Engaging with theory through self-study

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Bodies in flight do not leave the world behind. They take the world with them—into the future. (Massumi, 1992, p. 105)

Context

We are doctoral students who formed a self-study group three years ago around collective feminist issues we confronted as we transitioned from being teachers to becoming teacher educators. Over time, we recognized our group as a self-study assemblage ((Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Strom, Abrams, Abi-Hanna, Dacey, & Dauplaise, in press) that contributed to individual and group transformations. However, as we are all becoming-different in our lives, we continue to grow both together and apart. Though we are held together by the common threads of our relationships, histories, and previous collaborations, we now find that our different academic trajectories and career paths require different theoretical and analytical tools so that each of us can make sense of her new practice.

Aim

Taking our initial inspiration to "think with theory" from Mazzei and Youngblood Jackson (2012), we sought to create a project that reflects and refracts our collaboration by applying different theoretical frames to our self-study narratives, reflections, and dialogues. We asked, what happens when multiple theoretical frames, positionalities, and practical concerns collide in the space we have built over the past three years? Might we examine our own practices through theoretical lenses of use to us individually and then bring those various perspectives into dialogue with each other where they can be used to understand the interplay between our individual self-studies and our collaboration together?

With these questions as guideposts, we embarked on a new self-study project that attempts to embody Massumi's (1992) "bodies in flight." We purposefully sought to take the "world" we created together, as a self-study assemblage, with us into the future. In this project we maintained a common thread for our collaborative work- supporting the improvement of our self-study practice- while deliberately leaving space for each group member's individual conception and experience of practice. Thus, in this paper we celebrate our group's multiplicity and believe it strengthened our self-studies, provided a measure of trustworthiness, and enriched our understanding of practice as we created layers of understanding through dialogue that were applied in our practices as teacher educators and teacher education researchers.

Methods

Guided by principles of self-study design suggested by LaBoskey (2004), this collaborative research project is self-initiated, focused on inquiry into our practices, aimed at transformation, relied on qualitative methods, and trustworthy as demonstrated by our personal accounts. Further, post-qualitative researchers (e.g., St. Pierre, 2011) inspired this study as we experimented and experienced (Deleuze, 1968) and thought differently about our practices using theory (Mazzei & Youngblood-Jackson, 2012). Because one of us moved to California and others had completed the coursework that brought us together on campus, the university was no longer the site of our work together. We adjusted by using synchronous and asynchronous information and communication technologies, such as Dropbox and Google Hangouts, to facilitate our process (Berry & Crowe, 2009).

To generate data, we first wrote individual narratives exploring our practices through a particular theoretical framework and placed these narratives into a shared Dropbox folder. We used our narratives to shape our dialogues, which took place approximately every three weeks via Google Hangouts. In dialogue, we explored pivotal moments in our practice and engaged in a process of collaborative inquiry (Placier, Pinnegar, Hamilton, & Guilfoyle, 2005). Our dialogues were recorded and later reviewed and partially transcribed. After each dialogue, we each wrote reflections addressing how the conversation pushed, changed, or informed our own thinking and theorizing about practice. Cycles of narrative writing, dialogue, and follow-up reflection were repeated nine times and became a way to engage in "different levels of talk" (Placier, et al., 2005, p. 57) individually and together. We wrote final narratives to outline how our work together facilitated personal growth, improved our practices, and helped us to develop an appreciation for the connection between theory and practice.

Our data analysis occurred on two levels. First, we examined our own self-study narratives and reflections to note pivotal moments of challenge in our teaching and research practices and the role of theory in thinking through those problems. We then came together online and in-person for a three-day writing retreat once our individual analysis was complete. We discussed our individual themes and found points of convergence and divergence in our separate analyses by pulling examples from our own reflections and narratives. We listened to audiotapes of our dialogues and examined how our dialogues, and the theory woven together throughout, facilitated the development of our conceptions of practice and influenced how we enacted those principles. Finally, we used Google Drive to collaboratively write this paper.

Self-study as apprenticeship

As an overarching theme, we recognized our work as approximating Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) ideas about communities of practice. In our self-study community of practice, we are invited to apprentice as self-study practitioners and to move deeper into the center of practice by engaging in "a way of learning—of absorbing and being absorbed in—the 'culture of practice'" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 95). We traced the origin of our apprenticeship to the 2012 Castle Conference where our first self-study work was embraced, giving us the confidence to recognize ourselves as legitimate, if peripheral, participants in the "constellation" of self-study communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

For this study, we decided to engage in conversations with different theorists who would help us to frame our individual practices and then to bring those ideas into dialogue when we met as a group. We hoped that by opening our self-study community to include the voices of 'expert' theorists, we would hone our theoretical understanding and then apply those new insights to our daily practices as teachers and researchers. However, our analysis revealed a much more complex and interesting process of negotiating (Wenger, 1998) the place of theory in our practice, as shown below.

