The Evolution of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Participant

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An essential goal of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is increased student learning. To accomplish this goal it becomes imperative to collaborate with students so a better understanding of learning arises. Recognizing, using, and increasing student voice can take many forms, such as asking for feedback on class structure, co-creating the syllabus, or partnering in research. Although recognizing student voice is essential, it is also imperative that teachers understand their voice as a means to maximize student learning. It is this collaboration between student and teacher that can truly enhance learning.

The following reflection will trace a journey of my becoming a SoTL researcher and working toward a collaborative relationship with students in my courses. The overarching theme is how studying teaching became a calling to better understand and utilize SoTL both to increase student voice and to recognize and capitalize on my own voice as an educator. As the narrative unfolds, a shift in understanding student learning emerges: from developing a teaching style/identity, to focusing on studying the teaching-learning process, to actively incorporating student voice in multiple aspects of teaching and learning.

My recognition and use of student voice connects with what Shulman (2004) described as pedagogical content knowledge. In Shulman's words, it is "a particular form of content knowledge that embodies the aspects of content most germane to its teachability. Within the category of pedagogical content knowledge I include, for the most regularly taught topics in one's subject matter, the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, and demonstrations-in a word the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others" (p. 203). It encompasses an understanding of what makes certain concepts difficult to learn and a recognition that teachers must develop a repertoire of teaching strategies to address the preconceptions and misconceptions that diverse students often bring to the course content (M. Cohn, personal communication, January 16, 2012). An individual who has pedagogical content knowledge has solid knowledge of the discipline and generic teaching principles but also understands educational context and the participants in that context and how best to facilitate learning of key course concepts at the intersection of those. Striving toward the effective use of student voice provides an excellent example of developing a particular kind of pedagogical content knowledge because it aims to bridge content knowledge with those learning it through enlisting the active support and participation of those learners.

Developing a Teaching Style/Philosophy and Identifying My Own Voice

The greatest influence on my early development as a teacher was my experience as a wrestling coach. When I began coaching, I had no idea I would eventually choose a career in teaching and thus did not approach coaching with a preconceived notion of what teaching should encompass. Coaching, by its nature, requires active collaboration between athlete and coach. It is imperative

for coaches to learn the strengths and weaknesses of their athletes and design opportunities to demonstrate improvement. As such, athletics does not rely on grades as an indicator of success; rather, athlete performance exemplifies understanding. Embracing collaboration with athletes/ students to understand strengths and weaknesses became the foundation to my teaching identity.

As I reflect on my experiences, it is important to note that my teaching voice developed subsequent to my teaching identity. As I gained self-efficacy in my coaching ability I found myself talking more with my wrestlers to better understand their needs and encouraging them to be aware of their development. At this stage, my voice was simply a way to communicate with my wrestlers. I had not yet realized how my voice was an embodiment of my teaching identity.

Perhaps the defining moment in my development as a coach evolved as I learned to use coaching pedagogical content knowledge. During every wrestling match there are multiple opportunities to apply conventional coaching knowledge, and for the majority of the time this knowledge provides positive results. However, a more experienced coach will know when to break from conventional knowledge and employ different techniques. For me, this transition emerged as I gained a better understanding of athlete ability and wrestling strategy. Individual wrestling ability became the primary tool to guide coaching strategy. It was also at this time that I commonly consulted my team captains to plan practice and sought their input on team progress. Specifically, I met with my captains weekly to get their input on how they believed the team was developing and asked them to plan and conduct portions of practice. Together we determined milestones and assessed progress. My role as coach became less about being an expert and more about listening to athletes as they identified areas to develop. As I listened, I developed a deeper understanding of what they needed in order to learn and could develop individualized teaching approaches that increased my wrestlers' awareness of their strengths and means to improve weaknesses. This kind of collaborative approach also helped me to develop a teaching voice that was in dialogue with my wrestlers' voices.

Coaching provided an excellent opportunity to develop my teaching identity. Simply stated, I learned how to develop practice/ lesson plans based on team and individual need and, as a result, developed coaching pedagogical content knowledge in action. Most importantly, coaching exposed me to how when I collaborated with athletes and asked them to assess their own development and contribute to planning practice, they were more engaged and had improved outcomes.

