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Beginning with Trusted Friends:
Venturing Out to Work Collaboratively in Our Institutions

A self-study community encourages the sharing of experiences and new insights, both positive and negative. The building of knowledge develops through dialogue in a personal-constructivist-collaborative approach (Beck, Freese, & Kosnik, 2004). Loughran and Northfield (1998) note that the individual perspective may be a significant paradox in self-study terminology. The term, *self-study*, suggests that the individual is the focus of the study, yet self-study is a collective task (Elijah, 2004; Ham & Kane, 2004). Samaras & Freese (2006) write of this paradox of self-study as both personal and interpersonal. It is as if the community *leads* (Vygotsky, 1978) or *completes* (Newman & Holzman, 1993) development.

Collaboration does not mean harmony. Interactions may cause the individual to question his/her position or those of others as they develop new understandings. Beyond the cognitive level, self-study scholars have the emotional support of self-study colleagues who are invested in improving learning and teaching through self-study. Kosnik, Beck, and Freese (2004) state that an inclusive and equitable self-study community fosters personal and professional growth which impacts program development. LaBoskey (2004) affirms the need for a supportive and interactive community in the knowledge building process. This paper addresses the impact of our collaborative experiences in the self-study community. We discuss how it has supported and influenced our personal and professional thinking as well as our work in our home institutions.

CONTEXT

We have witnessed the influence and significance of self-study for enhancing teachers' professional development and life-long learning in the preservice and inservice teacher education programs we directed (e.g., Beck & Kosnik, 2005; Freese, 1999, 2002, 2006; Kosnik & Beck, 2005, 2006; Kosnik & Beck, 2005; Samaras, 2002; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998; Samaras et al., 2006). Although we work at three different universities, Stanford University, George Mason University, and University of Hawaii, respectively, we have engaged in numerous collaborative projects over the years to also study our practice as teacher educators. Two notable joint endeavors were: program co-chairs and co-editors of the Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Self-study of Teacher Education Practices (2002); and co-editors of *Making a Difference in Teacher Education Through Self-Study: Personal, Professional, and Program Renewal* (2006). As we worked on each project, we commented regularly (and enthusiastically) that we truly enjoyed our collaborations and wondered why we worked so well together. We are connected by our interest and research in program development. We were painfully honest about our respective challenges as directors. We all agreed that self-study as a component was sorely missing in the preservice and inservice teacher education programs at our institutions, and we supported each other in our efforts to include it in our curriculum. We were all committed to self-study as a legitimate and powerful methodology to reform teacher education.

Our e-mails, self-study meetings, and gatherings at the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) Castle Conference and the America Education Research Association (AERA) conference allowed us to engage in continuous dialogue and gave us new perspectives and suggestions for addressing the various challenges and professional responsibilities we faced. Three questions kept surfacing in our discussions and frame this study: 1) Why did our collaboration work? 2) What were its limitations? 3) How have our collaborations influenced our work at our home universities?

METHODS

We used a range of methods for this study:

a) We reread our e-mails to identify common themes and examples that illustrated them.

b) We each wrote an individual piece in response to questions we raised which were sent to the other two members of the group for their responses.

c) We each identified a project on our home university and asked ourselves, "What did we learn from our self-study collaborations that we applied to our collaboration at our home university?

Our collaborative analysis led us to five major themes:

1) learning to dialogue in virtual communities; 2) sharing common values; 3) appreciating the social in the professional; 4) linking leadership and partnership; and 5) making a mutual commitment.

FINDINGS

Learning to dialogue in virtual communities

Although it was difficult for us to have face-to-face collaboration, given that we are in three different parts of the county, distance was not a barrier for us. We recognized the value of regular communication and kept in contact through e-mail and phone. E-mail made correspondence instantly accessible and we all noted that when we received an e-mail from one another, we looked forward to reading it and responding to it immediately. This quick responding ensured that we did not have silences or time to *read into* the silences as so often happens. E-mail had the benefit that we had time to respond at our convenience, whereas at work, in face-to-face meetings you often have to respond on the spot. We set the terms for our collaborations and worked on projects of our choosing. In contrast, at our universities, the Dean (or someone else) often assigns work to us. In our collaboration, we could shut out external demands and approach our dialogue not as an obligation but as an opportunity to stretch and expand our understandings.

