Facilitating “Gem Moments” of Learning: Reading Research as Teacher Professional Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to deepen our understanding of a relational model of professional development that nurtures teachers’ interest in learning and professional growth through reading. This case study documents the impact of a teacher reading group that was created for the purposes of a larger study between 2005 and 2007 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Louisa, one of the six participants of this larger study, is the focus of this paper. Louisa’s practice of reading, interpreting, evaluating, and utilizing the on-line research she read individually and collectively with the other five participants of the study became a way for her to identify and critique important issues, reframe her experiences as a teacher, question her professional assumptions and beliefs, and begin to develop a new unit of study for her English as a Second Language students.

It’s like [a] little—jewel—gem moments you know—everybody flies in—you’re there for an hour and share information and I think—oh that’s interesting—that’s good—and then—we’re off. (Louisa, Individual Interview, May 10, 2005)

Louisa, in the above quote, is sharing her experience of meeting regularly with a group of six educators to talk about scholarly articles they collectively read as part of a study on teacher learning. This paper provides a context in which to deepen understanding of a relational model of professional development that nurtures teachers’ interest in learning and professional growth through reading. Louisa, one of the six participants of this larger study, is the focus of this paper. This case study documents the impact of a teacher reading group that was created for the purposes of a larger study between 2005 and 2007 in Vancouver, British Columbia. Louisa had been a secondary school teacher for 28 years at the beginning of the study. She was and is currently a Department Head/teacher of English as a Second Language and English. She is a white, middle aged female.

Ten years into my teaching career, it was a reading group with a handful of colleagues that helped reinvigorate my interest in learning. Within the small intimate space of my office where I was a teacher/counselor for fifteen years, I

was privy to numerous stories about the good and bad experiences of schooling. I came to better understand the struggle that many teachers faced in the grueling pace and political climate of neo-conservative reforms in public education throughout my teaching career in Canada, particularly during the 1990's.

During this time the Progressive Conservatives were elected on a platform called the “Common Sense Revolution” in Ontario in 1995 under the leadership of Mike Harris. This was the beginning of a massive restructuring to Ontario's public sector. During Harris' first year as premier, welfare rates were cut by 21.6 per cent, Ministry of Health budget was cut by \$1.5 billion (p. 22), and grants to school boards were “cut by \$1 billion dollars over a full year” (Dare, 1997, pp. 21- 22).

Not only was less money available for educational services, but new legislative changes had a devastating impact on the teachers and students that I worked with everyday. For example, in 1996, Bill 34, made junior kindergarten an optional program, cut funding to adult education programs, and removed statutory entitlement to sick days for teachers. A new secondary school curriculum reform came into effect in September of 1999 that introduced a standardized literacy test in Grade 10 and reduced requirements for graduation. Bill 160, The Education Quality Improvement Act, stripped teachers of their statutory contract rights. Teachers across the province walked out of their schools and stayed off the job for two weeks as a form of political protest to these legislative changes to education in Ontario.

In response to the struggle to find a sense empowerment amidst these changes to education, a small group of female friends and I began reading articles about how to address the social problems of our schools. We were concerned about what it meant to create a safe school environment for our students and teacher colleagues. These informal meetings in which we shared readings and ideas became a form of professional learning community that represented what was important to us, providing a much needed re-energizing in the often exhausting work of teaching at an inner-city school in southeastern Ontario.

In many ways this experience of reading as a form of social and political participation propelled me back into the academy as way to further my understanding of what it meant to stay intellectually curious and passionate about teaching. As a teacher/researcher I became more and more excited about the relationship between teacher learning, teacher effectiveness, and the transformative potential of feminist research in education. Feminists have clearly articulated the political act of reading seen as early as the 18th century in the English “Bluestocking circles” (Myers, 1990) and the more recent work of linguistic and cultural feminists (Christian-Smith, 1994; Long, 2003; Mills, 1993; Radway 1997, 1991; Twomey, 2007). As a university professor, privileged with a lifestyle of required reading and learning, my interest in supporting teachers in developing and sustaining an intellectual landscape continues to motivate my research in teacher education. Professional development models are needed that can support teachers in finding ways to nurture their love of learning through engaged reading and professional learning.