Owning theory

Initially, we tried to own theories about power (Foucault, 1976; 1980), non-linear thinking (Barad, 2007; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), constructivist/democratic learning (Dewey, 1916/1938; Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978), emancipatory education (Freire, 1970), participatory research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986/2009), and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), appropriating them wholesale. Listening to the audio recording of an early meeting, we were struck by Charity's joking comment about not having yet "found" a theory: *When is the deadline to*

have my theory? (audio recording, August 23, 2013). Her statement drove home the superficiality of how we were using theory in the beginning of our work together, and that moment provided a turning point as we realized that our conception of theory was actually stifling our ability to apply it in our practices. An excerpt from one of Rabab's narratives serves as an illustration of this point:

> A conflict between the theory on which my practice is based and the situations I've encountered with students at the university seems to be a constant theme for me. I approach learning and teaching from a constructivist perspective. I am a firm believer that individuals have to seek their own knowledge. Learning is not something that is disseminated from one person to another. And yet, I constantly battle with students whose views of learning are contradictory to mine. I don't want to define and restrict myself with and to a specific theory. I don't want to commit to Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky or Neo-Piagetian thought. This is my dilemma. (narrative, September 22, 2013)

However, not all of us felt yoked to theoretical orthodoxy. Katie helped us to reframe our approach to theory by suggesting that we adapt the Deleuzian term "individuation" for our work with theory. She wrote, *[R]ather than having identities, we have individuations, momentary enactments that temporally construct an identity or subjectivity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; St. Pierre, 2004). Perhaps theory has its own individuations as well--becoming an assemblage with particular problems of practice and generating thinking that is productive at that time (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994)* (reflection, November 11, 2013). With Katie's support, we gave ourselves permission to dabble and play with theory, taking pieces that we felt were useful at particular times. Rabab later reflected, *Being able to unload the rigidness of my approach to theory, has given rise to an openness I was suppressing in the name of theoretical purity; it allowed me to be accepting of shifting from one theory to another* (reflection, January 19, 2014).

Reorienting theory around problems of practice

It was not until September, when we started back to work, some in schools, others in offices, that our dialogues were re-orientated around practice. No longer just fodder for academic discourse, theory became a tool with which we understood the dilemmas of practice, individually at first, then in dialogue with each other. The following excerpt illustrates our process.

Jacky: *I'm working in the classroom with a co-teacher, and I'm thinking about...what power is...I used to take power as "being under your thumb." And I know I've had this discussion with Katie before about power, who gives it, who takes it, but now I'm getting into what power really is...so I'm kind of at that point right now.*

Katie: *But I think what's interesting is that you can look at that from different theoretical standpoints. If you looked at it from a Deleuzian standpoint (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983/1987/1994), he would say that power is a force that…*

Charity: *Like an energy.*

Katie: *It's prepersonal, doesn't belong to anyone, what happens between people. Rather than possessing power, you are negotiating it through your actions.*

Jacky: *That's interesting because that's actually what's going on in the classroom. But I still feel that I take over more than the co-teacher does. I think she is still feeling her place now.*

Linda: *Isn't that part of the negotiation that Katie is talking about though? You can't take it unless she's giving it...that's part of it, that ebb and flow…"* (audio recording, October 6, 2013)

Together, we helped Jacky think critically about her understanding of power relationships generally and specifically as she interpreted her relationship with her co-teacher. She later reflected, *Today, I am able to move in and out of the theories without questioning whether my perspective was questionable…I am able to see that each of the group members can consider the same concept or practice through different theoretical lenses* (reflection, September 22. 2013).

Listening to others' problems of practice, we moved from thinking about our experiences as isolated and apart from theory to reframing them as universal dilemmas that could be connected to theory. Katie recognized this shift in how theory was being woven through our dialogues, writing, *Are we coming together around a "junction of problems" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 18) where the different theories and theoretical constructs join in different ways to create—not answers, per se, but new thinking about the problems of practice?* (reflection, October 7, 2013).

