
Textualizing Experiences: Reading the “Texts” of Teacher Education Practices

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Abstract

The authors embarked on a year-long journey with the intention of learning to textualize their experiences, reading them as one reads written texts (Edge, 2011). The goal of the study was for each author to improve her instructional practice through deeper comprehension of that practice, becoming more intentional in making decisions. This self-study used autobiographical writing, reflection on critical incidents, and discussion among critical friends, resulting in deeper comprehension of our teacher education practices. The collective findings of the study explored (a) tensions between personal and professional lives and their influence on instructional decisions, (b) textualizing experiences is a valuable way to improve teacher education practices, (c) growth in knowledge and agency occurred through serious and collective examination of critical incidents, and (d) using a similar process with students can show them the power of praxis as a means to continued professional learning.
Textualizing Experiences: Reading the “Texts” of Teacher Education Practices

A group of seven female teacher educators conducted a self-study of their teacher education practices with the guiding question of: “What can we learn about our teaching by critically discussing the texts of our teacher education practices?” We defined text in a broader sense to include the idea that experiences once written could then be shared, reinterpreted, and analyzed (Edge, 2011). Integral to our process was the use of a collaborative conference protocol to guide our data collection and analysis. Through discourse and acting as “critical friends,” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 819) we challenged and pushed boundaries as we analyzed our “textualized” experiences (Edge, 2011, p. 330).

Collectively, we learned that our decisions were influenced by an array of personal and professional tensions stemming from critical events. The identification and examination of the critical events led us to understand the broader context of these events as periods of personal uncertainty or “wobble” (Fecho, 2011, p. 53) that set the stage for each person to search for answers and new ways of understanding. We learned that our teaching experiences could become engaging texts open to multiple interpretations leading to new discoveries. Our culminating take away was a renewed commitment to model for teacher education students how to textualize, share, and grow from their own and each other’s experiences.

Perspectives or Theoretical Framework

Educational reforms of the 21st Century have set higher standards for learning, more focus on test scores and data-driven instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), and greater responsibility for student learning placed on the shoulders of classroom teachers (Cohen, 2011). Teacher educators strive to provide learning opportunities that develop educators who are inspired, respected, and engaged in learning across their careers (Cohen, 2002). Inspired educators develop a “teaching practice” that is both attentive and deliberate and that seeks to connect teaching to student learning (Cohen, 2011, p. 26). Such teachers create “educative” experiences (Dewey, 1938/1998, p. 44) by choosing to “add the passion, energy, and commitment that make education happen” (Cusick, 1991, p. 216). Likewise, they have a transactional (Dewey, 1938/1998; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994) relationship with their experiences as they read and make sense of their daily practice, much as they read and make sense of any text.

Thus, the purpose of this research was to offer the authors opportunities to reflect on our teaching practice with the goal of studying our own teaching (Schon, 1987). This purpose was guided by a theoretical framework situated in two complementary epistemological perspectives: feminist communication theory (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997; Colflesh, 1996) and transactional reading and learning theory (Dewey, 1938/1998; Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994; Rosenblatt, 2005).

Feminist Perspectives

Teaching is “intimate work” (Bruner, 1996, p. 86). Professional learning that makes a difference in classroom instruction offers educators opportunities grounded in the complex
environment of practice while supporting and nurturing reflections and discourse on their developing knowledge, often termed praxis. From a feminist perspective, care and understanding are at the center of teaching and learning (Noddings, 1984). Like the typically female role of a midwife who helps draw new life from the mother, a teacher recognizes that knowledge is created within and drawn from the learner. Such a theory of knowledge creation is a departure from the more traditional and often male perspective of a banker who deposits knowledge within the learner (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

Expanding the feminist focus on care and understanding, a framework for women’s ways of knowing grounded our research. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) advocate for women to become constructivist knowers who see knowledge as actively constructed by all human beings. Constructivist knowers move beyond silent receivers of knowledge and act with a sense of agency. To act with agency, women must gain confidence and skill in using information from a wide range of sources to form their own understandings (Colflesh, 1996).

Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) describe spaces within which women learn together and move toward constructivist knowing as “public homeplaces” or places where “people support each other’s development and where everyone is expected to participate in developing the homeplace” (p. 13). In public homeplaces, participants feel safe enough to express their thoughts and envision possibilities beyond their current situations. Much as in Close and Langer’s (1995) ideas on “envisionment building” (p. 3) when reading literature, as members of a “public homeplace” textualize and share their lived experiences, they begin to “explore the horizons of possibilities” (p. 3). When reading for information, Close and Langer (1995) suggest that the reader “maintains a point of reference” (p. 3) while:

…their envisionments are shaped by their questions and explorations that bring them closer to the information they seek and that help them better understand the topic. As people read, they use the content to narrow the possibilities of meaning and sharpen their understandings of information. Using information gained along the way (combined with what they already know) to refine their understanding, they seek to get the author’s point or understand more and more about the topic. (p. 3)

As the researchers in this study, we read our experiences as texts so that we could explore possibilities and let our questions and explorations help us better understand those experiences and sharpen our interpretations of those experiences.

