January 2012

Dialogue On Our Action Research Experience

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Both of us have been taking part in an action research project dedicated to studying the First-Year Experience at Maryville University. A striking feature of our involvement has been realizing how our research goals shifted as we went along, our research leading us down a path we didn't anticipate when we began. We both started with a specific research topic—for Jen, "improving student presentations," for Johannes, "improving classroom discussions"—and then, to our surprise, found ourselves moving into very different directions. The dialogue below presents some of the insights, reflections, and challenges we have been facing in this process.

Johannes: You know, it seems we've gone through a similar process of reflection and discovery as we became part of this action research project. We started out with one idea, and then in the process realized our real concern was a different one.

Jen: I agree. Initially I had taken on a project of improving student presentations.

Johannes: What made you choose that project?

Jen: I graduated with my undergraduate degree in Speech Communication and I am struck at how ill prepared students are at giving effective presentations. It seems such an important communicative skill to have, and I felt University Seminar would be the perfect place to teach these skills.

Johannes: How did you go about trying to improve your students' skills?

Jen: Well, similar to taking on a new sport, it's difficult to improve if you don't practice. I see my University Seminar class as a place to "practice" giving presentations so that when students are expected to do so in future situations—class or work—they are better equipped to do so. Since this is a goal of mine, my students do several presentations throughout the semester and I was always disappointed in them. I decided to take on the action research project of changing what I did in order to improve their presentations. I began modeling what an excellent presentation looks like. I had my peer mentor critique my presentation and allowed the students to do the same. I was much more specific with my expectations and addressed the fact that one of every person's greatest fears is speaking in public.

Johannes: This sounds like a very successful action research project to me.

Jen: I was delighted that the presentations had improved and I know that the students gained more from this change in my teaching; however, when I really thought hard and honestly about the "problem" in my teaching—it wasn't the presentations at all. My real problem was the barrier that existed between me and my students in the classroom.

Johannes: Which is somewhat ironic, given your other roles in the Maryville community.

Jen: Indeed, I do have a great rapport with a lot of students on campus. Through my various roles on campus as being responsible for orientation, an academic adviser, and just my overall personality—I like to think that I am approachable, accessible, and students know me, and hopefully like me! But for some reason, that level of comfort and ease with me was not evident in my University Seminar class. Please know, there was a very strong sense of community within the students in the class, but I was certainly not a part of that community. My real problem in the classroom was that students did not get to know the real me. It's as if I put on a different persona—a more formal and, dare I say, traditional role of professor. This is what really bothered me about my classes.

Johannes: I think I've had a similar experience. If I would believe in the traditional role of the teacher, such a barrier between me and the students wouldn't be a problem; you know, "we're" the authority, and "they" are learning from us. But more and more it seems to me that this distinction between "we" and "them" blocks off genuine learning. But so how did you work on breaking down those barriers?

Jen: I decided that I was ready to 1. Admit the problem, and 2. Address the problem. I spoke to my colleagues about my concerns and got mixed reviews. Some said that this more authoritative approach in the classroom was appropriate for the University Seminar class. Others shared that they are informal in the University Seminar setting but more formal in their upper division courses within the discipline—some so much that they allow their University Seminar students to call them by their first name, but those in other classes by their formal name, Doctor So and So.

Johannes: So what was your solution?

Jen: My solution was to open up. To share with students more of the real me. I needed to take off the mask that I must have been putting on without even realizing it. I opened up with the help of some very specific strategies: I sent e-mails to students in the class prior to the semester to introduce who I am—and to make clear that I am here to help, and I visited the dorm to meet students on move-in day. Furthermore, I set up the class in a square for every class, and participated in every class activity. I met with small groups outside of class rather than one-on-one in my office, making everyone more comfortable. Often, I shared personal examples about the weekend, the highs/lows—I shared mine whereas before I moved on to something else without sharing anything about *me*.

Johannes: I think I went through a very similar process. Initially, I also had a specific "theme" I wanted to study: the quality of classroom discussions. I had students fill out evaluations about the various types of classroom interactions we had, and attempted to glean insights from their written evaluations.

Jen: That sounds sensible; I'm guessing you could then see which techniques worked better than others?

Johannes: Only somewhat. You see, I then also started to feel, it's not "technique" I'm concerned about at all. And surely, all the various "methods of instruction" have their merit. It's not that, say, lecturing, or whole-class discussion, or group work is inherently better or worse than another method. It seemed to me something else often determined whether I (and the students?) felt a class was important, meaningful, memorable.

Jen: What was that "something else"?

Johannes: I think you already mentioned it. "Opening up." The word I like to use here is "vulnerability." I began realizing meaningful interaction becomes possible when I stop hiding, as far as possible, behind a persona. When I become equally willing to learn with my students, learn from them, and authentically respond to their voices. And yes, that crucially includes bringing in my own voice. I used to think it was important to keep my own voice out of discussions, as I didn't want to influence the student's thinking processes, didn't want to take away their freedom.

Jen: But now?

Johannes: Now I want to say that, at least for me, sharing my own voice is a way to move into a more authentic learning environment. I've heard it being said that genuine teaching occurs when we simply become a vessel through which the teaching flows. And so, in an ideal classroom community, maybe teaching and learning flow through all of us.

Jen: That does sound a bit esoteric, don't you think? Can you give some actual examples of such a shift?

Johannes: Well, for instance this past semester I was teaching a University Seminar titled "Spiritual Journeys," and the class interactions felt most truthful when I didn't simply ask the students to share their experiences with spiritual matters, but also gave myself permission to speak of my own spiritual journey.

Jen: Maybe what students react to here positively is the sense that we're all in this together, and so the classroom experience can become a truly shared journey. Of course, I'm aware that there's still a power relationship in the classroom. But if we're serious about, well, a more egalitarian form of learning, we do need to start somewhere.

Johannes: And I'm aware that making myself vulnerable in the classroom is a scary thing.

Jen: But maybe one of the roles we have as teachers is to model vulnerability for our students. Perhaps as a path into an authentic classroom experience.

Johannes: I agree. I'm reminded of how Jane Tompkins writes about her hope for teaching, to create an environment in which "the class experience itself becomes the end and aim of education. Not something learned that you can take away from the class, not a skill, or even a perspective on the world, but an experience worth having as it goes by, moment by moment."[1] It seems to me that allowing vulnerability into the classroom would be a crucial step towards Tompkins' vision.

Jen: And maybe make the classroom truly a place of genuine learning and transformation?

Johannes: Let's do some more research to find out!

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[1] Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*, Reading: Perseus Books, 1996, page 144.