will lead to new insights for practice" (Marcos, Miguel, & Tillema 2009, p. 191). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) emphasize the importance of reflection about action. "Get the reflection on action right

and it enables you to start reflecting in action more effectively too. So it's not so much practice that makes perfect then, as practice that is reflective" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 98). Furthermore, reflection in concert with others strengthens a teachers' understanding of their practice.   Researchers and practitioners increasingly recommend collaboration to enhance teacher learning (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Building upon Dewey's conception of reflection, Rodgers (2002) provides a framework for reflection consisting of several stages. Within the framework, teachers first describe in detail selected noteworthy situations from their classrooms, then ascribe meaning to those events through analysis, and finally decide a course of action to take. In the description phase, teachers accurately describe a teaching experience and determine where to focus their teaching. Through analysis the teaching event is more closely examined in order to derive meaning from the experience (Berliner, 1991, 2001; Kersting et al. 2012; Sherin & van Es, 2009). van Es and Sherin's (2002) Learning to Notice Framework focuses upon the analysis phase of Rodger's framework. van Es and Sherin emphasize the importance of taking an interpretive stance to viewing the teaching situation in order to understand what happened. Others have considered the role of evaluation within the reflective cycle. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) highlight the importance of evaluating experiences through re-examining experience in the light of one's intent and existing knowledge.

The final step in Rodgers' framework explicitly connects reflection and action. "Often those who write about reflection will stop before this final phase, forgetting that for Dewey, reflection must include action" (Rodgers, 2002, pg. 855). Dewey distinguishes between deliberate action based upon reflective practice, termed intelligent action, and other types of action. "Intelligent action is considered rather than impulsive and is shaped by data gathered from an experience" (Rodgers, 2002, p. 847).

In the framework below, the stages of description, analysis and call to action include an integrated interpretative stance and evaluative stance within the analysis phase. The interpretative stance provides the opportunities for teachers to understand the experience while an evaluative stance allows for critiquing the teaching experience based upon an understanding of the events. Therefore, within this framework evaluation cannot occur without first understanding the experience. Taken together, understanding and evaluating provides for opportunities of perceiving and explaining the meaning of action.

Table 1: Levels of Reflection

Levels	Description	Example
Description	Accurately describing the Experience	I began the lesson with a review on adjectives and synonyms.
Understanding	Interpreting the experience	When the students broke up into groups, being paired with other students who had a stronger foundation helped the struggling students gain a better understanding while still being able to participate in the discussion without step by step guidance.
Evaluation	Critiquing the strengths and weaknesses of the experience	In this lesson, my deliberate pairing of students provided better opportunities for student autonomy.
Call to Action	Based upon understanding and critique of experience, making recommendations for future experiences	In the next lesson, I allow for independent practice without teacher assistance.

Implementation of the Action Research for Teacher Development Model

Multiple opportunities for reflective practice within the action research process are essential. Therefore, video of a teacher's practice is used as an artifact for both collaborative and self-reflection. During the first cycle of the action research process, teachers video a normal classroom lesson on a subject area they would like to focus upon for the action research project. The teachers view and reflect upon the video with a peer group. The peer group provides insights, based upon common understandings of effective practice, on the teaching episode. Following the feedback, individual teachers write reflections and set an action research goal. For a full year, teachers to engage in multiple cycles of videotaping lessons and reflecting individually and collaboratively upon their practice working towards their action research goal. The peer group continues to provide support and insights throughout the year. The Action Research Model for Teacher Development is illustrated below.
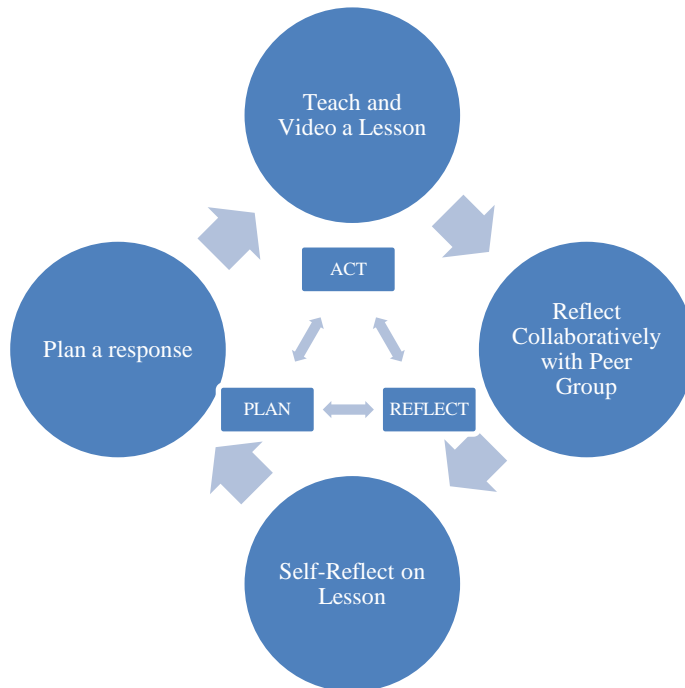
Figure 1: The Action Research Model for Teacher Development