The researchers used extended dialogue to wrestle with ideas. We listened to each other’s ideas carefully and spoke our own emerging ideas, knowing that dialogue allows ideas to clarify, change, and expand. Participants in a public homeplace develop self-respect, confidence, and a sense of agency through this process. Textualizing experiences helped each researcher develop skills of constructivist knowers as we read our experiences, created new interpretations, and incorporated new insights constructed with critical friends (Edge, 2011). One can learn to become a constructivist thinker in a public homeplace where such thinking is valued and modeled; a public homeplace offers a learning environment in which all members become one among equals and where power is shared among all. Educators who are constructivist thinkers are more likely to see their students as capable of thinking and constructing new ideas (Belenky,
Bond, & Weinstock, 1997) and to enable their students to see learning as a dynamic, symbiotic, and transactional relationship.

Although these ideas are not exclusively female ways of thinking, in the greater society much has been written about the differences in male and female approaches to knowledge, communication, and leadership (Gilligan, 1982; Sergiovanni, 2000). Women more often define power as “power to” whereas men typically define power as “power over” (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 282). Males tend to focus on the individual and on feeling in control of their situations; whereas, females tend to emphasize relationships and see power as a means to shared goals (Sergiovanni, 2000). However, in all groups a time for building trust is required before communication reaches a level of expanding knowledge.

**Transactional Perspectives**

In transactional theory, learners are in a state of transaction with their environments including their own knowledge and experiences, sources of knowledge beyond the self, and with other learners. According to Rosenblatt (1978/1994), as readers interpret texts, they are changed by the texts as well as changing the texts through their interpretations. So learning occurs both from within the learner and from shared interpretations that expand the reader’s questions and insights. The researchers saw parallels between these two bodies of research and used both perspectives to frame this study.

Teacher learning that improves teaching practice requires not only new knowledge and skills, but also new ways of thinking and of seeing oneself. As teachers become confident knowledge constructors, they learn through praxis or trying new practices while seeking to understand why those practices work or do not work. Thus, teachers become researchers who learn new ways to think about and to carry out their work; they become more deliberate and attentive to their instructional decisions (Cohen, 2011). Teachers with a well-developed sense of agency build theory grounded in classroom practice (Bruner, 1996). Through inquiry, they actively formulate questions of importance to them, direct their own investigations, and communicate their newly constructed ideas, thus improving their practice in the process (Liston & Zeichner, 1991).

Transactional theory also suggests that learning occurs when people consider, discuss, and inquire into problems and issues of significance to them (Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994; Rosenblatt, 2005). Based on this framework, the goal of professional learning for educators would be that they become constructivist thinkers and knowers through reading their own experiences, sharing their interpretations, and expanding those interpretations within a trusted community with the intent of improving their teaching practice.

Merging the two broad areas of research, feminist and transactional theories, provided the theoretical framework of our study. This framework created space for each of the authors to grow and to learn personally and professionally both individually and collectively.
Methodology

There is energy stemming from an existing established practice of self-study at our institution (Anderson, Imdieke, Lubig, Reisner, Sabin, & Standerford, 2010). The researchers saw a connection between the conference call for dynamic text discussions and self-study methodology. Self-study is rooted in post-modern and feminist thinking (LaBoskey, 2004). The purpose of this methodology is to both inform the researchers and to generate knowledge that can be shared in the professional discourse community. Self-study moves beyond empirical evidence to include consideration of underlying values and beliefs (Cochran-Smith, 2002). Rather than prove answers, self-study helps the researchers to explore and to challenge their assumptions with the purpose of improving their understanding and practice of teaching (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

Much of our data came from written and oral stories we shared from our personal and professional experiences. Narrative knowledge which is “concerned with the explication of human intentions in the context of action” best characterizes the knowledge of teaching (Bruner, 1985, p. 100).

Stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments, and faceless subjects. They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. And, of course, they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remember that we are in the business of teaching, learning, and researching to improve the human condition. Telling and listening to stories can be a powerful gift of regard—of caring—for one another. (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 280)

In telling stories about our textualized experiences, the researchers found this self-study helped to broaden and deepen our knowledge of teaching and learning and of ourselves as women teacher educators. Dyson and Genishi (1994) suggest:

The storytelling self is a social self, who declares and shapes important relationships through the mediating power of words. Thus, in sharing stories, we have the potential for forging new relationships, including local, classroom ‘cultures’ in which individuals are interconnected and new ‘we’s’ formed. (p. 5)

Modified Collaborative Conference Protocol

This group of seven female teacher educators conducted their self-studies over one year during bi-weekly meetings using a modified collaborative conference protocol (Seidel, Walters, Kirby, Olff, Powell, Scripp, Veenama, 1997). This conference protocol included textualizing a lived experience by putting it into writing (Edge, 2011), reading the text in the public home place, responding to the text by offering personal and academic connections that provided additional lenses from which the text could be considered, hearing the author’s response, and composing the learning through written reflection.
**Textualizing an experience.** The researchers wrote stories about critical events from their teacher education practice contextualized within their personal autobiographies. Individually, each participant analyzed how her own beliefs and values influenced the choices and decisions she made as she re-read and reflected on those experiences.

