

# My Introspective Time Capsule

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This study takes place in the southwestern part of the United States on the Mexican-American border and is a narrative about a teacher's journey of self-discovery about her own teaching practices through reflection.

Dr. Myriam Torres (New Mexico State University) and Michele Stafford-Levy ventured into the typical professor-student relationship. The professor guided her graduate student through a journey of self-discovery and how to document the process of self-reflection and action in her own classroom. By sharing these events from her professional life through autobiography, the student strives to serve as a model for both pre-service and in-service teachers to reflect, act, and document their journey of growth in their own practice.

## Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of my Praxis

I ask myself, "What more can possibly be said about teacher research? How can I possibly contribute to the vast body of literature out there?" All I have is my own story. All most teachers have is their own story. In this paper I have discovered that this is in itself a contribution to the literature. Through this paper I have learned that qualitative research is as individual as the individual. We are NOT numbers as in quantitative research. Teacher research is particular and unique but not less insightful.

Opening up to autobiography was a frightening concept for me. Teachers must take the risk of autobiography in their own action research. This is what I learned throughout this journey-my journey of participatory research.

I constantly wondered what can of worms I was going to open. After years of critical theory study at the master's level in the borderlands, and presently as a doctoral student, I began the practice of systematic inquiry during a course I was taking called *Pedagogy of Instruction for a Diverse Society*. As I systematically reflected on my actions in the classroom and the practice of my own teaching, it occurred to me that a time capsule would serve as my metaphor for the work I was doing because I needed to look both into my *past* teaching experiences (autobiography) and *present* (context) in order to see the *future* (informs instruction) of my praxis. I imagine that inside of this time capsule is a collection of stories about my teaching experiences that I can tap from time to time in order to reflect and this is what informs my praxis.

With excellent guidance from my professor, I began to see the linearity of my metaphor of a time capsule and had to merge this continuum with concentric, reflexive circles; what the literature calls reflexive participatory research.

## Reflections on My Past

I sat down with Dr. Myriam Torres one afternoon and she commented on my reflective log. She said I was "skirting around" issues in my work. Why do we put up such walls by the mere mention of autobiography? There must be some sort of instinct that "kicks in" out of self-preservation. I think human beings must feel vulnerable when it comes to dealing with our past and all the emotions it evokes. Simply stated, our autobiographies define us and that's what's frightening. But why was this important for this class or for this project or for that matter, my praxis? So, I strapped myself in for the long haul and began the necessary documentation of this journey of analysis and opened up my personal time capsule to peer into. Through daily journals, audiocassette recordings of some workshops I was conducting for teachers after school, and documented conversations with my professor/mentor I was able to reflect on my past teaching experiences to help me define my present state and as a teaching professional in general. As I open my personal time capsule, my experiences now flow gently out and swirl above my head. These are the stories of teaching experiences that shaped my life-as a teacher.

## **Autobiographical Reflections**

I am a former high school English teacher of both Hispanic and Anglo extraction. I taught at a border high school that is geographically located at the southernmost region in New Mexico. The population at our school was 99% low-income Hispanics of Mexican decent and primarily newcomers (immigrants) and undocumented families living in trailers in the desert sands of southern New Mexico; where a small mountain and a train track separate the U.S. from Mexico. The border patrol is more visible here than the local sheriffs department.

## **Reflections On Santa Teresa High School**

If we look into my teaching time capsule, we would see that I began teaching on an emergency waiver at Santa Teresa High School in the 1995-1996 school year. I was hired as the G.R.A.D.S teacher. G.R.A.D.S is an acronym for Graduation, Reality, and Dual-Role Skills for pregnant and school age parents. The school was looking for someone with experience in working with children and the importance of nutrition for pregnant and nursing teenagers. I had been teaching art in inner city Houston and I had two boys of my own. G.R.A.D.S. came out of Carl Perkins monies in the Family and Consumer Science department that espoused proper nutrition for these young girls and their children. New Mexico has the second largest teen pregnancy rate in the nation. I loved that job. I always believed in educating women first in families and I've even spoken in Peru at their national conference for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) on the subject. I grew up in a feminist household during the Feminist Movement. My mother who served as a feminist role model for me raised three professional women all on her own. We truly believed in our mother and supported her efforts to rise from the barrio. Then I taught these teenage mothers in southern New Mexico and I really began to see the importance of an educated woman. When I saw the following quotation by Chittister (1998) in a calendar for daily thoughts, I feel that I found the thought that literally defined those years for me. She says,

"It takes an educated woman to maintain a quality home. It takes an educated woman to raise healthy, well-nourished children. It takes an educated woman to raise the educational level of an entire family. It takes an educated woman to be an agent of social change" (Chittister, 1998).