Methodology

Through the year-long project Lauren's collaborative reflection peer group, comprised of Janelle, a 7th grade mathematics teacher, Florence, a 4th grade teacher, Jerry, a 4th grade English as a Second Language teacher, and Tricia, a district level coach of teachers met on a weekly basis. All five teachers had worked in the district for at least 10 years and all were working on completing an action research project using The Action Research Model for Teacher Development. The story of Lauren was chosen to tell as her journey is a powerful illustration of how purposeful reflection within the action research process can provide the supports necessary to change practice in purposeful ways.

Data Analysis

This study used case study methodology to afford us the opportunity to explore deeply Lauren's experiences and perspectives through the action research process (Creswell, 2007). A case study requires "extensive material from multiple sources of information to provide an in-depth picture of the case" (Creswell, 2007, p. 96). Multiple data sources included transcribed collaborative dialogue sessions, written self-reflections captured through Lauren's reflective log, and Kim's research journal capturing her observations over the full year. Five dialogue sessions of Lauren and her peers viewing and discussing her videos were videoed and transcribed. Each collaborative dialogue session was approximately 60 minutes. Immediately following the viewing of each of the videos in their peer groups Lauren wrote in a reflection log her thoughts from viewing the video with her peers. In addition, the reflective log served to capture Lauren's thoughts on the implementation of the action research project.

To construct the case study, open coding of the self-reflective log, researcher journal, and transcripts of all collaborative dialogue sessions was used to generate categories that indicated a pattern of teacher change. Next, a finer grained level of analysis was conducted to examine in-depth changes in reflective thought. To conduct this analysis, transcriptions were divided into "idea units" segments (Jacobs & Morita, 2002). Each time the conversation shifted to a new issue, it was coded as another idea unit. Idea units ranged from a minimum of one sentence or question to one paragraph. Dialogue sessions were coded according to the reflective framework; description, understanding, evaluation, and call to action. A fifth code of questions was added to the coding were assigned to questions asked in regards to the six dimensions. Lauren's self-reflective log was then analyzed using the same coding process.   Patterns between and within data sets were identified that allowed us to track Lauren's development.

To assure reliability of the findings, two types of triangulation were used. We used member-checking which allowed Lauren, as part of this process, to clarify and confirm interpretations at the end of the research project, while data triangulation insured that the data sources were compared to provide corroborating evidence (Yin, 2003).

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed Lauren progressed through stages along a trajectory of development that led to intentional change in practice. Through the process Lauren recognized the need for change, reframed her practice based upon new understandings, reexamined her practices, and intentionally restructured her practice.

Recognizing the Need for Change

Lauren began the action research process sharing a video of her teaching a writing lesson to her 29 students, including 11 English Language Learners. Lauren chose to show a writing lesson as she explained to her peers she was challenged to provide instruction to all 29 students in the area of writing. During the first peer collaborative session, Lauren provided an overview of how she teaches writing instruction. As she watched the video with her peers she focused on her own delivery of the instruction.

Lauren: I said "OK" to the students too often.

Janelle: I think that helps the students feel more comfortable.

Florence: I say it all the time.

Lauren: I don't know. I think it is annoying.

Lauren: I also spent the first twenty minutes of the lesson going over content information and making sure they understood the directions; so I spent 33% of the lesson giving directions while the students sat on the carpet and got antsy. Once they were in their seat, I spent more time (about 10 more minutes) giving more directions which proved that the students did not understand what I was asking of them. (Collaborative Reflective Dialogue Session, October, 2012).