**Reading the text.** Critical events from each professional autobiography were read aloud within the homeplace; the shared readings served as a means of identifying research questions for each individual.

**Responding to the text.** After each story was read aloud within the group, the author-researcher listened and took notes while the critical friends offered observations, personal connections, connections to existing literature, and questions for the group to consider.

**Hearing the responses.** After hearing the responses, the author-researcher joined the conversation and offered clarifications, affirmations, questions, and points of disagreement.

**Composing the learning.** Finally, each author-researcher reflected on her own learning and these take aways were later shared with the group as part of the on-going exploration and knowledge construction.

The data collected included field notes of bi-weekly meetings of the entire panel, reflective journals of each member, written feedback participants provided to their own students as illustrations of decisions made, documented decisions during class sessions, conversations with critical friends who challenged and pushed our thinking, and written artifacts from our teaching and learning experiences. We considered each emerging theme through multiple data sources and from the perspective of each researcher as we defined our collective themes across the year of the study.

**Findings**

In this study we sought to better understand and to improve our teacher education practices. By critically reading and analyzing our individual narratives within the public homeplace, we collectively identified four themes about our practices (a) personal and professional tensions influence the decisions we made in our teaching, (b) our ability to stretch our understanding was accomplished through interpreting our experiences as texts, (c) our growth was rooted in critical incidences and moments when we felt our convictions wobble (Fecho, 2011), and (d) by modeling the process of textualizing our experiences, we will provide learning environments and opportunities for our students.

In the section that follows, we first provide a description of the theme as understood and collectively defined through an analysis of all of the texts of our teacher education practices. Each researcher selected a theme that best illustrated what she learned about her teaching by critically discussing the text from her teacher education practices.
**Personal and Professional Tensions**

One common theme that emerged throughout the study was that each researcher felt an array of personal and professional tensions that influenced her professional decisions. Many of these tensions can be directly attributed to the classic female roles combined with the expanded female roles of women since the feminist movements of the late 20th Century, such as the growth of mothers who work outside the home. The women in this group all felt that they were expected to have it all and do it all with no excuses for less than perfect performance. In other words, the women felt they were to fill both traditional female and male roles at the same time and to fill all these roles expertly. Demands of home and work often conflicted, and each member of the group felt that she was often unable to do her best in either place. Yet, each believed that in resolving these conflicts, growth occurred and she became stronger both personally and professionally.

**Laura’s Personal and Professional Tensions.** I have been an educator for nearly 20 years and became a mother two years ago. How have my personal and professional identities changed as I seek to merge these two important roles? As most women, I had felt that I would someday meet someone with whom to create the traditional marriage and family. However, over the years that did not happen, and I realized that I could create my own family. So, two years ago I became the mother of beautiful twin boys. Before I became a mother, I felt that balancing these two full-time roles would be quite possible and I set high expectations for my performance in both contexts. Although I would absolutely not eliminate or trade either role, I have come to realize that it is not possible to be near perfect in two consuming roles at the same time. I find that I am always feeling guilty about shortchanging either my sons or my students. I realized from my critical friends that all of us have experienced these same guilty feelings at different stages in our lives.

From these guilty feelings, new learning emerged, although the process of this learning has been especially challenging due to the commitment of time for such insights to occur and evolve. Fitting the additional reading, writing, meeting, and reflecting into my already overloaded schedule produced even more tensions and guilt. I frequently arrived at the next meeting scolding myself by thinking, “Great. One more thing I haven’t gotten done.” However, in a public homeplace, my oral insights were welcomed and the conversations helped me bring my learning to new levels. I gradually came to understand that I cannot control everything in life and to accept that as okay.

I realized that the tensions and inadequacies that I often felt were similar to those my students felt as they balanced multiple roles in their lives and tried to be the best future teachers they could at the same time. Students today are usually holding jobs and carrying full-time credit loads in their university programs. On top of work and classes, they are expected to volunteer time outside of the program to become more familiar with the needs of students in special education that go beyond classroom walls. And, they are expected to make sense of the complex world of teaching students in both general and special education while remembering the content from both professional fields.

Becoming a mother has brought a shift in my thinking that has enabled me to become a better learner, caregiver, teacher, and mentor. I realize that each of us moves through stages in
our lives, and depending on the stage in which we find ourselves, the way we frame the world
and our beliefs about what is important and how to relate to others will vary. Our personal
experiences shape who we are at specific points in time and influence how we interact with one
another.