While I was working with pregnant teens, I made every attempt to be a positive role model for these young ladies. Here is where I learned to give young adults the space they need in order to grow to be responsible adults. As I worked more and more with school-age parents on empowering themselves and their families, I, too, began to feel like Chittister's agent of social change. This southern New Mexico school district was determined to address the issue of teen moms and I got the program on its feet. However, due to congressional pressure, Clinton changed the welfare laws the second year I was there and I helped these girls transition to the new, more stringent policies. As I reflect on those years, I think to myself, "Talk about kill the messenger". I did manage to keep the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children Program) van to continue visiting the school on a monthly basis delivering checks to the girls so that they could buy milk, cheese, and juice-a very noble gesture on the part of our government.

When I ask myself through reflection why I became a teacher, I think this particular teaching position presented itself and I was truly inspired-I seized the opportunity. I felt that I had the chance to become that agent for change for generations of mothers and this appealed to me.

I wanted literacy to play an important part of my curriculum and I taught these school-age parents the importance of 1.) the continuation of their own education and 2.) the importance of reading to their babies. I saw literacy through an intergenerational approach. But things changed for me after two years when the state department was coming through to accredit us. I was pursuing a Masters in TESOL and I felt that literacy was what these young women needed. However, the Family and Consumer Science funding didn't see eye to eye with me on that. So the school's principal moved me to the English department where I was protected from the accreditation team. I had to temporarily abandon the family literacy program I had initiated and that was painful for me. Letting go of projects that one starts is commonplace in education. One never knows how the next program director/educator will handle your former program.

My undergraduate years were from Speech/Drama, Television/Film (Louisiana State University-Baton Rouge). So, I moved over to join the bards in the English department and I taught literature to Mexican American teenagers. I followed Jaime Escalante's (Stand and Deliver) lead and tried to do so in a culturally responsive way. I introduced students to the works of Sandra Cisneros, Gloria López-Stafford (my mother), Denise Chavez, and Pat Mora. I attempted to use meaningful literature for my students in culturally responsive ways.

In our high school English class, my students and I placed a drug lord, Julius Caesar, in the *barrio* whose gang had backstabbed him because of his greed and ambition. We studied universal themes in this desert setting. By going to graduate school and studying critical theory during my years as a high school teacher, authors like Freire and Nieto began to influence my personal philosophy of education. About teaching in the slums of Brazil, Freire (1987) said, "I taught them grammar based on what they were already writing, not from a textbook. And I also used readings from very good Brazilian authors" (p. 28). I remember that this simple statement had a profound impact on my praxis. I really and truly began to see the light and attempted to incorporate this crucial concept into my teaching.

The next two years afforded me the opportunity to work with a computer in the classroom and I received great training from two Challenge Grants. I learned to juggle one computer with thirty

kids (Stafford-Levy & Wiburg, 1999). I also took the computer off my desk and put the kids on the machine. What a radical notion! I was the talk of the school. The last year that I taught high school, I was assigned the journalism job because of my strong tech skills, my willingness to let the kids use the expensive equipment, and my relationship with my students. These simple concepts allowed me to work on the school newspaper and the yearbook. We were quite successful and we had good readership, too. Being a journalism teacher taught me that you must be performance based, project-based, and be able to trust your high school students with cameras and the computers-- a tall order. We also brought in stories and poetry from the neighborhood that further increased our readership. We were addressing literacy through authentic materials and this was a wonderful feeling. We had a great sense of accomplishment and this empowered our students. This also made concrete for me what Freire had been teaching all along-- the use of authentic materials!

My fifth and final year in this southern New Mexico school district was spent as a curriculum facilitator for two school faculties (a middle school that served as a feeder school to the high school where I taught). The job of this facilitator was to provide support for teachers with the district's mandatory performance assessments. It had been mandated from the district's administration that the teachers become project based (ASCD) and some of the teachers resented this imposition. My job was to smooth over the relationship between central office and my colleagues at the high school. Here's where my work with teachers began. Diplomacy and people skills were a must for this position. I not only had to be diplomatic in making sure the teachers were actually doing the projects, I had to gather up all the products and document their participation. Some teachers really resented the "extra" work. Here's where the concept of constructivist approaches to teaching became concrete for me. These products weren't additional work but rather supplemental. I really saw project-based pedagogy in action. As teaching professionals we know this type of learning means much richer forms of assessment. This is especially critical for second language learners in this border community.

I witnessed John Dewey's framework (Starnes, 1999) of experiential education. What I was doing embodied "Dewey's ideas about four aspects of education: the relationships among teachers, learners, the curriculum, and the community; the ways learning occurs; preparing students for full lives as citizens and individuals; and reflection and evaluation" (p. 2). These performance assessments weren't "add-ons" but rather experiential learning for students so that teachers weren't so bound to the textbook-- again Freire's idea of letting go of the textbook. I'm reminded of the movie "To Sir With Love" where a young Sydney Poitier throws the textbook into the trashcan of his rowdy inner-city Liverpool classroom-- a classic image in my time capsule and an indelible part of my memories about teachers and teaching.

