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Digital oral feedback written assignments as professional learning for teacher educators: A collaborative self-study.

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Abstract

Allan Luke (2008) uses a “pedagogical economy where literacy education is taken as a cultural gift”. This paper reports on the digital oral feedback provided to pre-service teachers in a literacy unit and explores the pedagogical gift this feedback is to the teacher educators marking this work. Rather than mark their written work as individual lecturers, we collaboratively read the assignment and recorded the sound file of the conversation around each assignment. We then participated in another conversation with a critical friend, which enabled us to explore the impact of this form of assessment on our professional identities as teacher educators. We found these conversations provided a rich context for our professional learning about ourselves as teacher educators, as well as specific content knowledge we both brought to the teaching of this unit. We found we were working as a team to provide more in-depth feedback of the assessment criteria for each assignment than we did with written feedback. Through this dialogical feedback we were able to construct the pre-service teachers' assignments as an important textual gift in our collaborative professional learning about assessment, and in exploring our beliefs and practices as teacher educators.

Introduction

Luke (2008, p.68) described a “pedagogical economy where literacy education is taken as a cultural gift”. This paper reports on a self-study of the digital oral feedback provided to pre-service teachers in a literacy unit, and explores the ‘pedagogical gift’ this feedback provided to the two teacher educators, Glenn and Avis, marking this work. Rather than mark their written work as individual lecturers, Glenn and Avis collaboratively read the assignment and recorded the sound file of the conversation around each assignment. They found these conversations provided a rich context for their professional learning about teaching literacy, as well as highlighting specific content knowledge that they both brought to the teaching of this unit. They found that working as a team enabled them to provide more in-depth feedback of the assessment criteria for each assignment than was previously the case for assignments with written feedback. Through this dialogical feedback Glenn and Avis were able to construct the pre-service teachers' assignments as an important textual gift for their collaborative professional learning. A further ‘layer’ of self-study involved the participation of a critical friend, Judy, who worked with Glenn and Avis to explore their learning about assessment in more depth, with a particular focus on their beliefs and professional identity as teacher educators. This stage went beyond the ‘moderation’ aspect of Glenn and Avis’s work, and added a level of analysis that focussed on the ‘self’ of the teacher educators in order to better understand their teaching practices. Self study in relation to teaching and researching practice helps us “to better understand: oneself; teaching; learning; and the development of knowledge about these” (Loughran, 2004a, p.9). The central tenets of self-study research include: concern with the links between the self, teaching practice and student learning; questioning of taken for granted assumptions about teaching and learning; making private reflection public; challenging teachers to ‘deconstruct’ their practice; the centrality of collegial approaches and support; and a focus on tensions, dilemmas, and challenges (Loughran, J., M.L. Hamilton, V. LaBoskey, and T. Russell 2004). Hanson (2009) argued that the ‘lived realities’ of academics should have a greater presence in the research literature on teaching in higher education. Self-study is one way in which such lived realities can be explored in a personal and public space. The growing body of self-study research in

the field of teacher education (see, for example, Berry 2007; Brandenburg 2008; Bullock, 2011) is testament to the importance that an increasing number of teacher educators attach to examining their own practice in order to more deeply understanding their pedagogy and professional identity. In this self-study, the focus was on an exploration of how innovative ways of assessing student learning is also a means by which teacher educators can explore their own professional learning.

Context of the study

When we (Glenn and Avis) told our fellow teacher educators that we were looking forward to marking with excitement and anticipation, we did get some interesting responses. In our attempt to make the marking of a literacy unit more efficient, we provided the pre-service teachers with digital oral feedback rather than written comments on their final assessment item. We provided each of approximately 85 pre-service teachers with a conversation about their assignment, and we also recorded separate conversations about our reflection on marking each student's work immediately after. In addition to these conversations, we met with a critical friend, Judy, who facilitated a further discussion about our professional learning based on her listening to our recorded reflections. In this paper we use cultural-historical theory (also known as socio-cultural theory) to frame our exploration of how pre-service teachers' assignments acted as a 'pedagogical gift' (Luke, 2009) to our professional learning as teacher educators, and to the outcomes of our collegial discussions. The research question for this study was: *How did the use of collaborative digital assessment impact on our professional learning and identities as teacher educators?*