We know that women can have it all; they can balance many roles, but they may find
doing it all at the same time is challenging and riddled with tensions (Slaughter, 2012). It is true
that men face similar tensions and challenges, but it appears to be more prevalent for women.
Women tend to be more open to sharing stories with each other as well (Belenky, Bond, &
Weinstock, 1997). I find that now I tend to use my personal and professional stories as a primary
way of teaching my students. My stories of tensions and struggles can help students accept their
own challenges as growth experiences. They can accept that roles will change and become more
and less important as stages of life come and go. Learning through stories is a powerful approach
to learning (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Sharing my stories supports
my students as they become part of the public homeplaces that I create in my classrooms and
encourages them to reflect, share, and learn from their own and each other’s stories.

Jan’s Personal and Professional Tensions. My self-study grew out of concern over the
rapid, unexpected and ongoing changes in my role as a public school teacher. Throughout my
professional life, I have diligently tried to make sense of the various professional hats I have
worn; however, I lacked a group of critical friends to support my learning from my experiences.
The one constant during all of this professional change has been my personal ambition to further
develop my teaching practices in the area of writing and to support other teachers in raising the
quality of writing in their elementary classrooms.

My critical incident arose from assumptions and expectations. While my public school
colleagues focused on teacher-directed products, I expected to continue having shared
professional experiences through dialogue about the process. Participating in a collaborative
conference protocol in a safe public homeplace has broadened my constructivist approach to
thinking.

The self-study group modeled how to step back and let others arrive at their own
understandings, as they are ready. Connecting the shift in my thinking to Langer’s (2011)
process of envisionment building helped to strengthen this new understanding. As additional
ideas emerged, I questioned previous assumptions and practices. I realized that my personal and
professional tension was rooted in the difference between my values and what I thought was the
expectation of my job. My thinking had shifted from a problem-solution frame to one that was
willing to make meaning from understanding the perspectives of others. In the same way we read
a story to understand, I read my students and co-workers experiences as stories so we could co-
construct meaning rather than look for quick fixes.

Stretching through Interpreting Stories

The second theme that we identified was the power to learn through sharing our own
experiences as texts that could be interpreted. Within the safety of the public homeplace, each
member developed the trust to share stories that went straight to the heart of her as a person and
a professional. We began by sharing oral stories of the questions that were spinning in our heads. Written professional and personal autobiographies were then composed and shared across our months together. Some members had conducted self-studies together previously and were more comfortable with sharing early in the process. Others needed time to become comfortable with this type of reflecting and sharing. Through laughter and tears, the authors came to know and trust one another. As this trust developed, so did the depth of the stories and the ability to share interpretations, questions, and disagreements. We truly found ourselves engaged in a literary community as we read the texts of our experiences. Those texts were as powerful as any we have read before.

**Bethney’s Stretch.** As a member of this self-study team, I struggled to share publicly my experiences and as I wrote this final piece, I continued to struggle. When I came to the study as a new assistant professor in the School of Education, I found myself among the *greats* whom I had admired both as a former student of the school and as a professional in the field. As my colleagues began sharing their stories over the weeks and months that we met, I knew eventually it would be my time to share.

As a former teacher, guidance counselor, school leader, and now an assistant professor of educational leadership, I have spent a significant amount of time trying to understand why I saw my educational practices and beliefs to be a bit different than many of the professionals around me. I recognized that quite possibly it was the elements of my story that made me see things differently. I connected strongly with the work of Robert Starratt (2004) and thought that by just *knowing* my story and holding it close, I was honoring it and allowing it be an authentic part of my practices.

There is a tacit moral imperative to be true to oneself. To not be true to oneself would be to miss the whole point of one’s life. Since I am a unique being who will exist only once in the whole history of the universe, my originality is something that only I can discover, author, perform, define, and actualize. Only I can realize the potentiality that is solely my own. If I refuse this most basic human privilege and opportunity then I violate my destiny and myself. (p. 66)

For as long as I could remember, I felt I was conscientious to the idea of authenticity and the role it would play in my life and work. Although I may not have always had the words for naming it, in reflecting back on my young mind, I recognized the elements of authentic-based ideas to have been present in my thoughts. As I began to progress further into this self-study, I drew stronger connections between my story, my professional experiences and the literature, until finally, the question emerged: How do I continue to grow in my own authenticity and encourage students to grow in the understanding of their authenticity and its necessity as a foundation for ethical leadership, while working in a field that often pressures us to do otherwise? Through the support of my critical friends in our public homeplace, I recognized the next step I would need to take. To be authentic, one must recognize, accept, internalize and externalize their story (Starratt, 2004). It was the externalization, the textualization piece that I was missing (Edge, 2011).
I had a story inside me, but had never textualized the experiences that comprised my story. To do so, would be to put it in a format that would become public and open to the interpretation of others. As I became more engaged in the self-study process, hesitantly, I began to textualize, and place written words to the events that I believed made me into the person I was today. Although I had my story written, on several occasions, I passed by stating that I would be ready to share the next time. In between meetings I would re-write and insert a bit more information into my document. With each meeting I became more and more comfortable working amongst my critical friends (LaBoskey, 2004) in our public homeplace. As an individual who recognized that my story grew daily and changed with each new experience, I had always guarded it from the possibility of misinterpretation - of one not understanding it in the exact form that I did. I held my story close, feeling strongly that no one would ever see it in its true form which can only be found in the original, first-hand experience. My story began before I was born and has continued to develop into its current state of which it is found today. I believed in my story; it was my interpretation of the life surrounding me and my foundation for carrying authenticity forward in my beliefs and practices. To share this story would be to open it up for the interpretation of others, who might see it differently than I did, and this I feared would change its meaning.

