Dialogue Practices in Teacher Education Classrooms

Students and Teacher Educators' Perceptions

Leslie M. Gauna, Christine Beaudry, Jane McIntosh Cooper, & Gayle A. Curtis

Teacher Education   Dialogue   https://equitypress.org/

[The professor] did not create a comfortable or safe classroom environment for me. She was extremely biased and I feel like we only addressed things the way she wanted them to be addressed [during discussions].

This comment from a course evaluation taught by one of the authors was echoed by a small group of classmates. At that time, we were teacher educators engaged in a longitudinal collaborative self-study in its eighth year to better understand and improve our practices. We named our research-collaborative "hub" Chicas Críticas, (Cooper et al., 2019) alluding to our shared critical theory perspective in our formative years as educators becoming scholars. All three members plus our critical friend (and author) identify as cisgender female, two as white and one as Hispanic. Our critical friend is also white. The three Chicas, we taught with the same years of experience at three different Hispanic-Serving-Institutions anchored in large metropolitan areas in two of the top ten American states were numeric and percentage population growth (Census Bureau, 2019).

The striking dissonance revealed by this student's comments between intent and outcome left us feeling like a "living contradiction" (Whitehead, 2000). This devastating interpretation of our teaching practice and intentions, along with another critical incident involving guest speakers (Cooper et al., 2018; Gauna et al., 2019) and previous findings from our longitudinal self-study, combined were the *provocation* (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 1998) for a new inquiry. Specifically, we examined how we approach classroom discussion and dialogue, how these approaches are perceived by our students, and how we can use student perceptions to further understand and evolve our practices by aligning more closely with our values, thus improving students' experiences and outcomes. Recognizing the varied dimensions of dialogue (Howe & Abedin, 2013), we take a multiple-perspectives approach rooted in critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 1988; hooks, 1994) and constructivism (Bruner, 1986). These perspectives advocate privileging student voice, democratizing power and knowledge, and acquiring knowledge as an act of transacting and negotiating meaning (Bruner, 1986). Critical pedagogy considers teaching as liberation through "dialogical and problem-posing education" (Freire, 2005, p. 40) where teachers and students are (re)creators of their own knowledge and understandings (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004).

In both perspectives dialogue is part of teaching and learning. In critical pedagogy, "crucial to [the learning] is the element of dialogue…[which] provides students with the opportunity of experiencing…the dynamics of participatory democracy" (Giroux, 1988, p. 39). Integrating a critical approach to self-study offers potential to illuminate tensions such as dissonance between intent and outcome reflected in the student's comment, and to uncover unintentional perpetuations of dominant power structures through pedagogical practices (Ragoonaden, 2015). From the

constructivist perspective, the co-construction of knowledge is how we learn or engage in meaning-making. Through "transactions with one another" (Bruner, 1986, p. 63), we construct meaning in this "semi-connected knowledge of the world from which, through negotiation, people arrive at satisfactory ways of acting in given contexts" (p. 65). The centrality of dialogue to our pedagogy and evidence of opportunities for us to refine this aspect of our practices led us to the focus of this collaborative self-study. Although literature distinguishes between dialogue and discussion (Howe & Abedin, 2013), our students used these terms interchangeably, so while we focused on dialogue, comments from students often referenced both.

Aims

The wonderings that guided our study to improve practice were:

- How did students interpret our approaches to dialogue? What were the aspects of our approaches that students found most memorable?

- How did we interpret students' feedback about our approaches to dialogue to further understand and improve our practices?

Methods

From the student perspective, this collaborative self-study utilized data collected from 155 students in three separate teacher education institutions in the Southwestern United States, including pre-post surveys, reflections, exit tickets-out-of-class, online discussions, end-of-year student-instructor interviews, and instructor evaluations. Emphasis is explicitly placed on students' feedback in an effort to privilege student voice. This recognizes that it is crucial to inquire into students' interpretations of our intended approaches, which ultimately inform their experiences and perspectives. This reflects both our orientations as critical and constructivist educators as well as the purpose of this self-study to inquire into our practices to improve student experience and outcomes. Our teacher educator perspective was gathered from weekly journals and meeting conversations (recorded, transcribed, and captured in a shared document). Accuracy of understanding was checked using a dialogue protocol, re-reading notes, and revising writings. Data analysis involved coding student responses then collectively identifying intersecting narratives/emergent themes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) through critical professional dialogue (Guilfoyle et al., 2004) that included insights from our critical friend at different stages of this research. Seeking establish trustworthiness (Mishler, 1990) as grounded in the authority of experience (Munby & Russell, 1994), the exemplars used, represent real-life testimonies/experiences from our practice (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002) were taken from classroom artifacts including, reflections, exit tickets, and class evaluations, unless otherwise noted—and are direct quotes from students.