Studying the Teaching Process: A Further Expansion of Voice

 Although coaching afforded me an important opportunity to clarify my commitments as a teacher and build my teaching voice, it did not provide the language or content needed to develop and progress as an educator. It was not until my first faculty position that I gained a language for learning and was able to expand my voice and experience student development. I was fortunate to be hired at a university where studying teaching was valued and encouraged. Being a teacher/researcher allowed me to view my classroom as a research site and ask questions regarding learning. As a result of my environment, I found myself asking, How are my students learning, meeting course objectives, and demonstrating understanding? In my second year, I participated in a two-year action research seminar. The goal of the seminar was to develop,

conduct, and disseminate an action research study on a question central to our teaching. Little did I know this seminar would transform my thinking and practice as an educator.

The first study I conducted, while in the seminar, examined how beginning rehabilitation counseling students learned counseling skills (Kiener, 2007). I used a grounded theory approach to answer the research question, and the core categories of mutual engagement and comfortability emerged. Through a grounded theory approach, core categories are not predetermined but rather emerge from the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Mutual engagement is the process of viewing a class as a group and applying principles of group formation (forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning) and effective pedagogy to increase learning. When a class is in the working stage of group formation, a safe learning environment has been created and learning can be enhanced. Comfortability is the interaction of students and instructor as they progress through the stages of group formation. At the heart of the study was acknowledging students as primary contributors to their learning and developing ways to maximize this process. This study illustrated how students facilitated their own engagement through active participation.

During the study there were two pivotal moments that helped generate the core categories. The first pivotal moment came when I asked the students to participate in counseling role plays. At the time of the role plays (early in the semester) the students did not feel safe to demonstrate their ability in front of their classmates or me. As a result, the students were apprehensive about continuing role plays. For me, this demonstrated how the students were "storming" as a group and how they had not yet developed a sense of comfort. In the subsequent class the students asked to spend more time getting to know each other by sharing past work experiences and future goals. By listening to my students and providing an opportunity for them to get to know each other, I was able to support them feeling more at ease with demonstrating their learning in an open forum. This was a defining moment for the class and my teaching. From this point on, I began to investigate how I could capitalize on student voice as a means to increase comfortability.

The second pivotal moment was less defined and evolved out of the process of sharing the research data and analysis with my students. The students became increasingly interested in the process of providing feedback and clarification on their experiences as research participants. It was in this process where the students moved from participants to co-investigators of their learning. It became common for students to ask weekly about the study and add additional context to their experiences. As a result of the active student participation, mutual engagement evolved to become a core category.

Both moments demonstrate how when students are actively involved and invited to participate in their learning they are likely to accept the opportunity and excel in their new role. This new active role allows students to view themselves as agents in their learning and not be relegated to passive recipients waiting for knowledge to be delivered. I believe when this happens students are more willing to use their voice with instructors and increase the chances of teaching and learning together.

As an outgrowth of my participation in the action research seminar I continued to study questions central to my teaching. I undertook additional studies to further define and conceptualize mutual engagement and comfortability. It is with this lens all research questions were framed. As my research and teaching evolved, I employed both formal and informal student collaborations.

Formally, I have conducted, written, and presented research with students. The first presentation occurred by happenstance. There was a state conference held on our campus that paralleled one of my classes and I engaged the class in the idea of co-presenting. Two students agreed to participate and then we began to meet and determine roles and responsibilities. For the most part, the students determined the topic, developed the outline, and sought research to support the topic. I served as a guide rather than leader. From that point on I began to look for additional avenues to conduct research with students. In general, collaborating with students has become a disposition. Each new semester, I ask how students can be involved and how that involvement can increase their development and voice. Conducting research and writing with students provide an opportunity for students to see themselves in a new role and further their learning.

Informally, I have fostered active student involvement as a class norm through creating syllabi and assignments with students. These are instances of valuing student engagement in all aspects of teaching and learning. In my program, there are two courses taught sequentially with the same students. Near the end of the first semester I ask students to co-create the syllabus by asking them what they liked and disliked and by providing a general framework of the course (indicating what can and cannot be changed and making sure student outcomes are addressed). In most cases students provide valuable suggestions regarding assignments and course structure.

The action research seminar allowed me to strengthen my teaching identity and gave me the confidence to continually try different classroom strategies to improve learning. Specifically, it prepared me to continually investigate my teaching with an increasing emphasis and use of student voice. Mutual engagement and comfortability became guiding concepts that enabled my students and me to break from traditional teacher-student roles and co-create better learning environments.