I opened myself up to the process and through the support of my critical friends, I externalized my story by textualizing my experiences. Immediately, I recognized a transformation that had occurred, a weight that have been lifted, and a true sense that others not only understood my story, but they supported it. Through textualization, I recognized my story in a new light and saw an even stronger connection between my beliefs and practices, my desire to be authentic in my teaching, and the literature that I so often turned to as a professor of educational leadership. By sharing my story and listening to the interpretations of my critical friends, I became empowered to strengthen my practices. Evans (2007) shares that, “When asked about their origins of their philosophy, people invariably point to their experience— their experience as an adult, as an educator and as a student, and primarily to their early experience growing up” (p. 147). I had previously thought that to know my story myself was enough to recognize where my philosophies, beliefs and sense of authenticity was founded. Through the process of self-study I learned that by letting others into my story it became lifted to a new level, and my story was empowered to do the work that our experiences are intended to do.

Growth from Critical Incidents and Wobble

The members of our team each shared thoughts on feeling “wobble” (Fecho, 2011, p. 53)—that is, moments when we felt we were wavering between what we previously thought or experienced and what we were in the process of thinking or experiencing. Through wobbling, we came to understand Piaget’s ideas of equilibrium and disequilibrium (McLeod, 2009) at a personal level. As we confronted and reflected on situations where our deepest beliefs failed to guide us as expected, we began to wobble about those beliefs. We questioned what we were doing and wondered if there were better ways. It was in this state of disequilibrium when we truly began to learn. Although the feelings were uncomfortable, they pushed us to search for new ideas and beliefs. We came to recognize periods of wobble as critical incidents to examine. It was in sharing and discussing these critical incidents where the most learning occurred for each of us.
**Abby’s Critical Incident.** Wobble occurred for me as I sought to answer the question: How do I balance my personal belief that teacher candidates must be supported and nurtured while honoring the integrity of our profession? This question emerged from the critical incident of dismissing a teacher candidate from the program. In textualizing my personal and professional experiences as a public school teacher for 12 years and now as an assistant professor, I explored my wobble in response to this critical event. Through conversations and connections with my critical friends and the sharing of literature, I began to further examine my beliefs about learning and thinking.

Bruner’s (1986) two modes of thinking emerged as pertinent influences in this study. A paradigmatic view of learning and thinking is rooted in a formal, mathematical system of description. A narrative view of learning and thinking focuses on human interaction and seeks to demonstrate how personal experiences help to shape our stories. Within education, there is a heavy reliance upon the paradigmatic paradigm as evidenced by the use of measures such as grade point averages, course grades, and performance upon tests. This leaves much to be desired when our students demonstrate dispositional issues that are better suited to a narrative view of assessment. To tell and know the complete story of ourselves and our students, the paradigmatic and narrative paradigms must be utilized as complementary modes of thinking. The wobble for me came as I realized that in spite of analyzing and striving to understand and support the teacher candidate in terms of both views, the difficult decision to dismiss the student from the program was necessary.

This realization resulted in me questioning my deep rooted belief that growth, learning, and change can occur given the right opportunities and when marked by authenticity, trust, and reciprocal care (Hickman, 2010; Noddings, 1984). As a woman, a special educator, and an educational leader, my belief in the ability to inspire others to achieve goals through collaboration, relationship building, and empowerment had been shaken. It was through the process of textualizing the experience about the unsuccessful teacher candidate that I realized despite belief, empowerment, and care, some are not meant to be educators.

As I worked through this time of disequilibrium, I searched for new ideas and ways to understand this critical incident and similar ones to come. At the onset, this critical incident began for me as a question of power. Who gave me the power to stand in the way of another’s dream to become a teacher? I saw myself in my new role, the Director of Field Experiences, as a gatekeeper and felt uncomfortable with that power. Often female leaders are thought of as providing the power to rather than the more masculine view of the power over (Sergiovanni, 2000). Interpreting my role as the person initially charged with addressing situations of student concern and in essence ordained with a “power over” (p. 282) who continues in the program or does not, represented an internal struggle for me. My natural leadership style sought to assist others to achieve their goals by providing the “power to” (p. 282). Through the process of making connections and ongoing envisionment building, I made meaning from my experiences in order to inform my practice.

I now see my role as not the power over keeping those out of teaching, rather it is the power to help my students realize professional pathways to their true calling, be that teaching or
some other career. From this perspective, the power to achieve is given freely and with care. This new way of seeing allows me to balance my innate belief in our students and my desire to protect the integrity of the teaching profession. This required me to seek a balance between the belief in the potential of my students to become effective teachers and knowing when that belief is better served in helping my students to see what true strengths they have and the potential to build a career from those strengths.