Theoretical perspective

John-Steiner and Mahn (2006) suggest that "cultural-historical theory is based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development" (p. 2) Vygotsky's (1981) search for a methodology or system to explain the relations of learning and development, gave shape to the concept of *mediation*. Mediation is a relational concept and considered central to cultural-historical theory. Vygotsky (1981) argued that artefacts as mediation tools facilitated and shaped learning, and in turn, were shaped through interaction.

In cultural-historical research, the notion of mediation provides the conceptual link between the subject (persons), settings/contexts (mediation means) and the changing cultural tools (objects/motives) used in daily life. Studies of mediated action grounded in Vygotsky's ideas focus on socio-cultural situated-ness and on language (Kozulin, A.,1986; Moll, 2001). Daniels (2001) however, suggested that the researcher needed to go further in order to "examine issues such as the conditions that have given rise to cultural tools, and the constraints as well as affordances associated with them" (p. 83). Furthermore, Daniels (2001) observed that "...the analysis of mediated action is concerned with how humans employ cultural tools in social and individual processes" (p. 83). Vagan (2011) wrote about interactional positioning and quality of vocal utterances in our institutional work with colleagues and students. He drew on Bakhtin's argument that "both written and spoken discourses are constituted by several different social languages and social genres, each often associated with certain characters, ideologies, professions and perspectives" (p.46), in order to alert researchers to give attention to cultural shaping and artefacts. It is evident in our work as teacher educators that paying attention to language exchange and new technologies that mediate our institutional practices helps us to examine our professional identity in a holistic way.

Stetsenko and Arievitch (2006) advocate the use of cultural-historical theory for transformation of thinking about educational practices, and bring us to the idea of a practice theorist through quoting Kurt Lewin: "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" (p. 78). Stetsenko (2007) moves this idea further by adding that "there is nothing more theoretical than a good practice" (2007, CHACDOC Symposium). Stetsenko pointed to a key feature of cultural-historical theory in that it is grounded in both activity and practice, in particular times and places. It is argued by some scholars

(e.g. Edwards, 2010; Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2005; Wertsch, 1985, 1998, 2007), that the observed world can be turned into new representations through reflection on, and theorization of, the institutional practices observed in research participation. The notion that scholarship grows from reflection on practices in activity helps explicate our shared intentions of marking a very large number of assessments as well as researching this work as a gift to our teacher practice. Professional learning is served through grounding our work in both activity and practice and through the conversational discussion that expressed and mediated different perspectives on institutional processes that relate to our work as teacher educators.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research was collaborative self-study. The clear connection between research and practice that is central to Stetsenko, and other cultural historical theorists, made this an appropriate methodology for the study. The collaborative design of the research began with Glenn and Avis reflecting on their learning from the marking of each assignment, which was captured on a sound file immediately after each assignment was marked for later analysis in this study. Glenn and Avis collaboratively analysed these sound files using ‘practice dynamics’ that is grounded in cultural-historical theory. Chaiklin (2008) and Lave (2008) describe cultural-historical researchers as ‘practice theorists,’ suggesting that a researcher can’t understand a person without seeing their activities in relation to the social and institutional practices in which these activities are grounded. The practice dynamics within which research subjects operate and the tools/objects used help to inform their institutional participation, which is open to on-going changes in settings over time (Ridgway, 2009). In Glenn and Avis’s analysis they were asking questions such as: *How is the organisation entered into in actual practices? How is our work coordinated? What are the coordinating texts? and What is the pedagogical discourse beyond those texts?* (Smith, & Griffiths, 2011). After Glenn and Avis reviewed and analysed their data, a fellow teacher educator, Judy, acted as a ‘critical friend.’ Judy listened to the sound files recorded by Glenn and Avis, and noted any references to dilemmas, tensions or opportunities for professional learning that were worthy of following up. These issues were then discussed in a three-way conversation, which was recorded and later analysed by Judy. We felt it was important to include a ‘critical friend’ in the research design because as Loughran (2004b) argued, “the learning as a result of collaboration in self-study [is] linked to the opportunity to access alternative perspective on situations [and] ...helps practitioners to see beyond their own ‘world views’ and to broaden their perspective on situations in meaningful ways” (p. 158).