The interpersonal exchanges via e-mail allowed us to grow and expand our thinking by opening our minds to other perspectives and issues. We found ourselves constructing our learning together, probing one another's ideas, and reviewing and reframing our ideas collaboratively. Through collaboration our roles kept shifting and we found we were teachers to each other, and learners at the same time. Although the e-mail and phone kept us connected, we had opportunities to meet and continue our dialogue through face-to-face communication at AERA and the biannual Castle Conference. These meetings ensured that we would have face-to-face communication time at least once a year.

Sharing common values

Care is bi-directional and necessary in collaborative research. We found that we blurred the lines between the personal and professional. Our personal friendship initially led us to collaborate, and this friendship served as a foundation for extending our work. Knowing each other fairly well allowed us to give feedback beyond the superficial. Each of us was willing to compromise while humor has allowed us to negotiate through tensions. As we reread our e-mails for this research, we noted that in addition to the business at hand, there were always comments about the personal – new babies, upcoming weddings, and even family hardships. Bringing the personal into our collaborations contributed to our ongoing dialogue and to the strength of our professional relationship. Our professional work has been enhanced by knowing we can discuss professional challenges we encounter in our institutions and receive honest and

supportive feedback. In addition, our writing and research has taken on a new dimension in that we can discuss and re-examine our ideas, inquire into and probe our teaching, and gain new insights through our dialogue.

Our paths to academia and S-STEP followed similar patterns. We each have been classroom teachers, researchers, and practitioners. We each entered academia with the hope of finding and contributing to a supportive and collaborative culture. Much to our surprise this did not happen. We sought out others who shared a common philosophy about work and its place in our lives. In our e-mails, we talked about our shared values, which included trust, responsibility, hard work, caring, and humor. In an e-mail correspondence, Anastasia suggested that we dialogue about trust. She noted in one e-mail, "*I find it so interesting that I can't wait to get back to writing with my trusted friends. Why is that I wonder? What makes them my trusted friends?*" Anne responded:

> *Because we all experience a sense of vulnerability in our profession, as well as in our personal lives, it is key to have a feeling of safety with other people before we can let down our guard. With you and Clare I feel a deep sense of intellectual and personal safety. The trust revolves around our shared understanding that we are supportive of one another in all aspects of our lives.*

Appreciating the social in the professional

As noted above, we blurred the lines between the personal and profession. This led each of us to be more intentional about connecting the social and professional in our work settings. We all realized that the three of us are very task-oriented and our life and work histories have fed into our strict work habits. We also learned from each other that it is essential to slow down and meet with folks in social settings. Clare did this by having lunch with her colleagues as opposed to eating lunch in front of her computer. These interludes which included discussion of work allowed her to get to know her team and others beyond the team in a way that formal meetings do not allow. Clare discussed how she applied her learnings to the university setting and addressed the importance of the personal aspects of self-study:

> *When I moved to Stanford to assume the Directorship of the Teachers for a New Era (TNE) project, I knew this was going to be a steep learning curve: a new project, a new role, a new university, a new state and a new country. Despite all this newness, one common element from my previous work at the University of Toronto would remain, I would be leading a team and would be a member of a larger community. The TNE team was composed of a number of individuals with a wide range of backgrounds ranging from Xiaoxia the stats expert, to Ruth Ann the expert on local school districts, to Nancy the expert in financial matters. I realized there needed to be ongoing communication and that the personal and the professional would have to be part of their work. (This had been central to my work with Anne and Anastasia.) To address the per-*

sonal side at the first TNE team meeting I asked each person to talk about a strength, a personal interest, preferred working style, and a pet peeve about working on a team. This exercise allowed folks to reveal who they were both as professionals and individuals which has been built upon in many different ways. This got the team off to a good start and the blurring of the two worlds has continued.

After listening to Clare's experiences in TNE, Anastasia explained how the social was also central to her relationships with her students and administrative staff although she had to make time to apply that in her work with faculty. Anne found the same thing in her experience co-teaching a course at her institution. She recognized the importance of giving time and space to get to know her colleague on a personal level. Anne stated:

From Clare and Anastasia, I learned the value of creating spaces to discuss personal issues, interests, and strengths as a teacher before my colleague and I negotiated our roles and responsibilities. I found the value of honoring and paying attention to the personal aspect of collaboration.

Linking leadership and partnership

One of the things that we all found was that it was critically important for one person to take the lead in each collaboration. Clare considered how this reduced time figuring out who had to do what and where the boundaries lay. She wrote:

We have been steadily working on joint projects for years and as we are winding up a project, we started to plan our next collaboration. Having a project to work on focused our energies, provided deadlines and external expectations which forced us to move forward when we could easily have gotten bogged down in process.