Context of the Study

This study was conducted in a large urban centre in Western Canada. It is a city of approximately 550, 000 with an overall regional population of 2 million people.

Within this study of a teachers' reading group I asked how reading environments might create intellectual engagement and transformative possibilities within teachers' communities of practice. I use the term communities of practice to frame this study's use of Louisa's participation as a form of situated learning and professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

This study postulates a theory of professional development that is more than an experience of transferring or transmitting knowledge, but requires opportunities for constructing a deeper understanding of what it means to be a teacher within a relational, dialogic experience of learning. This form of professional learning recognizes the need for an embodied understanding of practice that comes from one's interpretation of experience (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006, p. 392). I also draw on Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) 'inquiry as stance' in which teachers are more than simply consumers of educational research provided by university researchers. Rather, a form of teacher learning or 'knowledge-of-practice' provides teachers the opportunities to "generate local knowledge of practice by working with the context of inquiry communities to theorize and construct their work and connect it to larger, social, cultural, and political issues" (p. 250). Louisa's practice of reading, interpreting, evaluating, and utilizing the on-line research she read individually and collectively with the other five participants of the study became a way for her to identify and critique important issues, reframe her experiences as a teacher, question her professional assumptions and beliefs, and begin to develop new curriculum.

I locate the practice of reading in a broad perspective that integrates work on cognition, language, social interaction, society, and culture. This form of situated literacy recognizes the social history of literacy practices as well as the notion of culture as "unbounded, kaleidoscopic, and dynamic" (Heath & Street, 2007, p. 7).

Design of the Study

For this analysis I asked how a supported reading environment contributed to Louisa thinking about her professional identity and perception of her work; to her thinking about her pedagogical practices; to a larger understanding of herself and life, going beyond these professional concerns.

Over the course of the study (Oct 2005- Feb 2007) I had three distinct roles in the study. I conducted interviews, I facilitated our monthly discussions, and I searched digital databases to locate articles on the topics that the teachers were eager to read. I positioned myself as a participant observer, interviewer, and traveling librarian in relation to the six women participants in the study. The teachers brought a wide range of knowledge to the reading process and seemed to easily identify relevant topics for discussion. Early on in the process of determining topics and finding texts, participants were invited to attend a media

tutorial to learn how to use the Internet and other databases to search for relevant texts. Two of the six participants (Louisa being one of them) expressed an interest in attending, but all participants requested that I act as a traveling librarian for them and gather copies of the articles and drop them off at their school or home. The underlying factors were time and access. All participants were working full time. Although there was some Internet access through the local school board’s library system, it was limited. My privilege as a graduate student provided free access to a wide variety of databases through the University of British Columbia libraries.

The majority of texts we read as a group were feminist texts. Feminist philosophy, pedagogy and educational research texts became the focus of our group readings. Individually however, participants requested and read from a much larger range of genres and articles of interest. Louisa read a variety of texts; fiction, curriculum materials, newspaper, and articles in newspapers and magazines (see Appendix A).

Discourse Analysis: “Language in Use”

A feminist qualitative methodology was employed in this study. A feminist qualitative methodology advocates how knowledge might be applied in ways that offer possibilities for social change and transformation. This analytical framework positions a critical theory of literacy within a necessary theory of learning. The teacher reading group was structured to provide an experience of learning as a social phenomenon that happens in the context of lived experience and participation in the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In this paper I use the term discourse to signal a dialogical social process embedded in a larger network of verbal-ideological belief systems (Bakhtin, 1994). One’s speech is a series of interrelated “viewpoints, world views, and trends [that] cross, converge, and diverge in it” (p. 93). This kind of discourse analysis as a method studies the ‘social voices’ of participants evident in this case, in the spoken discourse of Louisa’s interviews (Cameron, 2001). In generating a systematic analysis I looked for evidence that Louisa’s approach to reading contributed to her comprehension, evaluation, and utilization of primarily feminist texts and educational research. I analyze the impact of Louisa’s involvement in the project through the verbal discourse of her interviews. Louisa’s discourse engages with a multiplicity of social perspectives that appear influenced by her understanding of her students’ cultures, her professional expectations of the teacher as “expert,” the voices of authors she reads, and her own interpretation of her years of teaching experience.