Outcomes

The tapestry of voices metaphor captures the three-fold purpose of dialogue that we consider helpful in categorizing our findings: (1) enacting pedagogy, (2) building relationships, and (3) co-construction of knowledge. These categories simultaneously interact when dialogue occurs among student-teacher candidates and instructors.

Dialogue as Enacting Pedagogy

For us as teacher educators and for our future-teacher students, *what* we teach (content) and *how* we teach (pedagogy) is always in sight (Russell, 2007). Students' references to dialogue provided insight into what *we say we do* compared to what *they say we do* in our attempts to make dialogue happen.

Grouping, Facilitation, and Consistency in Dialogue. Grouping practices notoriously elicited comments such as the following, which was echoed by many other students: "I especially LOVED mixing our groups! I could say that I genuinely have done meaningful experiences with every student here." Another singled out a regrouping technique during class,

stating, "I do like the clock-partners idea so there is more movement." In resonance with the two previous comments, one student expanded on mixing up the groups and the role of the facilitator:

> I liked that you frequently opened the space for us to collaborate in a variety of groups. You made it a requirement at times to mix up our groups, and that was good to help us create a stronger sense of community. You do a good job of prompting discussions without ruling over them.

Here, the student recognized the purposeful, diverse ways we organized groupings while making sense of what it takes to facilitate dialogue, suggesting students value facilitation that guides rather than "rules over" student exchanges (Schuitema et al., 2018). Other behaviors perceived by students noted that the professor:

- "allow[ed] students to listen to each other and [gave] back feedback in a respectful manner."

- "introduc[ed] a topic for a discussion, and indicat[ed] the sensitivity involved. This I believe create[d] an environment for openness, while being respected."

- "consistently fostered a classroom where all viewpoints were welcome."

These students' perceptions show the value attributed to consistency—or certain predictability—in the way we enacted our facilitator roles, despite the unpredictability of the outcomes. Testifying on how students saw themselves as future facilitators one student wrote, "I LOVED the way you handled...the one angry guy's questions. I actually learned from the way you answered him and I will handle similar students the same way." This feedback shows the student anticipating having to manage future difficult situations by emulating our dialogue practices as a resource.

The Preferred Format: Small Groups. Small group discussions were explicitly singled out—and at times demanded—by students as a preferred mode of organizing dialogue. Throughout the semester students acknowledged not only the challenges but also the value of dialoguing in small groups. One student wrote, "I enjoyed grouping into small groups, discussing ideas with others, and practicing listening protocols." Another student shared, "[I really liked] engaging in groups breaking down topics...talking in smaller groups. I am not a big talker in a large setting." Many students shared how they "eased up," finding "comfort" and "satisfaction" in the conversations as the semester went on. For others, dialogues elicited contradictory feelings, as shown in the following testimony: "Dialogue really helped to break up the lecture. It kept me engaged and pushed me out of my comfort zone. I don't really like working with other people."

Students' reasons for not engaging in small group dialogue alluded to anxiety, nervousness, feeling challenged to properly articulate their thoughts, language issues, or fear of offending someone with their divergent ideas. Several students confessed that they knew if they waited long enough, "someone else would speak." The following reflection shows the complexity of engaging in dialogue: "I am nervous when I know I am going to have a peer discussion in class. I am still nervous during, but calm down, especially in smaller groups. Afterward, I am usually okay and realize it was not that bad." The spectrum of reactions from nervousness to calmness and then relief revealed what engaging in dialogue entails.

