

# Breaking Out of Well-Worn Grooves

## Rekindling Teaching Passion with Fresh Pedagogical Practices

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Collaborative Self-study

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As mid-career teacher educators, in many ways, we feel we have hit our stride. We are adept at navigating our roles and responsibilities on our respective campuses, and students and colleagues respond to us in ways that suggest we have some wisdom worth sharing. However, sometimes, if we are honest with ourselves, our teaching can feel a little stale. We worry we might be prone to coast a bit, and if we're not vigilant, we could slip toward seeing ourselves described as "out of touch."

Finding ourselves at this professional crossroad, in this self-study, we have endeavored to reinvigorate our teacher identities and our practices. As we have asserted previously (Ramirez & Allison-Roan, 2014), we see the value in modeling for our students the ideal of being students of our own practice. In this study, we intentionally positioned ourselves as learners in our classrooms in order to critically analyze the consequences for ourselves and our students in intentionally taking risks.

This study was conducted at three institutions in different regions of the US. We are all associate professors and have been in our respective positions for a little more than a decade. Valerie works at a small liberal arts institution in the Northeast. Laura is faculty at a large state university in the Southwest. Laurie is at a moderately large state university in the Southeast. We teach primarily in our institutions' secondary education and middle grades programs.

## Research Questions

What are the consequences for our views of self, for our teaching outcomes, and for our relationships with students when we intentionally and systematically infuse new instructional strategies into our courses?

## Framework

We position this study within S-STEP literature which advocates collaboration and reflection. Loughran and Northfield (1998) and Mena and Russell (2017) contended that collaboration is foundational to self-study research, as it enhances the integrity of research and researchers. Loughran and Northfield (1998) argued working with important "other(s)" can lead to genuine transformation of practice, rather than simply rationalizing or justifying it. As we engaged in efforts to infuse new strategies in our practice, we collaborated with each other and our students, reflecting on our ideals and

practices with the goal of aligning them. Collaborative reflection on practice involves others in the process of interpreting, challenging, and understanding data, creating the possibility of a multilayered impact on teaching practice (Tidwell & Heston, 1998). Transparency of our practice was an important component of this inquiry, allowing our students to engage with us in open reflection as co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge (Samaras, 2011; Walton, 2011). Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) promoted collaboration in self-study, suggesting research is enhanced by multiple, and sometimes alternative or oppositional, perspectives as we consider our practices, potential problems, and positive aspects. Although we did not wish to experience “public failure” (p. 84), we saw value in making our work transparent to students, thereby modeling the researcher-practitioner viewpoint.

Ultimately, collaboration in self-study enhances the trustworthiness of the research (Mena & Russell, 2017). Working with others who can provide a range of perspectives also tests the validity or, in qualitative research, the trustworthiness of the data sources and analyses (Loughran & Northfield, 1998; Mena & Russell, 2017; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). We believe our research is trustworthy because it was conducted collaboratively with others, including students, with the shared goal of better understanding and improving our teaching practices (Taylor & Coia, 2009).

Critical reflection, another essential component of S-STEP research, has always been central to our work as teacher educator researchers. Critical reflection, as Brookfield (2010) asserted, is not an “unequivocal concept” (p. 218). Our conceptualization of critical reflection is positioned among divergent interpretations (e.g., Brookfield, 1995; Loughran, 2002; Rodgers, 2002; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). We contend reflection becomes critical when it is motivated by the desire to be just, fair, and compassionate and when it questions the criteria, power dynamics, and socio-political structures that frame our practice (Brookfield, 1995, 2010). Central to this study, we were dedicated to challenging ourselves by infusing new strategies into our practices for the purpose of moving ourselves and our students toward pedagogical practices that were more egalitarian and empowering for learners. As we implemented each strategy and reflected on our efforts and their consequences, we were cognizant of the interplay between our actions and relationships of power with and among students.