Reading and New Perspectives

As mentioned, Louisa had been a secondary school educator for 28 years at the time of this study. She had worked as an Art, Social Studies, and English educator and taught for 2 years in Japan. Louisa, currently was a department head of English as Second Language (ESL) instruction at a large inner city school in the city, described her classes as “95% Chinese.” Louisa, as one of six participants, attended all eight teacher reading group interviews and met with me for three individual interviews.

Early on in the project when we discussed Louisa's expectations around the project, she commented: "I'm still a little unsure where we're going-but I'm open... and I think it'll just-it'll be an opportunity for me to read more and read things that I would not normally have read" (Individual interview, April 26, 2005). Louisa also talked about the opportunity that reading created for her to learn new perceptions of herself: "Just it's good to read things that I can sort of look at and draw experience for myself...It helps me in my sort of learning and how I perceive myself" (Individual Interview, May 10, 2005).

Louisa's comment reflects a dynamic reading process, a phenomenon that has been well researched by reader response theorists. Louise Rosenblatt's (1983) concept of reading as an artfully constructed transaction between a reader and a text questioned an exclusively developmental approach to reading. For Rosenblatt, the reading experience became a way to live through the text, to explore the world through the medium of literature. Nor was meaning making contingent only on readers' ability to code and decode texts. Reader response theory shifted the reader to the center of the reading process, through a dialogic, relational focus involving the text. Readers now had a form of agency that was absent in the earlier approaches to language and literacy. The interaction between the reader and the text was theorized as the ability to construct new ways of interpreting experience. Louise Rosenblatt stated that one purpose of the reading experience was for "critically relating it to other views of human nature and conduct" (p. 13). Although Rosenblatt is referring to the challenge of reading literature, she argued that the genre is insignificant to how the experience of reading can alter perceptions. Texts help us understand the infinite possibilities of existence and experience. For Louisa, the articles she read as part of this study, became a kind of self-directed professional development in which she interpreted the texts in relationship to her professional responsibilities as a teacher.

Louisa and Feminist Pedagogy

I used my access to a university library to find an article on feminist teaching practice in Japan, a topic that Louisa had said she was interested in reading. The article, entitled "Women's Studies and Feminist Pedagogy: Critical Challenges to Japanese Educational Values and Practices" (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1996), provided a rich context in which Louisa talked about her own practice as an ESL teacher:

I liked it [the article] because I think I can relate it to my troublesome level 2 who are going to be level 3s next year and the idea that I think one of their problems is not [that] I couldn't relate to them cause they weren't getting their work done and there's no motivation at that level...I think if I use some of these techniques, I realize that maybe they have similar feelings about my teaching style. Not that I'm lecturing them but the idea that they expect me to have all the answers. (Individual interview, July 10, 2005)

Reading about another teacher's experience of teaching ESL students (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1996) seemed to resonate with Louisa:

When I read this I thought, “Ooh.” The lights came on. They should have anyway I should have known, but you know how you get reminded of things?” (Individual interview, July 10, 2005).

This comments indicates the intertextual meaning that Louisa was garnering from the reading process. I use the term intertextualities to signify how the Louisa created multiple meanings from the texts. As discussed through reader response theory, meaning is mediated in many ways: by the author’s construction of the text, the readers’ knowledge of the texts in relationship to other texts, and the reader’s response to conversations about the text. Louisa wanted to utilize some of the author’s ideas in her own teaching:

She [the author] did things like asking them [the students] to question the articles at the beginning: ‘What do you think you’re going to be reading about?’ So that before you give them something they have to anticipate...get them to create the questions rather than the teacher giving questions to the students about their reading assignments. They create questions first and give them to each other. So she [the author] talked about things like that...giving certain people roles in the class. I’m going to try and use some of these techniques. (Individual interview, July 10, 2005)

Later in the interview, she talked about utilizing the article with her colleagues: “Yeah, I’m probably going to show this in my department” (Individual interview, July 10, 2005). For Louisa, the Fujimuar-Fanselow (1996) reading fostered inquiry and new ideas for teaching.