## **Reflections on University Teaching**

I had a unique opportunity to take a full time clinical position for two years at the university where I am currently working on my doctorate in Learning Technologies. NMSU received a Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers [PT3] grant to help fund our technology push in teacher preparation. Part of this grant is to completely restructure our secondary teacher education program and I feel lucky to teach the English/Language Arts Methods course. We also train professors on technology integration into their classroom practices and we have revamped the

technology course for pre-service teachers. So we have taken the Computers in the Classroom course and formed a team of instructors (four sections) who teach this class called Teaching with Technology (EDLT 368). I am on the team that teaches this class.

Part of the teaming we have done is to enable my colleagues to use my online course tools as if they were a student-- as if they were admitted into my class like any student would be. As a matter of fact we can all look at what each other is doing in this online environment. Each one of us has our own online course that we use to supplement our teaching.

My colleague called me one night and asked me why she had been dropped from my Web CT course (an online course tool), which she had joined so that she could take a look at my syllabus and how I teach web pages. I told her I had accidentally dropped her from the class and I would see to it that she was admitted back into my class immediately and placed back on the roster. However, she forced me to reflect on how I teach web pages-- I take a step by step approach which is not the scope of this reflection.

During this particular phone conversation we proceeded to talk extensively about what I had been doing for the past couple of weeks during which we were teaching web development to pre-service teachers. Through this dialogue I was forced to reflect. It made me look at the rationale behind my pedagogy. Had it not been for this conversation with my colleague, I might not have reflected to such great depths about that class and my approaches to web page development. I once again offer a memory out of my time capsule that deepened my reflection on my classroom practices.

Now my question is, "What does a teacher in the public schools do to reflect? Is reflecting a luxury?" As a university supervisor for student teaching I spend a lot of time in the public schools and I wonder if teacher reflection after a lesson is immediate, later, much later, ongoing, or not at all. Do other professionals tap into their symbolic time capsules in order to reflect too?

Like all good teachers I remember that I reflected all the time when I taught high school. I taught three classes that were 90 minutes long and I had a 90-minute planning period. This was a great structure with plenty of time for the reflexive process of reflection and planning. My question is how do elementary school teachers reflect on their praxis when classes are 45-minute periods and the 4-6 core courses/subjects they teach-every day! Between shuffling kids in and out of classrooms in this hustle bustle world, I wonder if they use a systematic approach to inquiry.

Stigler and Hiebert (1999) in *The Teaching Gap* take a look at the teaching practices of Japanese, German, and American math teachers. In it, the authors find that the Japanese, who outscore most countries on the TIMSS (The Third International Mathematics and Science Study), use lesson study as part of their reflective process. Teachers look at each other's lessons for help, collaboration, and receive input from their peers. Often these lessons are video recorded for teachers to self-evaluate.

Another type of lesson study that is available for teachers is the concept of a Critical Friends Group (Bambino, 2002). Here, teachers collectively examine and discuss how to "improve both the students' work and the teachers' approach" (p. 25). Critical Friends members give and receive

feedback to improve teaching. This process helps teachers look more deeply into student assignments and their responses to them. "Critical Friends Groups have been the catalyst for changes in the teaching, learning, culture, and climate of learning communities in a great variety of schools" (p. 27). Here is yet another systematic approach to teacher inquiry.

## **Post lesson Reflections**

So I am back to my preliminary focus question, "How can I deepen my understanding about my teaching through reflection?" I think that when I work with learners I am able to help them draw on their own experiences. I make every attempt to teach using constructivist strategies: KWL, Brainstorm, Socratic inquiry. After audio taping a staff development for public school teachers that I conducted, I noticed that I asked participants many questions based on prior knowledge as I introduced new concepts. I noticeably asked participants to bring their life experiences to the concepts I was introducing and life experience is what this group had plenty of.

As I systematically reflect on whom I have been teaching lately, I feel there is a difference between working with in-service teachers and pre-service teachers. I teach both and I adjust my approach accordingly. As I review the audiotapes, I notice that I always ask questions but my analogies are different between the two groups. For my pre-service teachers/students I make analogies more contemporary. When I work with the seasoned, in-service teachers from a different generation, my analogies and comparisons are almost nostalgic.

For example, Carmen (a permanent substitute teacher from the community) said it was time to get a new computer at her house. I compared that to when television was first available to the public. She said she experienced those times recalling how her father was one of the first in his community to get a TV. So I had struck a familiar chord for this group of learners.

My focus question has been how do I reflect on my own teaching practices? After recording my thoughts through autobiography, I feel that I am closer to knowing how I can deepen my understanding of learning. I must work with learners more in order to deepen that understanding. Listening to the tapes shed some light for me.