As illustrated by this excerpt the discourse of the first dialogue session between peers focused upon the management and organization of the classroom setting. However, during the second collaborative dialogue session, a shift in focus in the discourse between peers began to occur. Questions posed by her peer group encouraged Lauren formulate and articulate her reasons for her instructional decisions by considering student learning as illustrated below.

Lauren: I don't do guided writing for the higher students. I work with the kids who need help on punctuation and writing paragraphs but the others are independent so I always let them go.

Tricia: But why?

Lauren: I don't have support in my classroom for this.

Tricia: So, you don't differentiate the instruction because you don't have support?

Lauren: Yes, I don't know where to go with the instruction with the kids who are already writing well. How do I challenge them?

Jerry: I don't know. I would love to know how to best meet the needs of my students who already are doing well.

Janelle: Maybe a start would be to look at what the teachers are doing in 7th and 8th grade and use that to plan some lessons. They clearly don't do the same thing as 6th grade. (Collaborative Reflective Dialogue Session, November, 2012).

The discourse in the collaborative dialogue session served as a catalyst for Lauren to reconsider her instructional decisions. Her strategies were initially based upon the needs of the majority of her students, especially students needing additional support. However, after the collaborative reflective dialogue session, she reconsidered her instructional decisions from the perspective of students who have mastered grade level material. Building upon her peers' feedback she wrote,

I think I may be shortchanging my gifted students by assuming that since they are already on grade level they don't need further instruction in writing (Self-reflection, October, 2012)

The recognition of her students' needs represented the beginning steps for setting a goal for the improvement of practice. Based upon feedback from her peers and her own self-reflections, Lauren set an action research goal to differentiate writing instruction for five higher performing students in her class.

Reframing and Reexaming Practice

Over the next several weeks Lauren implemented a plan of action for differentiating the instruction to meet the needs of all the students in her classroom. However, differentiating the instruction proved to be very challenging. During the third collaborative dialogue session, she shared her challenges with her peers,

Lauren: I tried to differentiate the lesson but it was very difficult because there were so many students and I was very nervous. I am really trying to implement new techniques and ideas into

Writing Workshop but I am finding it very difficult. I keep trying to call small groups back that are on a higher level than where the rest of the class is but I have trouble deciding where to go with them.

Jerry: Is that the greatest challenge?

Lauren: Yes, they have already mastered many of the skills that I will be teaching in class. I just don't know how to develop separate lessons for them.

Tricia: Why don't you try a survey? (Collaborative Reflective Dialogue Session, November, 2012).

Not sure how to best differentiate the instruction, Lauren turned to her own students and asked them what they wanted to learn through a written questionnaire. She brought the questionnaires to share with her peers during the fourth collaborative dialogue session. The following excerpt illustrated how her peer group unpacked students' responses to reframe and reevaluate Lauren's understanding of her students' capacity to self-assess their learning.

Lauren: I decided to ask the kids what they wanted to learn through a questionnaire.

Jerry: What questions did you ask?

Lauren (showing student work): I asked them what their strengths and weaknesses were in writing.

Tricia: They provided specific feedback on their strengths and weaknesses. They have a very good sense of what they know and need to learn.

Lauren: I know I was surprised to find out that my students said that they are the main ones that drive themselves to do their school work. I had figured that this would be true for several of the students but did not expect it from all of them.

Janelle: They provided great feedback. Now, the question for you is what are you going to do with this information? (Collaborative Dialogue Session, January, 2013).

This collaborative dialogue session was a turning point in the project for Lauren. She reevaluated the role of the students in her classroom and considered alternatives for instruction. As a result, Lauren empowered her students to take greater ownership of their learning through structuring peer group writing sessions in which her students took a leadership role in the group.

Restructuring Practice

Lauren spent weeks restructuring her writing instruction with her students, providing opportunities for the students to lead their own lessons. The final video Lauren shared with her peer group was her small group of students working together on their writing. Through the discussion, her peer group evaluated the interactions between the students. Her peers noted, Tricia: The level of questioning between the students was much higher in this video. The students are asking higher order thinking questions of one another when talking about their writing.

Jerry: The students really took ownership of each other's writing. I am so impressed with the feedback they gave one another.

Lauren: Yes, the students are able to meaningfully discuss both their writing and the writing of their peers. They each had strengths and weaknesses and could build off each other. (Collaborative Dialogue Session, February, 2012).