As we have come to define critical reflection for our teaching and research, we have taken on a stance of deconstruction where we, with our students, are engaged in a “partnered practice of critical reflection,” a process of collaboratively (de)constructing knowledge about teaching and encouraging one another to critically reflect (Berry & Crowe, 2009, p. 86). Berry (2008) also invited students to critique and provide feedback on her teaching, acknowledging this is a “risky business” (p. 36) for the teacher educator, but one with potential to reframe our work. “In doing that which one advocates for ones’ students, insights into teaching and learning are apprehended in practice that might otherwise not be fully appreciated or understood if such learning was not genuinely experienced by oneself” (Loughran & Berry, 2005, p. 194).

## Methods

This study was conducted over a fourteen-week semester and included our respective courses and enrolled students (Valerie n=12, Laurie n=35, Laura n=23). During the semester, we each committed to implementing three instructional strategies we had not previously used as teacher educators: Barometer: Taking a Stand on Controversial Issues ([www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/barometer-taking-stand-controversial-issues](http://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/barometer-taking-stand-controversial-issues)), Graffiti Board ([www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/graffiti-boards](http://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/graffiti-boards)), and Circular Response Discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, pp. 79-80). The impetus for this study grew out of an AERA presentation Valerie and Laura attended in which Tobin and Thomas (2019) shared insights gained through interrogating their use of the Silent Whiteboard strategy. In our case, the three strategies identified above were purposefully selected because each asks students to respond to open-ended prompts and actively work with one another to construct and share their understanding/views. They all also position us as facilitators of the learning process, not as the conveyors of knowledge.

We each chose when and with which of our courses’ content/concepts we utilized each strategy. In planning our courses, we thought about and discussed with one another how to use the strategies, when we envisioned using each

in our courses, and how we hoped the strategies would support students' active participation and learning. Initially, we committed to try each strategy at least once. However, as our semesters progressed, we ended up employing some or all of the strategies more than once, and in some instances, in other courses we taught. Doing so was beneficial in developing our skills with the strategies and in providing further opportunity to critically reflect on the consequences for us and our students in their use.

Data for this inquiry included our individual reflective journals that we shared electronically, regular Zoom conferences that were recorded and electronically transcribed, syllabi and weekly agendas from our courses, our teaching notes and summaries, and survey responses and written feedback from students on the use of the strategies, which we gathered during the semester (see *Appendix A*). Further, we read one another's reflective journals, commenting and asking clarifying questions. The Zoom conference sessions were also used as data points to which we were able to return to recall our conversations about our experiences beyond our journals.

As our semesters ended, we systematically immersed ourselves in our individual datasets in an iterative process, doing multiple readings to identify codes, emergent patterns, and questions for consideration as they related to our initial research question (Merriam, 1998; Samaras, 2011). In a Zoom conference, we discussed the aggregate data, exchanged ideas, and identified together with the broader patterns and divergent themes (Samaras & Freese, 2006). We prepared summaries of our individual and shared analyses, using them as interim texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and tools for further reflection. These summaries were used to facilitate the writing process and outlined our plans for extending this work beyond ourselves (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Samaras, 2011). In preparing the report for this inquiry, we selected representative excerpts that illustrate the themes we have collectively identified.

## Results/Conclusions

The following overlapping themes emerged through our analysis of our individual and combined data sets: a) the unsettling consequences of change, b) our renewed energy and enthusiasm for teaching, c) consequences for student engagement, learning, and relationships, and d) our new skills and perspectives.

**Unsettling Consequences of Change.** By our own admission, prior to initiating this study, we had become comfortable in our teaching practices, having taught our respective courses for multiple years. While we had made adjustments and adopted new texts and strategies over that time, doing so was generally on our terms and schedules, and we tended to utilize strategies with which we were already familiar. This inquiry positioned us differently, and because we were working collaboratively and we had shared our self-study plan with students, there seemed to be more at stake. Especially early in the semester, public failure (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009) seemed more likely than not. Rather than acting with bravado, we chose to share with our respective students that we were trying new strategies and inevitably we were not going to get things "perfect." Each of us expressed in our journals and in our conferencing feeling uneasy about the vulnerability we experienced through implementing the strategies and inviting students to critique our efforts.