Actively Incorporating Student Voice in Multiple Aspects of Teaching and Learning

As my utilization and understanding of SoTL grew, so did my participation in our university's center for teaching and learning. Participants in the center's activities began to ask questions about how to sustain, grow, and assess SoTL's impact on our university. In particular, I was interested in quantifying mutual engagement as a means to assess its benefit, if at all, on student learning. In an attempt to address this need I created the Comfortability in Learning Scale (CLS) to measure perceived comfortability. The goal of this research is for students and instructors to better understand factors that can increase or hinder learning and then design opportunities to increase teaching and learning together.

The CLS is a 20-item scale asking students to rate perceptions of their classroom learning environment. In general, the questions address how comfortable students are with their classmates, course content, and instructor. The CLS can be used as a one-time assessment or be

administered multiple times to assess development of comfortability. In addition, it can be used in a single class or to assess an entire program. My intended outcome for the CLS is for it to be used as an avenue for students to think about how they learn and then be able to communicate with their instructors to better participate in their learning.

A benefit in administering the CLS multiple times is it allows for students and instructors to receive real-time feedback regarding classroom group formation. The CLS would then become an avenue for active dialogue between students and instructor. After each administration, individual question and total class means can be calculated and reported to the instructor and students. It is hoped that this data can validate pedagogical content knowledge the instructor is using and/or provide an avenue to seek student input. For example, if students rate a question regarding comfort communicating with the instructor low, he or she can address the concern and attempt to increase comfortability. Or if students indicate interactions with classmates are valuable, additional group work with student input can be developed.

In addition to the scale, instructors can ask open-ended questions to gain a more nuanced description of student experiences. Students can be asked to reflect on factors contributing to their learning or to specifically identify how their learning has changed or been reinforced. Similar to end-of-course evaluations, the CLS provides important information on student perceptions. However, unlike end-of-course evaluations, multiple administrations of the CLS allow for student feedback to benefit current students and thus ensure that students and instructors are in constant communication for the improvement of learning.

I have conducted research with the CLS to examine the developmental nature of comfortability. Initial studies reported a decrease in comfortability after the third administration. In examining this outcome, I discovered the third administration coincided with an exam or major assignment. It is not difficult to understand how assessment can cause a decrease in comfortability. As a result, I have discussed my teaching and assessment philosophy with students, created a few smaller assignments for students to complete prior to the first major assignment, had students participate in self and peer assessment, and have co-created assignments with students. I have found that when students are co-creators they are more engaged in course content and in many instances develop very comprehensive assignments. I hope the additional exposure to assessment procedures will increase student understanding of the role assessment in learning. The CLS can provide an avenue to demystify the learning and assessment process and thus provide an opportunity for continued dialogue between students and instructors.

From a qualitative perspective, students have been asked to describe how completing the scale has or has not impacted their learning. In response, students stated: "I feel my learning intensified this semester…I feel more confident now of my ability"; "I find myself having conversations with others about topics we have talked/ read"; "At times amazed at my ability to contribute to discussions once uniformed on"; and "I definitely feel like everyone in my courses are contributing to my learning, not merely the teacher." Although it is difficult to determine the direct impact the CLS had on student learning, these students were able to reflect on and acknowledge different ways they experienced learning. The above comments demonstrate student capacity to express insights regarding learning — a necessary component of student voice.

Although the majority of responses were positive, a few students discussed a different experience and said: "Not sure it was (impacted) other than thinking about the safety of acceptance within the students in the class"; I have been more unconfident in my learning"; and "I struggled more with completing papers and other assignments." Even though these students did not acknowledge a positive experience, they were still able to indicate how they believed their learning transpired. These responses may be more valuable than the former as they provide an opportunity for student and instructor to meet and develop a plan for improvement. It is in these moments of collaboration that teaching and learning together can blossom. In total, these responses may provide evidence of how the CLS can increase student attention to metacognitive skills, which can be the precursor of active student voice.

Conclusion

Collaborating with students throughout the teaching and learning process can go a long way in establishing student voice and more importantly increase student learning. Through my SoTL research, mutual engagement and comfortability emerged as concepts to help me understand how students learned and led me to a commitment and various methods to increase student voice. My journey of discovering the importance of student voice began with acknowledging and creating my teaching identity as a wrestling coach. This process of understanding voice blossomed with my embrace of the principles of SoTL and the methods of action research. At this point, I am comfortable and pleased with the destination I have reached—increased teacher-student collaboration and a more active and meaningful learning environment for all.

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