Lauren's peers reaffirmed the structure of classroom afforded students opportunities to effectively lead their own lessons that allowed all students to work at their own level. After the peer group session Lauren wrote,

I was very pleased with this lesson and the feedback I received. Going into the class, I wasn't sure if what I was doing with my students was working. After watching the video and listening to the feedback, I can see that I really am making a difference in the children's metacognition about themselves as writers and also as learners. (Self- Reflective Log, February, 2013).

The changes Lauren made in her writing instruction continued over the course of the year. At the end of the project Lauren wrote,

The direction of the project developed in very different ways than I had initially planned. Originally, I had thought that I would be planning specialized lessons that provided a greater challenge for these higher-performing students. However, I discovered that the students wanted to take control of their own learning and not be catered to. They wanted to be given an idea or task but with the freedom to do what they want with it. This discovery completely changed the direction that my action research was headed. (Self-Reflective Log, May, 2013).

Discussion

The tensions and challenges that Lauren experienced teaching higher achieving students in a classroom with a wide range of learners are not unusual. Loveless, Farkas, and Duffett (2008) found teachers are much more likely to indicate that struggling students, not advanced students, are their top priority. Furthermore, the study found low-achieving students receive dramatically more attention from teachers than higher achieving students. Through this process, Lauren identified this problem in her classroom, unpacked the reasons for the reasons for the problem and resolved those tensions through restructuring her teaching approach in ways that empowered all students in the classroom.

Studying Lauren's trajectory of change through the Action Research Model for Teacher Development provided a glimpse into how one teacher was able to engage in this model to restructure her instruction around an identified problem.   The first step in Lauren's journey was recognizing the need to change practice by focusing upon student learning as opposed to teaching. This shift was instrumental for Lauren to begin to understand and evaluate how her current instructional approach of teaching writing was limiting the development of some of the students in her classroom. The discourse with her peers afforded Lauren the opportunity to unpack the reasons behind the instructional decisions she was making. Specifically, questions asking Lauren to explain her instructional choices focused Lauren on recognizing the needs of her students.

As she began to reframe her own understandings of the effects of her instructional decision, Lauren began to make change to her own practices. However, the challenges of managing the differentiated classroom led Lauren to reexamine the practices she was enacting. The frustration of the challenge of implementing differentiated instruction could have caused regression along the path to enacting change. However, the voices of others became instrumental for Lauren to progress. The responses of her students created possibilities for teaching that shifted the responsibility of the learning process from teacher directed to student centered. As a result of the process Lauren challenged her own assumptions, restructured her belief system, and enacted intentional change in her classroom.

The intentional change of practice based upon well-developed understandings of practice is the final step of Dewey's conception of reflective thought in which the relationship between reflection and action is clear. According to Dewey, "Intelligent action is considered rather than impulsive and is shaped by data gathered from an experience."   Rodgers (2002) further elaborates, " [t]he consequent action that one takes is "intelligent" and qualitatively different from routine action because of the thought that has preceded it" (p. 855).

Recursive Process of Self and Peer Reflection

The recursive nature of group and self-reflections within the action research process was instrumental for expanding Lauren's capacity to reflect upon her practice which provided the foundation to enact change. Initially, Lauren described her practices based upon her own experiences as teacher of this class of students. However, peer discourse in the collaborative reflection sessions served as a catalyst for Lauren to increasingly deepen her understandings of practice and evaluate her own practices in light of the new understandings. As Lauren reexamined her practices based upon new understandings of her students, her peer group challenged her to take action based upon her new understandings. The recommendations by peers prompted Lauren to contemplate alternative instructional practices that led her to restructure how to meet her goals of differentiated instruction. The development of critical reflection in which Lauren was able to evaluate her teaching in light of the new understandings was essential for change.

Teacher development must emanate from within the teacher; however it cannot happen in isolation. Vygotsky (1978) found learning occurs in two planes, first on the social level and then on the individual level (p. 57). The intersection of collaborative and self-reflection provided the opportunity for learning within a social context to enhance individual learning. The development of reflective thought through the recursive process supported Lauren's individual trajectory of development.

Conclusion

The outcome of Lauren's action research project differed greatly from her original intent. She initially planned to differentiate the instruction to meet the needs of all her students however, her initial plan of differentiation was based upon a complete teacher-directed model of instruction that created challenges for implementation in Lauren's large classroom. Through peer and self-reflection embedded within the action research process Lauren developed a greater capacity to critically reflect on her practice as she progressed through developmental steps that culminated in change in practice.

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