*In hindsight, I should have developed questions that were better suited to the activity or not given them questions at all. I also wish I had done the activity with the other reading for the day... I see some real potential with the strategy, but my execution was not effective, and the activity takes a lot of time. Students' feedback "felt" more critical. (Valerie's Journal, Oct. 3)*

*Sometimes I feel like I've created a monster with the level of critique my students are giving me. I'm trying to model how to be open and comfortable with it, but sometimes I'm not. (Laura's Journal, October 29)*

*Ugh. I'm not sure what to think and might have to come back to this as we all discuss it together. I am definitely going to try this [Barometer strategy] with another class, just to see if I can do it better. I'm feeling discouraged right now and not sure what to do. (Laurie's Journal, October 27)*

Through responding to one another's journals and in our Zoom conferences, we provided one another with vital support for continuing the inquiry and helped one another consider alternative perspectives of students' feedback and our own

appraisals of our practice.

*I am so sure this went better than you think! You picked a really hard topic to do this about. Remember, I did classroom management. I chose to make it feel a bit safer for myself--you went big. Which is awesome and should be commended. I feel like I'm getting to learn so much from your experience that I didn't open myself up to learning because I played it safe. So thanks!! (Laura's response to Laurie's Journal, Dec. 30)*

Having these opportunities to share, question, and respond to one others experiences was not only affirming, but offered each of us the chance to express emotions such as fear, frustration, and disappointment. Likewise, we were able to share successes, which arguably happens far too infrequently in educational settings. Ultimately, while there was an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability and discomfort, we were each glad we branched out and tried something new, expanding our repertoire and learning together in a space that was trusting, safe, and supportive.

**Renewed Energy and Enthusiasm.** Relatedly, while we each at times expressed feeling uncomfortable with the vulnerability the study required of us, we all also consistently noted that both the commitment to use new strategies and our collaboration with one another resulted in renewed energy and enthusiasm for our teaching.

*While it [using Graffiti Board strategy] was scary, it was also kind of exhilarating. Especially when we started to debrief. Students had really good responses...One of the neat things about trying something new this way and being really upfront about it with my students is that I felt like we were inquiring into teaching together. I felt like it put me in a different position in relation to them. I was also learning and seeing how things went. In that way, we used my teaching as a common text to interrogate. And that was really cool. (Laura's Journal, Sept. 11)*

*All in all, I'm really glad we decided to do this project. I'm spending so much more time on my teaching than I have in recent semesters, but it feels so much more satisfying. I have more energy for my classes I think because I'm doing new activities that I find interesting and I haven't seen/done a dozen times before. (Valerie's Journal, Oct. 3)*

*There were a few more questions, but they emerged from the discussion, which was rich and productive (from my view). Everyone contributed to the conversation at one point. It was really engaging to me as an observer and they made some really good points... So...final thought. I would definitely try this activity (Barometer - Taking a Stand) again. I like it. I can see some tweaks I need to make it more effective and less problematic. But I like it! (Laurie's Journal, Dec. 6)*

We each saw benefits to our professional well-being and satisfaction through having new unifying goals and purposes. Resonating with the work of Berg and Seeber (2016), we recognize that benefits from our collaboration and collegial relationship extended beyond the successful completion of this particular inquiry. As alluded to above, through coming together, we afforded ourselves the opportunity to connect with one another for authentic collegiality.