Connecting theory, practice, and practitioner

As our dialogues pulled theory and practice into relationship, we discovered that we were essential to that dynamic in our role as practitioners. We, ourselves, were simultaneously a part of—in the middle of—our theory/practice theorizing. Charity, for instance, recognized this middle positioning and related it to her role at work, writing, *Quite literally, at work, I am a middle manager. I have begun to see the opportunity serving in a mid-level management position provides. The power of the middle resides in mediating, advocating, leveraging, and bringing people closer together* (narrative, December 19, 2013). Her "middleness" became a source of strength for her as she navigated institutional changes and began thinking with multiple theorists such as Kahneman (2011), Willingham (2009), and Deleuze (1992). However, she began to recognize tensions between theoretical notions. For example, Kahneman (2011) differentiated between two types of thinking, one intuitive, quick, and emotional, while the other is more deliberate, reflective and intellectual. Initially, this conflicted with Charity's feminist belief about the value of intuition (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). In probing this conflict, she found that there was not necessarily 'one' approach or panacea, but instead, her theoretical meaning-making was tied to context and pragmatics. She described, *Rather than framing this as a contest between two approaches that needed a quick resolution, I chose instead to simply evaluate my thoughts critically on paper at each stage, and see where the more rigorous approach of evaluating my own judgments proved useful* (reflection, November 20, 2013).

The process of understanding and articulating our work as theory practitioners did not necessarily come naturally. For example, Linda struggled as she tried to reconcile differences in her approaches to her teaching and research practices. It was easy to relax pedagogically in her action research course so that she and her students could travel where their collective thinking took them. However, when she started to collect data for her dissertation, a participatory action research study, it was difficult to let go of her control over the process. As a novice researcher, she needed to return to the theoretical principles of participatory and teacher research (Carr and Kemmis, 2009; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009; Kincheloe, 2012) for guidance about how to open up a communicative space. *When I decided with intention to decenter the "I" in my research, there was space for empathy, generosity, possibility, and more importantly, participation. Theory reminds me that my research and teaching practices can be aligned, and I am responsible for doing so* (narrative, January 9, 2014).

Katie noticed a related shift in her thinking that parallels Linda's idea of "decentering the 'I'." She explained, *I've noticed a move in my thinking from the 'I' to the multiplicity, from the encapsulated, separate 'me' to 'me AND'... to think/view the world in connected, mutually interactive assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)* (reflection, September 26, 2013). Such a change allowed Katie to move away from the notion of herself as the sole owner of her dissertation. Instead, she began to view herself as coming into composition with her committee to jointly construct the work, which helped her to reframe and navigate ideological conflicts between herself and her committee members as she moved through the process (narrative, January 19, 2014).

Re-centering ourselves in the theory-practice relationship was essential to improving our practices. By the conclusion of our study Rabab shared that she was *at peace* (audio recording, January 19, 2014) with her struggle to bend her students to her theoretical stance. After months of discussing the mismatch between her beliefs and her students', she realized that she was expecting them to comply with her teaching methods—a rigid stance at odds with her professed stance of democratic teaching—and was driven to re-think her syllabus with the intention of meeting her students halfway. She explained, *I had to recognize that this transformation is a long process. I decided to change my ways; instead of expecting them to accept and understand the unfamiliar, I would be part of the process and meet them where they are comfortable, [so] I changed my syllabus* (narrative, January 19, 2014).

Meeting at the nexus of theory, practice, practitioner, and self-study

At the conclusion of this project we found ourselves at the nexus of theory, practice, practitioner, and self-study—a place we recognize as a nurturing and powerful community of self-study practice. Our self-study community is a communicative space where we shape the meaning of theory and its relationship to both practice and self (collective and individual). Our community creates a structure for nurturing personal relationships and sustaining the momentum we needed to engage with

theory. Jacky described our work together as being more than planned time to think and reflect:

> I think of the study group more as a forum to share ideas…*If we did not meet I would still reflect. So how is it different?...[W]e think from different directions and this creates more of a sense that we are in the rapids. We are always bouncing ideas between one another…We butt heads but we don't seem to verbally disagree. Why is that?" (reflection, January 7, 2014).*

Together we are emboldened to talk about theory and *[f]eel free to say things we would never say in an office…changing what we think about a research meeting* (Katie, audio recording, January 19, 2014). We describe our self-study community of practice variously as *multi-directional, authentic, accessible,* and *safe* (Collective Group, audio recording, December 18, 2013). It is a place where we can experiment with and change our relationship to theory without risk because we are in it together. Katie writes,

> *At different times in this process, theory has been a balm for my soul, a common point of connection with missed friends, a source of joy and laughter. My relationship with theory moved from the purely academic realm to the personal, the real. I no longer see it as something static existing "out there" that I have to understand totally before I can do anything with it (narrative, January 18, 2014).*

Likewise, we are shaped through our involvement in our self-study community of practice as we develop feelings of mutuality and connection to each other's work through our dialogues (Wenger, 1998) and gain practical insights we would not have found on our own (Berry, 2008). Together we created a communicative space at the intersection of theory and self-study that spurred a "change journey" (Samaras & Freese, 2006, p. 43), brought us deeper into our individual teacher education and research praxis, and enabled us to bring "the world" we created into our new futures.

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