Findings

We are presenting the findings of this study in two sections. The first section explores the professional learning that Avis and Glenn identified in their analysis of the sound files made after providing oral feedback to students. The second section outlines the professional learning identified through the conversation with Judy, our critical friend. The findings within and between each section are not mutually exclusive and we found it hard to categorise the professional learning in our analysis of the data. However, we better understood how the expansion of opportunity to reflect together and then to reflect on our own reflections, both together and then with Judy, brought to our notice the dynamic influences and shaping of our work within institutional systems.

The professional learning in the practice dynamics of digital marking (Glenn and Avis)

Our professional learning was framed by a coordinated attunement of practices around the marking. Both of us brought to the marking a history of practices, including differing histories with digital marking. Glenn had used digital oral feedback in some units before this research, and Avis had insights into the opportunities that digital feedback provides when we collaborated in the double marking of some fails in a previous unit. We found that, in the context of this research with two computers, three computer screens, marking sheets, images of student faces, we intuitively developed a method of ‘producing’ the feedback to the student and to ourselves in this complex

textual environment. The professional learning was framed by the collaborative practice that developed in this environment to make the practice of marking a workable task. Edwards and D'arcy's (2004) idea of *relational agency* is useful in articulating this developing professional collaborative practice. "Relational agency is not simply a matter of collaborative action on an object. Rather it is a capacity to recognize and use the support of others in order to transform the object" (Edwards & D'arcy, 2004, p.149). We transformed the assignment as an object of marking to one of professional learning, using our previous knowledge and respect for collaborative multitasking that had quickly developed in this space. We identified the need to support each other, which Edwards and D'arcy (2004) identified as a central tenet of relational agency, and this support was integral in the reciprocity we developed in this collaborative professional environment.

Although we outlined the attunement developed with each other's practices, we also found that contested what we counted as evidence in the marking process. It was apparent that, because Avis had taught most of the unit, she was relying on a relational knowledge of the student while Glenn attempted to match the student work to the rubric. We found this was a rich conversation in our professional learning, particularly around what Daniels (2001) describes as cultural tools. Glenn was using the rubric as the primary textual tool while Avis was using a sheet of images of student pictures as well as the rubric in determining the student mark. We had found our reflections often returned to the texts we valued in the marking process and this led to conversations about our changing workplace practices, for example, teaching units through Open Universities Australia. Glenn has taught a unit in this mode for several years while Avis expressed concerns about the lack of relational grounding in this method of teacher education. While the focus on relationships in teaching is not a new phenomenon (Comber & Nixon, 2009), the role these relationships play in the marking of student work, and ultimately what we counted as evidence to ascertain a mark, was an ongoing conversation between Glenn and Avis. We found that the dialogue provided for the students was a rich source for our professional learning. Just as the students negotiated the outcomes of the unit through completing the assignment, we negotiated our *ideological becoming* in the process of collaboratively reading and providing feedback for each assignment. We found our minds were "populated with a complexity of voices and perspectives (we) had not known" (Morson 2004, p.330) and we were testing our ideas and experiences against each assignment and each other's response to this assignment. We left this experience confirmed that the research on self has moved away from "essentialist and context-independent notions of individual possessions (e.g. personality traits, attributes) towards viewing the self as being embedded within socio-cultural contexts and intrinsically interwoven with them" (Stetsenko & Arieviditch, 2004, p.475).

Perspectives of a critical friend (Judy)

When I joined Glenn and Avis in a conversation about their professional learning and identity as teacher educators, my aim was not to examine their approach to assessment, but to delve more deeply into the insights and understandings of the professional learning that had taken place as a result of collaborating in this new form of assessment. I was hoping to uncover some issues, challenges and insights that they had perhaps not recognised in their own conversations and analysis, to which I had no access until the drafting of this paper.