Louisa continued to show interest in the teaching techniques suggested in the article, by questioning how she might apply these new pedagogical practices in a culturally relevant way with her Chinese students: “So it would be interesting to see if this connects to China in some ways” (Individual interview, July 10, 2005). As the study progressed over a fifteen-month period, Louisa decided she wanted to create and deliver a new teaching unit for her ESL students. Her reflections and questions about how to more fully engage her students informed the process she used to design the unit. She explained this during one of our group interviews:

Well I’ve been reading about Tiananmen Square. Well it all started with my level II ESL group—95% Chinese—who I figured weren’t really connecting with learning, especially learning English. So I thought maybe if we did something that, so it’s connected then to their home country...that would also connect on, you know, to Canada. (Group interview, October 13, 2005)

She explained to the teacher reading group her process in developing a new curriculum for her ESL students:

I was reading about Tiananmen Square so I thought maybe that would be an interesting place to-to start... I thought I would start with just revolutions in general—just civil disobedience, so that they [the students] wouldn’t feel that it was something, that I wasn’t attacking

China or criticizing it in any way. So I found some stuff on the Internet...I picked 2 or 3 different countries and kind of did some research on that. So that's where I'm going to start with them. (Group interview, October 13, 2005)

Louisa was already engaged in this topic of interest before the study began. However, discussions during our individual interviews and during this group interview indicates how the study nurtured her already existing interest and how she utilized this form of supported reading to not just think about her pedagogical practices, but to create a new study unit for her ESL class:

You got me some great stuff on it. The one that was really good is this one called Bringing Down the Wall [1991]. I liked it specifically because it has a lot of letters that were written to Fung [name unclear] who was one of the guys that ended up being protected in the American Embassy for a year. He ran to the embassy. He was not at Tiananmen Square, he was actually at the university at the time and he ended up in the Embassy for a year and then he got out and ended up in the States and was actually nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and other stuff. Anyway, there's letters in here, him writing letters like it's sort of [an] acceptance speech for the nomination and his opinion about people's demonstrations and stuff that I thought might be interesting to the students. So that's [what] I [have] been reading..that one and then of course the other articles you gave me on, was it National Geographic? (Group interview, October 13, 2005)

Louisa's conversation with the participants echoed our discussion in an individual interview three months earlier, signifying how she had integrated those ideas into her curriculum planning. Louisa was also keen to contextualize a book study with her students as part of this new study unit by using the techniques that she had read about and discussed with me from the Fujimura-Fanselow (1996) article:

If I use some of these techniques about you know, "What are you going to ask, say about this book?", "What are some questions that you might have about it?" and keep my mouth shut and hopefully they [my students] won't feel, I want them to learn something about it. I want them to be able to see what was happening and [unclear] to see it from the other side. (Individual interview, July 10, 2005)

Throughout the study the readings seemed to motivate Louisa to learn more about how to engage her students through culturally relevant teaching resources as one way to improve her effectiveness as a teacher. The readings about feminist pedagogy provided material for Louisa to develop learning opportunities for her students to form new perceptions and think critically about the relationship between cultures and politics.

Asking the Hard Questions

Louisa's further explored her interest in feminist pedagogy through the writing of black feminist writer, bell hooks. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994)

used a personal narrative and definition of “engaged pedagogy” to provide a reframing of what it means to teach in a multicultural classroom. hooks (1994) explores the need for classroom structures to recognize differences such as class, race, and sexuality. Louisa evaluates hooks’ writing: “I liked this one maybe because I could relate to her as an educator” (Individual interview, May 10, 2005). Louisa frames her connection with the text in relationship to her teacher colleagues:

[It made me think about] the people that I know that are teachers and how they would connect to that. You know when you read you always try to make connections with other people and how they teach and how they would compare what she thought. (Individual interview, May 10, 2005).