Organizing Dialogue: Some Techniques. Agreeing with one of our student's insights that class discussions "have to be directed," some of the strategies we employed that were explicitly referenced were the following,

- "Evoking personal experiences...helps discussions emerge and make connections."

- "Ask questions related to real life experiences. Trust that your students have some basis of understanding."

- "Sharing favorite ideas you heard from each table maybe could motivate us to say something meaningful."

- "Encouraged to 'steal' ideas from one another...I think it is one of the most efficient methods to innovate students to learn."

All of these comments have in common addressing helpful ways to motivate students to talk. The last comment about the benefits of the technique as "most efficient" shows how students evaluated the techniques in two levels, how it

worked for them as learners, and also how it would work for their future students in general.

In other comments students specifically identified what they should do when enacting dialogue while being teachers. One student wrote: "I learned that teachers should allow students to talk in class." Another went to the extent of sharing at her placement-school what was seen as effective which was to "have students talk at their table so there is no pressure to talk in class…I told this to cooperating teachers where I am observing and they liked that idea." This last comment gave us a sense of being understood on how we enacted dialogue, reaching the point where the candidate is able to teach the practice to other educators.

Building Relationships: A Prerequisite for and Result of Dialoguing

Students' feedback determined that dialogue is dependent upon relationships. As declared in one of several similar testimonies we collected, "in order to create class discussions we needed to build relationships and I think we accomplished that with your help." In this statement, the building of relationships is explained as a prerequisite to creating dialogue and it highlights the important role of the instructor as a facilitator. A second testimony reads: "[small group discussions] really help to build strong relationships with peers and with the professor." In this comment, relationships are a result of dialoguing. The following comment explains the notion of "everyone" involved in classroom relationships: "I learned that the bonds made, made everyone (student and teacher) more willing to help each other." Resonating with Critical pedagogy principles of democratic practices, the teacher is one more participant in the community of collaborators. According to students' feedback, features present in building relationships as part of dialogue are a safe, comfortable, and positive environment.

A dialogue-conducive environment can elicit and allow for strong feelings. As teacher educators, we strive to "create an environment of trust and reciprocity [for a]…caring relational climate" where dialogue will occur (Lysaker & Furuness, 2011, p.189). Contrasting the testimony that was the initial provocation for our study, to describe the environment in our classrooms, students used words such as "very positive/fun," "comfortable enough for people to participate in," "open environment to be able to give input as well as provide our own thoughts," and where "everyone got to discuss without judgment."

From students' testimonies, the proper environment appeared both as a prerequisite and a result of making dialogue part of our pedagogic practices. In the following comment, dialogue is the needed prerequisite: "[One needs to] provide a safe environment and ask questions to further discussions." However, dialogue was also an enabler for that safe environment, as explained by this comment: "dialogue and discussion are a huge part of this course. I think it creates a comfortable, safe atmosphere for students to express their opinion." Students also demonstrated their appreciation of what helped in achieving that dialogue-conducive atmosphere:

> I thoroughly enjoyed the dialogue and discussion in the classroom this semester. It has been a comfortable learning environment and a positive learning environment. I like how you engage the students during class and how you sit and talk and create a conversation.

The simple act of sitting down with the students, also pointed out by other students' comments, "like if she was sitting at a dining table with everyone" was an image that caught us by surprise and highlighted the non-verbal ways we make dialogue happen. A dialogue-conducive environment is safe, not as non-critical, but safe as to deal with a level of discomfort where strong feelings are allowed to be expressed and students would still engage.

Numerous students expressed a range of feelings during peer discussions, such as in this comment, "I like peer discussions, I feel a little nervous going into it but once I start talking to another peer, I get comfortable." Emotions may oscillate from initial nervousness to comfort.

Another student also described his/her varied emotions in detail:

> Having discussions in class makes me feel a little uneasy, because I get nervous that I may say something that could hurt someone. Also, because I'm a bit worried about the judgement I may face. During the

discussions, it usually calms me down knowing that I'm not doing the discussions alone and afterwards I feel relieved to have gotten my points out.