Our conversation revealed several key ideas that I believe were significant for Glenn and Avis's understanding of their professional learning. The data highlighted the high level of emotional engagement that this type of assessment demanded. When discussing their collaborative assessment, Glenn and Avis used words such as '*liberating, exciting, respectful, hopeful, trusting, exhausting, disempowering, worried and concerned.*' I was keen to delve more deeply into the emotional landscape of this type of assessment because I don't believe this is well documented. In our discussion, I particularly wanted to explore the idea of vulnerability. My perception was that in this type of assessment and dialogue, Glenn and Avis were 'laying bare' inner thoughts and feelings in a way that is not usual when assessing students' work. When prompted about her feelings of

vulnerability, Avis stated that she “*didn’t feel vulnerable at all, not a bit.*” She was excited by the possibilities presented by this assessment practice, and repeated several times that she believed it was an example of a ‘pedagogy of hope.’ Glenn, however, appeared more circumspect, and stated that he felt “*scared and worried,*” stating that he was concerned that his preferred way of teaching (i.e. using digital technologies for teaching rather than relying on traditional face to face contact with students) had the potential to “*disempower*” A in her preferred ‘relational’ approach to teaching. Glenn went on to discuss the notion of ‘humanity’ in teaching, and the implications of on-line and distance learning for the human relationships perceived to be essential to teaching. Both Glenn and Avis acknowledged that their sense of self as teacher educators is integral with their relationships with their students, but how these relationships were formed and sustained appeared to be different for each of them. For Avis, it was important to “*know the student,*” even to the point of having a photo of them as one of the artefacts she used to assist in her assessment of their work. Glenn, however, was more comfortable with the idea of not knowing students personally, having just completed teaching a distance education unit in which there was no face to face contact. He was quite confident to allow texts/artefacts/technology to mediate the relationship, but held some concerns about the implications for this for teacher educators’ work. Glenn expressed concern that, while the ‘learning space’ which they had opened up allowed for “*shared intentions and accommodating different perspectives,*” there was also the potential for his future pedagogical direction (using digital technologies) to threaten the pedagogical values (e.g. relational aspects) that Avis brought to the assessment of student work.

This raised some interesting questions for teacher educators: How can we acknowledge and respect a range of epistemological and ontological beliefs in a ‘shared space’ of professional learning, without one being regarded as more valued/valuable than the other/s? How do we negotiate the interplay between ‘humanity’ and ‘technology’ in teaching? Are they mutually exclusive? It also exposed potential tensions that could arise in collaborative endeavours in teacher education practices such as collaborative assessment.

Conclusions

We entered this experience attempting to de-colonise the practice of assessment of pre-service teachers’ assignments and reinhabit this space as a site of rich professional learning. Our findings showed that this was achieved by using appropriate digital tools that promoted a dialogue between the teacher educators, and by framing each assignment as a pedagogical gift to our professional learning. Our pedagogical practices were mediated through the dynamic forms of our shared interactions. These forms are made evident by examining the words of action we used in our sound recording reflections. Our dialogue was characterised by Glenn expressing and Avis re-expressing, Avis constructing and Glenn re-constructing, Glenn, using new ideas, Avis reusing these ideas, Glenn and Avis developing turn taking and generating reflective debate. Our professional learning, therefore, involved us in pedagogical exchange, mediated by interactions that were characterised by a sharing of different knowledges and the generation of new thinking about relational processes in institutional practices. Through this collaborative self study we learned the pedagogical gift of each assignment can be complemented with dialogue with a critical friend as a way of attempting improve our ‘ideological becoming’ (Morson, 2004) as teacher educators. As a result we took from this research a ‘pedagogy of hope’ (Freire & Freire, 2004) that we can improve our teaching through active collaboration and dialogue between teacher educators, irrespective of the challenging times that contextualise our professional learning. We were also able to open up conversations about substantial issues in teacher education that went beyond our immediate teaching context, and that posed questions critical to teacher educators more broadly.

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