**Modeling the Process of Textualizing Our Experiences for Our Students**

Finally, the original goal of our study was to improve our teaching practice, through critically discussing our teacher education practices. As we experienced the power of learning from textualized and shared experiences, we each renewed our commitment to provide such learning environments and opportunities for our own students.

**Christi’s Experience.** I learned the importance of empowering teacher candidates to become active meaning-makers of their lived experiences as texts after pondering: Why do I encourage teacher candidates to use artifacts and writings about their own experiences as texts from which to learn? As a doctoral student and then as a teacher educator, I had repurposed many literacy strategies meant for print-based texts in order to guide teacher candidates to make meaning from their teaching and learning experiences. Students often shared with me that they felt an increased sense of confidence and metacognition as a result of critically reading their textualized experiences (Edge, 2011). However, as I participated in one of these very strategies alongside my students by listing recent experiences in my journal and then sketching a symbolic interpretation of them, I felt, not confidence, but wobble (Fecho, 2011). By textualizing my teaching experiences as a new assistant professor, contextualizing them in my broader life story, and discussing them with critical friends (LeBoskey, 2004) in our public homeplace, I was eventually able to re-envision my professional practice and personal place with increased awareness, confidence, and purpose.

The inciting incident in my self-study happened as I sketched a symbolic interpretation of my lived experiences—a literacy strategy called Sketch to Stretch (Beers, 2003; Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988) that I adapted to help the teacher candidates extend and reflect on the meaning they were making from teaching and learning experiences in a field-based literacy course. Before sketching, I asked students to gather their thoughts by listing encouraging and challenging events from their semester. Yet, when I lifted my pen to skim the long list of recent events from my life, I found myself staring at my collected thoughts, and wobbling (Fecho, 2011) as I acknowledged all the newness in my professional and personal life—I was a new assistant professor teaching new courses with new colleagues in a new university which had a different culture than where I completed my doctoral work; I was in a new state, a new city, a new home, and had another new baby on the way. Like the beginning teachers I had studied as a researcher, and like my own students who were transitioning from being students to becoming teachers through their field work in schools, I found myself in a liminal space (Meyer & Land, 2005). Would textualizing my experiences help me too as I transitioned? I decided to become a student of my own teaching practice and formally study my process.

In the initial stages of my self-study research, I was able to put my finger on my feeling of wobble and recognize that moving across the country and taking a new job marked critical
events (Webster & Mertova, 2007) in my ongoing professional and personal life story. By informally writing about my lived experiences in my journal and then sketching an interpretation of them, I began textualizing critical events from my lived experience; placing the events on paper meant that I could take them out of my ongoing stream of consciousness and set them aside—like a photograph that captured a moment in time. As a result, the wondering I felt as I stared at my journal page was no longer just a nebulous shadow of doubt hovering in my mind but rather repositioned as something to set outside my present self, to take a step back from, and to consider thoughtfully in the context of extant literature as well as my own and others’ lived experiences. In our public homeplace my critical friends (LeBoskey, 2004) listened to my description of this moment and encouraged me to explore my beliefs about teaching and learning.

As an educator, my practice is situated in a transactional paradigm (Dewey & Bentley, 1949) and guided by connections between the tenets of Rosenblatt’s (1978, 2005) transactional theory of reading and Dewey’s philosophy of experience (Dewey, 1938/1998). I view students and teachers as active meaning-makers who have rich reservoirs of language and experience that they bring with them into classrooms—reservoirs that guide the meaning they make of new teaching and learning experiences. However, I also recognize that a persistent problem in teacher education (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner, Cochran-Smith, McDonald, & Zeichner, 2005) has been what Lortie (1975) called an “apprenticeship of observation” (p. 61), the limited vantage point that comes from observing teaching from a biographical rather than pedagogically-oriented perspective for sixteen or so years before teaching. Because of my beliefs, I view part of my role as a teacher educator to include designing learning experiences that can help teacher candidates to develop a kind of dual consciousness about teaching and learning (Cohen, 2011; Standerford, Sabin, Anderson, Edge, Lubig, & Cameron-Standerford, 2012). To facilitate this dual consciousness, I have used literacy strategies, such as the Sketch to Stretch (Beers, 2003; Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988) to help the largely invisible process of learning to become more visible to teacher candidates so that they may attend to the process of learning from personal, social, and pedagogical perspectives as they develop “classroom literacy” (Edge, 2011 p. 28).

Examining my beliefs allowed me to contextualize my wobble and the critical events it evoked within the theoretical and professional knowledge base from which my beliefs stem. However, it was when I contextualized them in my life experiences by writing the story of how I originally came to learn about the symbolic sketching strategy—first as a teacher, who sought to help students make meaning from print-based texts, and then, as a teacher educator, who recognized an opportunity to re-purpose the strategy to aid prospective teachers who appeared to be struggling to read classroom events during their field work in schools—that I began to fully textualize the experience in a way that led to re-envisioning my teaching.