The rich sequenced list of feelings beginning from being uneasy, nervous, and worried to becoming calm and relieved at the end manifest how feelings are at the heart of discussions (Stone et al., 1999). Those emotions might be strong as stated by one student: "depending on the topic it can make me anxious. Some topics I have strong opinions on and can be upset with others' bias [sic]." Another student shared, evoking his religious beliefs, "I usually get a fire during a discussion when God helps me see something new." The importance of gauging feelings works not just as a person but also as a socio-cultural rudder that can guide the pragmatics needed in dialoguing. As one student articulated: "sometimes [with peer discussions] it is easier to notice how someone feels about topics based on their tone." This last comment seems to echo another student's concern about "saying something that could hurt someone." Being careful about not hurting someone in a discussion is to be empathetic, a skill we want all our students to develop towards each other, and particularly towards minoritized populations they will teach.

In this section, we delved on relationship building in the practice of dialogue. We found that students' feedback insightfully determined that relationships enable dialogue and at the same time dialogue enables relationship building. We also reported on students' perception of the importance of the right environment for dialogue to happen and the feelings that might invariably elicit.

Dialogue as a Vehicle for Co-Construction of Knowledge

The umbrella term of co-construction of knowledge is helpful to look into dialogue as a pedagogy of engagement (hooks,1994), learning multiple perspectives by transactions with one another (Bruner, 1986), and a way to learn by constructing meaningfully and in-depth knowledge.

Dialogue as a Pedagogy of Engagement. What makes dialogue an essential practice of a pedagogy of engagement or an "engaged pedagogy" as coined by bell hooks (hooks, 1994, p. 13) is that dialogue, from a critical pedagogic perspective, opposes a "banking model of education" where the professors deposit knowledge into students as mere receivers (Freire, 2005). On the contrary, as explained by one of our students, a peer discussion "makes the class more inclusive, not just teacher to student participation. It makes me feel like the students get to guide the class" instead of all the power residing in the professor (Giroux, 1988). Our facilitation style was characterized as non-intrusive as one student, echoed by many others, wrote, the "teacher allowed students to communicate and be dependent on one another and only stepped in if need be." Students seemed to infer that in order for engagement to happen the role of the teacher is to facilitate dialogue, preferably student to student, with a non-imposing teacher-presence. It seems that dialogue as a pedagogy of engagement was indirectly echoed by our students' perceptions of our practices.

Learning through Multiple Perspectives. Students in its vast majority expressed that they have learned from each other obtaining different perspectives. One such comment, emblematic of many others, is "talking…exposed me more to understanding other people's values [sic]." We interpret that it was the reciprocal transactions of meaning that elicited comments such as "for me discussion and dialogue were critical. It allowed me not only to share my thoughts but also to get other viewpoints." Attributed to this process of acquiring multiple perspectives was the centrality to be able to both listen and speak. "The most important element in a conversation is to listen. I never realized that listening is easier said than done" wrote one student and was echoed by many others. Equally essential, highlighted by students' comments, was the needed assurance that "each student had a platform to vocalize any of their ideas or opinions" as students felt they had experienced. Students seemed to realize that "groups helped create debates and listen[ing] to each other's perspectives. They [were] an important way to learn." One comment highlighted the benefits of "pairing up with different 'experts' and sharing your knowledge with one another." Another student stated that discussions helped him/her "learned the most 'perspective' especially from all those that already teach. " These identified benefits were further explained through the following comment that hints at a sense of periodic exposure to discussions and dialogue,

> *I feel we were able to teach each other through discussion. We all got better at knowing what to look for and gave great feedback. If we don't have a dialogue, I would have missed out on great activity suggestions, on the ability to see weaknesses [in certain lessons],*

We consider this explicit mentioning of getting-better at recognizing content that could be improved upon and at providing and taking feedback, a clear example of co-construction of knowledge as a way to learn multiple perspectives through dialogue.

Meaningful Knowing: Depth in Dialogue. Students articulated that through dialogue the learning became meaningful and deep, as it reads in this comment, "I really enjoyed the discussions as they always seemed to lead to more deep and meaningful chats." We can infer the meaning of "deep" by contrast with other ways of acquiring content knowledge such as explained in this testimony, "the dialogue and discussion has really been the foundation of this class. The strong connections and understandings that I have/am developing were so much more substantial than an online discussion or textbook analysis."