**Consequences for Student Engagement, Learning, and Relationships.** We found in students' feedback and in our observations of their participation that our use of the strategies generally resulted in high levels of student engagement. In contrast to other teacher-centered discussion strategies, the three strategies resulted in more uniform student participation, and the large majority of our students found the strategies engaging and worthwhile, although there was variance among the strategies and our student populations. The Graffiti Board was viewed most favorably across all our student groups and the Circular Response Discussion least favorably. The Barometer had the widest variation in students' assessment. Since we employed the strategies with different content and goals, these findings do not point to the value of one strategy over the others. We conclude that they each had merit, and we hope to continue to develop our expertise in utilizing them. Of course, not all student feedback was positive, which, as Laura noted above, was sometimes difficult to hear. Laurie felt the same at times, reflecting positively on how she perceived the experience and then feeling less accomplishment and further frustration when reading student feedback.

*Well, there goes my whole dang theory that it (Circular Discussion) went better the second time around. Clearly, I felt better about it, but the students didn't seem to have much good to say... I do appreciate the feedback and see their points (usually). But sometimes I think they need to take more responsibility for their own engagement and pay better attention to the rules and the design of the activity. (Laurie's Journal, Dec. 6)*

Since we all work with preservice teachers who are on the cusp of student teaching, our efforts to be honest and transparent in our practice with our students and our commitment to own our missteps we felt was particularly meaningful for students. Rather than simply telling them that they need to be students of their own practice when they are teachers, we each made a sustained and concerted effort to model the dispositions and skills (including collegial collaboration) associated with critical reflection on practice.

*Overall I am finding the inclusion of de-briefing with my students to be a very helpful addition to my pedagogy. First, I think it models vulnerability and democratic principles that I hope they emulate. Second, they are being encouraged to think critically about pedagogical choices and to envision their own practice in more detail, with greater attention to their decision-making process. (Valerie's Journal, Oct. 3)*

We believe that modeling critical reflection and our own willingness to continue our professional growth were ultimately beneficial to our students. While beyond the scope of this study, we hope to see as our students transition into student teaching and classrooms of their own that they will take to heart our efforts to reflect on our practice, to accept feedback, and to view missteps and imperfections as inherent to the teaching and learning process.

Ultimately, conducting this study and inviting our students to provide feedback on our practice altered the dynamics of our classrooms and our relationships with students. As we noted above, this often resulted in us as professors feeling uncomfortable or uncertain about both our pedagogy and our professor/student relationships. Each of us at times worried that we had exposed ourselves to too much scrutiny and that students at times were unduly harsh in their critiques. It was difficult at times to maintain an open stance and not interpret their feedback as assessments of us and our use of the strategies. By the end of the semester, most of our uneasiness had subsided. We each concluded that maintaining our resolve across the course of the semester did have a generally positive impact on our student/professor relationships and that our classrooms had developed into more democratic communities that felt safe to their members.

*There were so many times this semester where I felt like I didn't know what I was doing or I felt unsure in some of the strategies we were using. But last night I had more students than I've had in a long time stay after class to thank me, to give me a hug, to tell me this was their favorite class...I think sharing my (our!) vulnerability and opening up my teaching to critique might have created a different kind of classroom environment and community. (Laura's Journal, December 4)*

**New Skills and Perspectives.** We noted repeatedly in our respective journals and in Zoom conferences the impact the inquiry was having on our skillsets. By its design, the study required us to learn three new strategies to use in our courses. What we had not anticipated was the extent to which the inclusion of the strategies would result in us being more conscious of other aspects of our practice that we had come to take for granted or had ceased to carefully consider or critique.

Each of the three strategies relied on us as instructors to develop prompts or questions for students to respond to. As we each discovered in implementing the strategies, we didn't initially craft questions that were best suited to the particular strategies or our learning goals. We each noted missteps or missed opportunities for the strategies to be engaging and/or effective.