When I wrote my story, my attention was drawn to clear images that took me back to, as it turned out, another time when I felt very aware of my liminal position as a professional and as a woman. I wrote about my first official day as a doctoral student, about walking out of the classroom I knew and thrived in as an English and reading teacher and walking into the university classroom as a new mother and a full-time student. I wrote about entering the methods of teaching reading class that I was supposed to co-teach as a part of my teaching assistantship.
with the university, and discovering the sketching strategy as a teacher of reading. I wrote about reentering that class as the sole instructor a year later and discovering the sketching strategy as a teacher educator. As I wrote, I constructed metaphors that allowed me to see parallels to my present situation; however, my seeing was still blurry. Later, when I read my story aloud to my critical friends, then listened as they offered observations, connections, and questions, I took a step back from the lived experiences and my memories of them in a way that lent clarity to them. I re-considered them from a position outside of myself—through the connections and observations of others, much as a reader of a printed story might suspend her interpretation of that story in order to consider others’ thoughts, interpretations, and personal connections before considering her own interpretation once more. As a result of this discussion of my textualized experiences, I approached my own story with new insights and with confirmed interpretations as well. In the take away writing I composed after reading and discussing my story with the group, I likened the liberating feeling of re-seeing my story to a breakthrough experience I had as a do-it-yourself home renovator—when my husband put a sledgehammer through a crooked wall that I had, with great frustration, tried to remove wallpaper from, smooth over with joint compound, sand, sand, and sand some more in order to paint the still-warped wall. He saw my frustration from a different position and through a frame of knowledge and experience I did not yet have. When he casually walked up to the wall and wacked a hole right in the middle of it, I took a step back in surprise. I did not feel anger, but a sense of “Oh!” in discovering an option I would have never thought to consider. Distanced from the wall, I saw it and my situation differently. This re-seeing was liberating, and together, we removed the warped drywall and made the wall anew. Similarly, the experience of textualizing my critical events into story and then discussing it with critical friends in our public homeplace, I could distance myself from my story and my situation enough to be able to see it differently. A shift in power had taken place. I was no longer in my story; I was the constructor of my story. I was no longer alone in my construction; I had knowledgeable allies and new vantage points from which to make meaning.

As our study progressed and we considered our research for purposes of sharing it with others, I had the opportunity to step back even further from my wobble, critical events, and the story I composed about them. Reflecting in light of the study as a whole, engaging in continued conversation, reading professional literature, re-examining artifacts from my self-study, and composing the meaning I made allowed me to both broaden and deepen my understanding (Langer, 2011). By textualizing and critically reading and discussing my personal and professional experiences, I was in a position to re-envision my practice and to construct an understanding of it anew.

In the semester following the completion of our study, I approached my courses with a kind of confidence and purposeful attention that I admit I, like my students, find difficult to put words to; however, in artifacts of my teaching and my students’ work, I see evidence of it, like fingerprints on glass. I hear it in my students’ voices. I read it in the subtext of students’ written comments on course evaluations: “This class has had to be one of the most valuable courses I have ever taken…I am walking away feeling more confident in myself and my future career.” I, we, live it.

Suzanne’s Experience. My self-study led me to examine feelings of never quite fitting in in my autobiographical writing and in reflecting on my critical incident. As a result of the
study, I felt stronger in my philosophy of teaching and learning and affirmed in my approach to grading student work in my online graduate courses by providing lengthy narrative responses. I decided to continue my approaches to assessment and believe it serves as a strong model for my own students as they consider issues of assessment and responding to students.

I was raised in a traditional, religious, and conservative family in the Midwest during the 1950’s and 60’s. In this culture men were seen as the breadwinners and women’s roles were centered in the home. However, my mother was a strong-willed woman who had internal struggles with these limitations and took a job outside the home, an unusual move for women of that era. Although my mother felt confined by women’s roles, she perpetuated the expectations by telling me it was more important for my older brother to go to college. Although my mother pushed at the edges of women’s accepted roles, she communicated her acceptance of those roles for me. Yet, I did not accept or fit it with this narrowed view of my possibilities in the world based on my gender.

My wobble (Fecho, 2011) began early as I entered and excelled in school, earning multiple offers of scholarships. My high school and college advisors encouraged me to pursue careers such as engineering; however, I chose teaching with great enthusiasm and optimism. My older brother struggled in school, never completely recovering from feelings of failure, and I witnessed many friends who believed they were not smart because of negative experiences in school. I set about my career with hopes of helping all children succeed, thereby, changing the world.

As I began teaching, I found my work often directed by policies and decisions from beyond the classroom. Teachers’ practical and professional knowledge was seldom valued or trusted. Entering this type of profession exacerbated my wobble about the role of females in society.