Louisa’s engagement with the text was connected to perceived similarities with hooks’ experience of teaching. She stated the affirmation she felt in reading about similar practices in her classroom, showing how the text validated Louisa’s experience:

Louisa: The whole idea of engaging your students and using, well, I kind of related to this because she talks about drama and dramatic language and I think I do a lot of that, especially as an ESL educator. But, it was nice to have her actually say that itself. It’s what I do, so it must be okay... That was sort of the highlight for me.

Author: So, connections to your own practice, any other connections?

Louisa: The embracing culture...the acceptance of culture as important. I think it’s really important as an ESL teacher that you are doing that.

In this same interview Louisa becomes introspective and chooses to talk about some of her struggles in teaching:

Kids that are failing...I think it’s my fault. But I do stop myself. I mean I do stop and I think, you know what, it isn’t my fault. I’ve done everything I can. This kid is not engaging with me, he’s not doing his work, I’m not getting any support from anyone, so guess what? I’ve done my bit. But you know if you don’t do that you’ll go crazy in the classroom. You just absolutely will go crazy. (Individual interview, May10, 2005)

Louisa’s interpretation of bell hooks’ writing prompted reflection on her practice. Louisa recounted the difficulty she has had in determining her own professional limits in taking responsibility for her students. She talked about how time and her experience as a teacher has provided her with the insight to get to a place where she has a plan and a way to work out what she called “the hard questions” or a kind of “thinking at another level” (Individual interview, May 10, 2005):

Yeah, so as a teacher you have to... I didn’t realize when I became a teacher that I was going to have to become so-sort of introspective and sort of-think things through. Well, I don’t know, I just thought it was just sort of going to happen, but after you’ve been in it a long time you

really do have to come up with some-sort of plan for yourself, how far you'll go with kids... and you think it through...what do you think you're going to be able to accomplish as a teacher, those kinds of questions, the hard questions. (Individual interview, May 10, 2005)

For Louisa, participation in the reading group became an opportunity for her to read new topics, extend her research about China, and find more resources for curriculum development. Louisa talked about reading and re-reading the texts even though initially she found some of the articles difficult on the first read. Louisa expressed self-validation when she recognized elements of herself in the text by bell hooks, which prompted her to reflect more deeply about her professional identity. Reading the article on feminist teaching in Japan "Women's Studies and Feminist Pedagogy: Critical Challenges to Japanese Educational Values and Practices" (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1996) prompted Louisa to consider her own teaching practices with her ESL students. She also recommended teaching strategies from the article to colleagues in her department. For Louisa, the readings prompted introspection that allowed her to think at another level in considering her professional responsibilities to students.

Louisa utilized this form of supported reading as it related to her pedagogical practice. She brought individual articles and texts with her to the group meetings and referenced them in conversation with the participants. She also spent the most individual time with me talking about how we could gather useful information for the new unit study she was developing. We spent time using the Internet as a way to gather visuals and media related articles for this same curriculum. Louisa also took advantage of learning more about open access to digital scholarly research through a planned workshop in June 2006. This was also an opportunity for Louisa and I to discuss her new curriculum and talk about additional sources of information that would assist her in the final planning of the unit.

Limitations of the Study

This exploratory case study cannot generalize a deterministic understanding of teaching learning or teacher professional development. However, this study has shown the possibility of teacher engagement in providing social situated learning opportunities for teachers within their professional communities of practice. This study offers new understanding of the need for developing teacher-centered, relational approaches to learning. Louisa was very motivated to engage in this kind of self-directed professional learning. However, she also recognized the value of meeting with her colleagues to talk about research and later to try and implement some of the ideas into her own practice. However, a significant limitation in sustaining a similar model of teacher learning would be the cost of providing an external coach for teachers that was necessary in providing a supported reading environment.

Implications for Teacher Professional Development

Louisa expressed the lack of meaningful learning opportunities she had experienced within her professional learning history, commenting about how she had to learn how to survive as a teacher without much support. Most of her

previous experience of professional development programs had been about “selling something”; a “flashcard and pens” approach that positions teacher learning within a process of increasing commodification of teacher professionalism. Luke (2004b) describes this trend in the teaching profession as a kind of “commodity fetishism” that “predicates the efficacy of education policy, the practice of teaching, and particular versions of student outcomes on production use” (p. 1434).