Through my reflections I realize that students learn best by making analogies and comparisons to other real world experiences. For example, I was teaching this particular group of teachers about search engines on the Internet. I compared the World Wide Web to a spider's web and a search engine is the spider that goes out onto the net to retrieve a fly. The fly is the information needed or, namely, the illustrious web page. So this metaphor was helpful for this senior faculty at the local middle school. Metaphors come in handy when working with all learners and this group grasped the information quickly. It was a great graphic for them to visualize.

## **My Future**

As I gaze into my crystal ball and attempt to foreshadow what direction my praxis will take, I conclude that my past experiences inform the future of my teaching. I envision (Table 1) a series of circles. These circles represent the past, present, and future of a teacher's experiences that

reflexively inform each sphere. These experiences are interdependent on one another and should be grounded in sound pedagogy and informed by the literature.

(Table 1) Reflexivity in teacher research

For me, critical theory has guided my practice and shaped my philosophy of education. Through a systematic process of inquiry and teacher reflection, I have been able to formulate focus questions about my praxis. As I read more and more and as I teach more and more, I can safely predict that the future of my praxis will be an unending process of reflection and action. Wadsworth (2000) says, "Action research, like the discovery phase of any science, knows it is coming from somewhere and going to somewhere, even though it does not know in advance where *precisely* it is going to end up or what the new state will look like" (p. 1). She goes on to state, "*changing our actions* as part of the research process, and then further researching these changed actions" (p. 1) starting' with reflection on action, and proceeding round to new action which is then further researched. "The new actions differ from the old actions - they are literally in different places" (p.1). I know that I am now in a new place that can be solely attributed to the systematic inquiry this project has provided me. Once in this new place, I am ready to begin the entire process again.

## Conclusion

I began reading Cochran-Smith (1995) during the construction of my time capsule. Ironically she summed up my entire journey very well. She says,

To alter a system that is deeply dysfunctional, we need teachers who regard teaching as a political activity and embrace social change as part of the job, teachers who enter the profession not expecting to carry on business as usual but prepared to join other educators and parents in major reforms. Teacher educators cannot carry on business as usual either. What we need in teacher education are not better generic strategies but generative ways for prospective teachers, experienced teachers, and teacher educators alike to explore and reconsider their own assumptions, understand the values and practices of families and cultures that are different from their own, and construct pedagogy that takes these into account in locally appropriate and culturally sensitive ways (Cochran-Smith, 1995).

From feeling like an agent of social change to teaching in culturally supportive and responsive ways, my time capsule holds the tales and life experiences of this teacher who attempted to better understand the reflexive process of teacher inquiry and reflection. In Dewey's (1929) *Sources of a Science Education* he argues that one of a teacher's most important responsibilities is to inquire into and investigate educational problems. Kincheloe, Slattery, and Steinberg (2000) cited that, "writing of the 'teacher as investigator,' Dewey saw teachers as the most important determinants of the success or failure of the school; in fact, he saw no other way to produce viable educational research" (p. 267). This is the vital premise of action research in teacher education.

This reflection into my time capsule has expanded my own concepts of how I teach and the process of reflection and action in my teaching. This inner dialogue and journey of introspection has taught me that a teacher-as-researcher cannot get caught up in the notion of contributing to

the literature. Instead, the core of this stance is developing a systematic approach to inquiry and reflection. At the heart of our praxis is the student. Freire (1998) reminds us "we must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not antiscientific" (p. 3). This love he speaks of is for our students, not to parent them, but to love them with "constant intellectual rigor and the stimulation of epistemological curiosity, of the capacity to love, of creativity, of scientific competence and the rejection of scientific reductionism. The teaching task also requires the capacity to fight for freedom, without which the teaching task becomes meaningless" (p.4). This concept of loving our students inspires me to be a better teacher. In order to be a better teacher, I must understand and deconstruct my own teaching through the reflexive process of teacher inquiry. My time capsule metaphor serves me well, framed within Freire's (1987) statement that imagination and intuition "means to be strongly present, to have your feet firmly planted on the ground, in such a way that foreseeing the future becomes a normal thing. You know the present so well, you can imagine a possible future of transformation" (p. 186). This transformation hinges on the process and introspection within teacher research.

In this paper, I have attempted to share with other professionals the many events in my life that have contributed to my development as a reflective practitioner. It's almost a story of my coming of age as a teacher. As I seal my time capsule now, I know that it will be opened time and again so that I can reflect and gain insight as to what informs the way I teach. As I put my capsule away on my already heavy bookshelf and I think of the experiences that are within it and the volumes of literature that surround it, I wonder what new experiences will be in there when I open it again. I can't help but ask, "What memories will reside inside my time capsule in the future?" "Where will I be as a teacher then?"

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