In this characterization of dialogue as a way to achieve depth, students not only reflected about their learning process but also, they envision themselves as future educators, as shown in this feedback, "discussions helped me to reflect on using more meaningful talks in my class to have my students think deeper about topics and concepts." In this self-identification as a future teacher, they placed themselves in our shoes as instructors and asserting, "You ask people to dig deeper on why they feel a certain way."

Implications

Two clear implications emerged from our findings: a progression of awareness about dialogue as pedagogy by our teacher candidates, and affirmation and refinement of our approaches to dialogue.

Varying Awareness of Dialogue as Pedagogy

Student feedback about dialogue suggested that students underwent a progression of awareness: from engaging in dialogue as learners to considering dialogue as teachers-to-be. First, students evaluated experience with dialogue in relation to their own learning. Second, "students placed themselves in the instructor's shoes" (authors' conversations), imagining how they might enact complex pedagogy in their future classrooms. Third, students formulated values about dialogue as a pedagogical principle. These suggest that when students perceive value in their experiences with dialogue in the classroom, they are more likely to reflect upon how those experiences were facilitated, and in turn incorporate dialogue into their future teaching practice. Our analysis of students' feedback in this self-study suggested that we better aligned our goals and practices.

Affirming and Refining our Dialogue Practices in the Classroom

Student feedback affirmed the variety of techniques we used to organize classroom dialogue to encourage both listening and speaking. Students welcomed our planned, purposeful, and structured grouping arrangements prompting varied interactions with classmates and appreciated the predictability facilitated by our dialogue practice. Resulting from this feedback we restructured our weekly professional dialogues within the Chicas Críticas (Guilfoyle et al., 2004) by first "connecting with each other sharing personal experiences, using similar listening and speaking protocols" (authors' conversations). We were reminded of the importance of the time needed for this process to build relationships and enable the co-construction of knowledge emerging from multiple perspectives. Several former students that are now in the field have emphasized that our modeling and our conversations about dialogue have supported their own facilitation of classroom discussions. It has been a reciprocal process.

We were surprised at our students' awareness of the emotional complexity involved with engaging in dialogue and the reasons for not engaging. The insight made us decide to be more explicit in warning students about the emotions that might emerge when we ask them to participate in dialogue. "The word vulnerability has been helpful" (authors'

conversations) to understand what was an ingredient that allowed for connection, depth, and production of knowledge to happen. As a result, empathy has been placed at the forefront of our teaching and not just in discussions.

Our students' noticing of our body postures and proximity when we participated in the discussions was a new insight. We had previously overlooked our habit of sitting among students. We believe that by voicing how embodiment is "linked to a range of semiotic resources that people draw on to communicate" (Block, 2014, p. 61) we could "refine the teaching of non- verbal ways we communicate as participants or facilitators" (authors' conversations) depending on the cultural context. The greater recognition of and explicit attention to the embodied aspects of dialogue reflects a substantive shift in changing how we model and discuss our approaches with our own students.

Finally, after reading our students' comments, and recalling our interactions in the classroom, we noticed that the three of us, have used immersive and interactive modeling of activities with discussions about both what students noticed from a learner perspective (how it felt to participate) and from a pedagogical perspective (what was accomplished and how). "In spite of time constraints, we purposefully held conversations about pedagogy and constructivist approaches" (Authors' conversations) and while students often made connections among their experiences, approaches to dialogue, and their own future practices, they did not root these in their broader philosophies and values as educators. The dialogue was not explicitly connected to critical pedagogy or constructivism principles, nor to other defined pedagogical theories. This study has strengthened our understandings of how dialogue offers a constructivist approach to learning and enables students to make connections to dialogue in ways that encourage and prepare them to use it in their own practices. We conclude by wondering how important it is to make these considerations more transparent and embed the practice of dialogue in a principled pedagogy. Perhaps such conversations can be the basis for future dialogues.

References

Block, D. (2004). Moving beyond "lingualism": Multilingual embodiment and multimodality in SLA. In S. May (Ed.), *The multilingual turn: Implications for SLA, TESOL and bilingual education* (pp. 54-77). Routledge.