Louisa stated her interest in finding ways to engage her students as well as develop an understanding of schooling that was grounded in a critical perspective of culture. She says of her own professional goals for learning and teaching: “I don’t want it [my perspective] to be some white woman’s view of how you’re going to adapt to life in Canada. It’s trying to understand culture and trying to help them [my students] to adapt to a new culture” (Individual Interview, April 25, 2005).

Louisa talked about the importance of an “internal” understanding to guide how teachers create professional development practices. This kind of teacher learning moves beyond older models of teacher professionalism by providing teachers with opportunities to engage in a deeper understanding of their practice in relationship and dialogue with each other. The topics that Louisa requested reflect her larger professional goals of which she says, “are many”:

I think a big one, it’s practical, to try and help my students to be successful when they get into a more mainstream class. That’s my main goal and it doesn’t necessarily relate to just subject matter. It’s everything. It’s their personalities. Helping them to adjust and helping to understand what’s expected of them next year from teachers and generally just everybody. And even helping them in a broader sense to just adapt to this new culture. It’s a new culture and a new environment and helping them to understand all of that, it’s a big job [laughs].
(Individual interview, April 26, 2005)

Louisa’s participation in the study enacted a form of “transformative teacher professionalism” that reflects a type of professionalism that is responsive to teachers’ need to more fully understanding their practice in context of larger social and economic issues (Sachs, 2003). Louisa’s discourse throughout her interviews shows a productive tension between the expectation of the teacher as ‘expert’ (who has all the answers for her students) and her desire to engage her students in finding multiple perspectives within a relational model of classroom learning. Louisa’s discourse throughout the study reflects a heteroglossia of social perspectives about teaching that inspired her to put new ideas into practice. Her discourse appears influenced by her students’ cultures, her own reflective practice, and the voices of the authors’ articles discussed during our individual and group interviews.

Lave and Wenger (1991) utilized the term, “communities of practice” to imply “participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (p. 98). The meaning that we derive through participation produces our communities of practice as well as our subjectivities. This study supports teachers’ need to reflect on their work and to associate with

their colleagues in non-prescriptive, communicative models of exchange (Glazer, Abbott, & Harris, 2004; Sherin & Shulman, 2004). Louisa's engagement with the scholarly texts took many different forms; skillful evaluations, direct critiques, and reflective responses. Through engaging with the texts, Louisa thought about her professional identity and how she might respond to complex issues within her classroom. Although I was a colleague to Louisa, I also in some ways, became a coach for her. She expected me to provide information for her, and although I was resistant in this role initially, it became apparent that this could be developed as a beginning stage of designing learning environments in which teachers might become more confident in accessing and utilizing digital information.

Implications suggest that more research needs to be done to develop teacher centered approaches to learning that can strengthen professional learning communities within a changing landscape of digital knowledge more readily accessible through the Internet. This could mean training and support for teachers who are interested in engaging with technology, particularly in how access to digital research and resources through the Internet and World Wide Web can support their pedagogical practices.

Louisa's participation in the project gave me the opportunity to observe how one teacher engages with scholarly research. Her engagement took many forms and speaks to the continuing need to support teachers' intellectual journey amidst the growing complexity of our schools social and cultural practices. Fostering teachers' love of learning is no easy task with increased accountability processes in education that have resulted in growing technocratic demands on teachers. Louisa has shown the thirst that teachers have for learning that is meaningful and connected to the larger social world of their classrooms and schools. Reading educational research provided an opportunity for Louisa to reframe her professional goals, consider more inclusive and humane approaches to teaching, and find those "gem moments" with colleagues that remind us of the importance of a relational approach to learning.

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Appendix A

Louisa's Topics of Interest: ESL/EFL; Japan and Feminist Pedagogy; bell hooks, and Tiananmen Massacre

Individual Readings

- Bromley, R., Imber, M., Simon, M., Rasmussen, M., Sanlo, R., Goodman, J. M., & O'Carrol, I. (2004). Youth Voices. Reflections on growing up lesbian in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, 1, 41-60.
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Group Readings

Feminist Pedagogy

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1-44.

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