*I felt rushed, probably because I had too many questions/choices and some they were totally unfamiliar with... I really wish I had been less uncomfortable with this whole thing so I could have given them a real chance to talk among themselves about their ideas/thoughts/opinions/rationales. (Laurie's Journal, Oct. 27)*

More importantly, we came to develop more critically reflective stances about our employment of questioning and discussion strategies across our teaching. This included thinking about how our selection of discussion topics and our wording of questions has implications for which students feel included, valued, and heard as well as what ideas or concepts are championed and which are discounted. Sometimes pedagogical moves and discussion topics and prompts that we perceived as safe and inviting were experienced as unsafe or alienating by some students. This phenomenon was evident in students' feedback for the Barometer Strategy. Valerie had used the strategy with the topic of video gaming. She anticipated that her students would have a variety of experiences and opinions about gaming but that the topic was not inherently unsafe for students to share their views about. In facilitating the activity, Valerie had felt positive about students' engagement and the usefulness of the strategy for prompting them to consider alternative perspectives. However, one student noted in their feedback, that they did not feel engaged or safe in sharing their views. Four of the 11 who completed the anonymous questionnaire indicated that they could not see themselves using the strategy in their own classrooms, two respondents provided the following explanations:

- I would be concerned about the students being afraid to say how they really feel.
- I think it could make students feel called out or left out. (Valerie's Student Feedback, Sept. 30)

The collaborative nature of this inquiry itself brought to the foreground for us the value of professional collaboration. While we might have individually implemented new strategies in our practice, investigated their impact, and realized many of the benefits noted above; we assert our collaboration enhanced our professional development far beyond what we would have experienced working independently. It spotlighted for us the importance of collaborative opportunities for educators, at all stages of their careers, to discuss and support one another in reflecting on and refining practice.

## Significance

This study was personally beneficial to us as mid-career teacher educators because it prompted us to move away from some of our entrenched teaching practices and be experimental again. Despite our actions being within our control, this initiative was frightening and we experienced feelings of vulnerability, both in trying on the unfamiliar and in asking others (our students) to help us evaluate our efforts and their consequences. Ultimately feeling scared and vulnerable helped us reconnect with the emotional lives of our students, reminding us how vulnerable they likely feel as they construct from scratch their pedagogies and are asked to reconcile what their emerging practices communicate about their underlying philosophies of teaching and their values concerning learners. Vulnerability is inherently part of self-study research. As Berry and Russell (2016) attest, "As self-study researchers, we deliberately make ourselves vulnerable through the careful and open study of our practices...We invite others into this process with us, as critical friends, collaborators, and as an academic community, sharing ideas and perspectives and publishing our efforts. Personally and professionally, this is risky business" (p. 115).

However, in the end, through this study, we developed our adeptness with new strategies, thus expanding our repertoires. Beyond that, we benefited from having an authentic opportunity to model what it means to be a student of one's practice and the importance of collegial collaboration to ground that learning. In most cases, students observed and appreciated that we were doing what we advocated for them, and they had an unfolding example of the process (including false starts and messy, imperfect outcomes). Perhaps because of all of the above, we found our enthusiasm for teaching rekindled and that seemed to contribute to our students' enhanced engagement and stronger, positive learning communities in and beyond class meetings.

As we strive to instill in our preservice teachers, learning is a lifelong process. Embarking on this self-study, we recognized the importance of continually developing as professionals and practitioners. We hoped to reconnect with the enthusiastic new teacher educators we once were, over a decade ago. We see value in sharing our experiences with others, even if making ourselves vulnerable in the process. To move teacher education forward in a time where fewer and fewer are entering the teaching profession, we see the need for our teacher education community to not only engage in research about our practices but continue to learn and grow collectively. While our experiences were not



always ideal, we hope to prompt others in the S- STEP community to examine their own practices moving forward and to share their stories of success and challenge alongside their students, as we have done.

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## Student Feedback on Strategy Use

Date: Course #: Strategy:

1. Today's strategy was helpful in developing my awareness, appreciation, and/or understanding of the class session's topic.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

2. Today I felt supported in fully participating with the strategy.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

3. Today I felt engaged and interested during the activity when the strategy was used.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

4. I would use or adapt today's strategy in my own teaching.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

5. What refinements/adjustments might the instructor make the next time she uses this strategy.







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