In my role as a teacher educator, I developed the habit of writing lengthy narrative remarks to my students in response to their assignments. Although these narratives take enormous amounts of time and effort, my philosophy of teaching as caring and supporting learners does not align with the practice of assessing students’ efforts with a simple numerical score. I believe narrative responses demonstrate my value of students’ ideas and expand their thinking. Such responses also develop stronger relationships with each learner. I use these narratives as formative assessments that nudge the learner to take the next step in his/her unique learning journey. Analytical rubrics accompany the narratives for each assignment, but both my students and I find the narratives more valuable as teaching, learning, and assessing tools.

My critical incident occurred the semester before this study began when a graduate student contacted me to express displeasure with her grade on an assignment. After offering the opportunity for revision and averaging the new grade with the earlier one, the student was even more discouraged because it would not enable her to retain an A in the course. I felt wobble. What is the purpose of assessment? Did the grade really matter to anyone but this student? In the end I decided to have the student redo the assignment; I re-graded it and assigned the new grade.
After this incident, my questions became more focused for this research: Why do I feel it necessary to write lengthy narratives in response to student assignments if the final grade is really all that matters to them? Do my narratives serve the purposes I have set for them? Within these questions were a complex set of issues such as the time and energy drain on my personal life, the myth that teacher education usually gives inflated grades, my core beliefs about the purposes of assessment, my understanding of the learning process, and my feelings of being out of step with the current trends in education reform that reduce assessment of students’ learning to a single numerical score.

Through the self-study, I came to know and accept my personal guiding beliefs that caring and relationship are at the center of teaching and learning. I define teaching as a public service profession. My philosophy is strongly supported by both feminist and male authors.

In the United States the mainstream culture has developed around a more patriarchal view of life and males are disproportionately represented in Congress and in top management positions in the private sector. As we move through the 21st Century, the purpose of education has been re-defined from a public service within a democratic society to an institution that prepares students for jobs to sustain America’s strong position in a global economy.

My view of education as a caring space within which each student and teacher finds his/her own possibilities and is mutually supported in achieving those possibilities does not fit with current trends in education. Competition leads to winners and losers rather than creating confident, powerful citizens. Competition can cause unwillingness to cooperate and share ideas (Kohn, 1986). Learning takes time and happens differently for each person. I do not believe there is some specific amount of factual information that everyone must know. New knowledge must connect to what a person already knows to either be assimilated or accommodated (McLeod, 2009). Knowledge is rooted in and constructed from our experiences. Critical incidents bring about wobble and as we reflect on the felt dissonance, we search to resolve unsettled feelings, hopefully, improving our knowledge and actions through this process. Learning happens from within and occurs through praxis or acting and then reflecting to understand your actions. In essence, we build theory grounded in our experiences (Bruner, 1996).

As a result of my self-study, I was able to better articulate my beliefs and philosophy of teaching and learning as grounded in both feminist and transactional theories and developed through my personal and professional experiences. My self-study affirmed my beliefs and gave me a renewed sense of urgency and agency or “taking more control of your own mental activity” (Bruner, 1996, p. 87). I realized that forcing my assessments into simple numerical scores goes against my beliefs in the power of relationship with and caring for my students as learners and as human beings. I accepted that the personal costs were worth the benefits to my students by both affirming their efforts and nudging them to think in new ways. I believe students who experience the power of feminist pedagogy in their own learning will choose to provide similar learning opportunities for their students. Based on over 40 years as an educator, my students of all ages have consistently supported my beliefs and actions in their evaluations of my teaching; their long-term relationships with me that last long beyond our time in the classroom together; and both my students’ and my success as educators and mentors. I have accepted that standing firm
on one’s beliefs despite not fitting in is possibly the best gift I can give to others in all of the personal and professional roles that I fill.

**Conclusion**

Through the self-study process, this group of seven teacher educators focused on exploring the question: “What can we learn about our teaching by critically discussing the texts of our teacher education practices?” By defining text in a broader sense, we were able to give our experiences a tangible structure that could be shared, reinterpreted, and analyzed. Through discourse guided by the use of a collaborative conference protocol and responding as “critical friends,” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 819) we were able to challenge and push the boundaries of how we can learn from reading, analyzing and discussing our textualized experiences as educators. (Edge, 2011, p. 330).

Together, we learned that our teaching practice was influenced by tensions that stemmed from personal and professional events. By identifying and examining those events like texts, we were better able to understand ourselves and the nature of our work. Key in this process was the creation of a safe homeplace that allowed for multiple insights from our critical friends. We learned that our teaching experiences could become engaging texts open to multiple interpretations leading to new discoveries. Our culminating take away was a renewed commitment to model for teacher education students how to textualize, share, and grow from their own and each other’s experiences.

Teacher effectiveness stems from educative experiences that can promote growth through disequilibrium. In order for this to occur, teachers need ways to critically examine their practice in safe places. This study demonstrated (a) the transactional nature of professional conversations deepen understanding and (b) the powerful way that, by valuing multiple perspectives, feminist communication theory can broaden understanding. Together, these reinforce the need for public homeplaces to foster critical conversations within and across our professional contexts through care and understanding.

**References**