Bruner, J. S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.

Census Bureau (2019, December 19). *U.S. population estimates continue to show the nation's growth is slowing*. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2019/popest- nation.html

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry*. Jossey-Bass.

Cooper, J. M., Beaudry, C., Gauna, L., & Curtis, G. A. (2019). A relational approach to collaborative research and practice among teacher educators in urban contexts. In J. Kitchen & K. Ragoonaden (Eds.), *Mindful and relational approaches to social justice, equity and diversity in teacher education* (pp. 1109-1167). Rowan & Littlefield.

Cooper, J. M., Beaudry, C., Gauna, L. M., & Curtis, G. A. (2018). Theory and practice: Exploring the boundaries of critical pedagogy through self-study. In D. Garbett & A. Ovens (Eds.), *Enacting self-study as methodology for professional inquiry* (pp. 163-169). Self-Study of Teacher Educational Practices (S-STEP) . https://selfstudysig.wordpress.com/

Gauna, L. M., Cooper, J. M., & Beaudry, C. (2019). *Dialogue as a critical pedagogy for contested topics: The case of guest speakers addressing LGBTQ issues* [Paper presentation]. American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference 2019, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, (30th anniversary ed.). Continuum.

Giroux, H. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*. Bergin and Garvey.

Guilfoyle, K., Hamilton, M. L., Pinnegar, S., & Placier, P. (2004). The epistemological dimensions and dynamics of professional dialogue in self-study. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton & V. K. LaBoskey, *International handbook of*

self-study of teaching and teacher education practices (pp. 1109-1167). Springer.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as a practice of freedom.* Routledge.

Howe, C., & Abedin, M. (2013). Classroom dialogue: A systematic review across four decades of research. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *43*(3), 325-356.

Kincheloe, J., & Steinberg, S. (2004). *19 Urban questions: Teaching in the city.* Peter Lang.

Lysaker, J. T., & Furuness, S. (2011). Space for transformation: Relational, dialogic pedagogy. Journal of Transformative Education, 9(3), 183-197.

Lyons, N., & LaBoskey, V. K. (Eds.). (2002). *Narrative inquiry in practice: Advancing the knowledge of teaching* (Vol. 22). Teachers College Press.

Mishler, E. (1990). Validation in inquiry-guided research: The role of exemplars in narrative studies. *Harvard Educational Review, 60*(4), 415-442.

Munby, H., & Russell, T. (1994). The authority of experience in learning to teach: Messages from a physics methods class. *Journal of Teacher Education, 45*(2), 86-95.

Pinnegar, S., & Hamilton, M. L. (2009). Self-study of practice as genre of qualitative research. *Theory of Teacher Education, 17*(16), 667-684.Ragoonaden, K. (2015). Self-study of teacher education practices and critical pedagogy: The fifth moment in a teacher educator's journey. *Studying Teacher Education, 11*(1), 81-95.

Russell, T. (2007). How experience changed my values as a teacher educator. In T. Russell and J. Loughran (Eds.), *Enacting a pedagogy of teacher education: Values, relationships and practices* (pp. 182-191). Routledge.

Schuitema, J., Radstake, H., van de Pol, J., & Veugelers, W. (2018). Guiding classroom discussions for democratic citizenship education. *Educational Studies*, *44*(4), 377-407.

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most.* Viking.

Whitehead, J. (2000). How do I improve my practice? Creating and legitimating an epistemology of practice. *Reflective Practice*, *1*(1), 91-104.
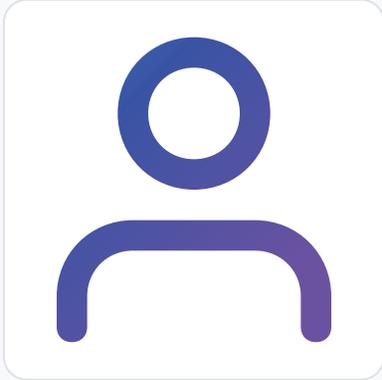
Leslie M. Gauna

University of Houston

Christine Beaudry

Nevada State College

Jane McIntosh Cooper

University of Houston

Gayle A. Curtis

University of Houston