Anastasia noted how this learning applied in her institution. She noted:

Clare is a model leader who always invited further discussion on any ideas she generated and is sure to keep things open-ended until she hears from others. I'm more aware of the messages within the statements which faculty make at faculty committee meetings. I listen more without responding so quickly.

The three of us also honored the importance of partnership in leadership. Anne and Anastasia talked often about their amazing writing experience in co-authoring a self-study for teaching practices primer. They each took the lead for writing certain chapters and yet each contributed to each other's writing to the point where they credited each other for the same ideas. Anastasia considered how that partnership influenced her current and necessary collaboration with the secondary education coordinator. They are combining their efforts in order to design a higher quality program.

Making a mutual commitment

Our collaboration was intentional: not by circumstance, but by a mutual commitment to the work at hand, to each other. When we said we would do something together, we did it. We all learned to be more deliberate in making choices in our collaborations. Anastasia commented that:

I shouldn't rush into collaborative self-study research projects. The collaboration shouldn't be because self-study matters only to me. Although my intention may be to support someone else's need to research and move towards tenure and promotion, I now more carefully consider working with others who care about and are interested in learning about self-study . I am currently working with doctoral students in a seminar on self-study for teacher leaders. We are committed to supporting and learning from each other in our small collaborative circle of self-study.

Anne stated:

In my co-teaching, my partner and I identified conditions that we felt were critical for successful collaboration, such as intellectual safety, trust, and shared values. I learned from my relationship with Clare and Anastasia that trust and intellectual safety were critical elements in establishing the conditions for constructing new knowledge.

We also learned there needs to be a reciprocal relationship in which both participants benefit from the collaboration. Anne noted:

I experienced a reciprocal relationship with Anastasia and Clare, which made me open to learning from my teaching partner. The give and take that developed with my partner was an excellent example of how the roles shifted and we were teachers and learners at the same time.

IMPLICATIONS

Self-study has immersed us in a culture that has allowed us to analyze and better understand our beliefs, our practices, and our teaching. The S-STEP Special Interest Group (AERA) has fostered a sense of intellectual safety in a non-competitive and highly supportive culture, much like what we encourage teachers to do in their classrooms. It is a culture that professes that individuals can make a larger impact on advancing teacher education when they work together in a trusting, supportive, and inclusive environment. Self-study has lead to transformations in our thinking and practices. We were encouraged by the process and fluidity of self-study in our meaning making. In this paper, we identified a number of characteristics that contributed to our successful collaboration together. We discussed how our experiences have helped us reframe our perspectives about collaboration and apply them in our university settings. However, as we analyzed our successful collaborative experiences, we saw how our collaboration seemed like a *counterculture* to the culture of academia. As we analyzed our collaboration, we gained new insights into how our collaborative experiences were in stark contrast to some of our experiences at our universities, and how the culture of academia

hinders/challenges the kind of positive collaboration we have experienced.

Our collaboration required *letting go*, *taking risks*, exposing one's thinking, asking probing questions, and voicing our different perspectives. In academia one must be careful about *revealing too much* to colleagues who will be conducting peer review or who are in competition with one another. The culture of peer review can bleed into a culture of finding fault and the resulting critique is not always constructive. The university culture of solitary pursuit for credit and independence is in contrast to our collaborative experience of interdependence. In the mandatory world of the university, there are more possibilities for clashes and differences of opinions. In our collaboration outside the university, we are not required to address many of the issues that are a part of a regular faculty's work: teaching schedules, committee membership, budget decisions, and so on. We might miss out on the day-to-day interactions, but we also avoid the competitive nature of university relationships within departments. Does our collaboration represent a counter-culture to the culture of academia? In self-study our experiences are not competitive and peer review takes the form of *critical friends* who are supportive and encouraging. We experienced hard work, shared the workload, offered encouragement, and remained supportive when life's events (good and bad) competed with our deadlines for proposals, papers, books, and chapters. Through our shared enthusiasm and support, we have been there to lift one another up personally and professionally.

In summary, our collaboration and self-study of that process has allowed us to come to a better understanding of:

- the role of dialogue in creating multiple perspectives useful to each other's program development and teaching;
- the importance of cultivating a culture that encourages and supports personal and professional development;
- the role that S-STEP and the Castle Conference serve in developing a safe, supportive, and productive hub for self-study scholars to construct new understandings of their work and its impact;
- the essentialness of collaboration outside one's university.

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