



Rupture and repair: Episodes of resistance and resilience in teachers' learning

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ABSTRACT

This action inquiry article examines veteran teachers' learning in a week-long professional development seminar. We describe moments of disconnection in key learning relationships (teacher, learner, text) and analyze relational-cultural dynamics that contributed to the disconnections. We investigate the dynamics that facilitate repair within the relationships. We argue that disconnections were often acts of resistance which preserve teachers' sense of self as learner. We aver that moments of reconnection were acts of resilience. This study's significance demonstrates the inherent links between resistance and resilience. Implications point to the centrality of taking an inquiry stance in the study of professional development experiences.

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1. Introduction

We invite you to imagine a Summer Teachers Institute, where fifteen teachers gather around a circle of tables, studying texts to deepen their understandings of Jewish history, culture and civilization. It is a dynamic setting, with participants deeply engaged in the texts and with their learning partners. Imagine for a moment, one of the teacher-educators unknowingly uttering a sentence or a phrase that offended, or otherwise put off, one or more people. Picture another moment in which a text kicks up anxiety, or a reaction so fierce, that one or more people turn away from the learning process. Disconnections such as these are inevitable in the dynamic world of adult learning. The question is how do we, as teachers of adults, contend with these disconnections? What can these moments of discord teach us about adult learning, about teaching/learning relationships? Most importantly, and the research question that guides this article, what opportunities for growth can these moments of disconnection offer us as teachers and learners?

Here we join an international community of researchers who are focusing on strategies to “disrupt” notions of learning and

practice in order to develop new schema for empowering educational practices for learners and educators (Faulkner, 2011). In addition, we contribute to the international discussion of teacher professional development, and the pedagogies that can best stimulate transformative learning (Avalos, 2011; Ben-Peretz, 2001; Reichert & Hawley, 2010; Rodrigues, 2005; Starkey et al., 2009). The research we discuss in this article is based on a Summer Teachers Institute – a five-day professional development seminar designed for veteran teachers. Building on a post 9/11 mandate to support teachers in deepening their understandings of diverse cultures and religions (Abu El-Haj, 2006), the focus of the Institute was to offer teachers the opportunity to construct their understanding of American Jewish culture and civilization through the examination of primary texts. A key feature of the institute was collaborative text study, and the ways that collective engagement with these primary texts can inform teachers' learning and practice.

In order to understand the ways our practice both supported and impeded teachers' learning, we have been engaged in inquiry action research over three Institutes involving over 40 participants. We seek to understand the nature of teacher participants' learning and to both understand and enhance our own professional development practice. Through our prior inquiry we discovered that collaborative text study contributed to the teachers' experience of learning as powerful, challenging, and transformative (Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009). Key findings from that study revealed ways the structure of the Institute played into a “fluidity” of roles (between teacher and learner, for instance) for those participants. Another

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study examined a sense of growth as a result of the “challenging” practices teachers experienced – a sense that was linked to greater confidence in their facility in teaching about Jewish history, culture and literature (Raider-Roth, Stieha, Turpin & Kohan, 2011). Finally, in seeking to understand teachers’ capacities to bring their Institute learning back into their classrooms, we learned that the relational web of school could both thwart and encourage implementation of new practices (Stieha, 2010).

Through our research, we understood that most learners do not have entirely transformative or obstructed experiences, but rather a combination of both. In this article, we take the next step in our research trajectory and examine what happened to three participant-learners when there was a break in the essential learning relationships of the seminar (between the participant and the facilitator, participant and the text, among the participants themselves, and, internally, between the participant and her own self). Through a qualitative, action research study, we found that these fractures compromised teachers’ learning. We also found that other relationships could facilitate repair, leading to a sense of resilience and growth. However, if more than one fracture occurred, the sources of resilience were fewer, making growth harder to achieve. Most essentially, we found that the repair of these fractures was a strong catalyst for growth, for none of the learning partners returned to their original understandings prior to the disconnection. Rather, in the experiences of these three participants, repair led to new understanding, knowledge, and growth.

2. Theoretical context

The idea that human relationships of schooling are central to students’ capacities to learn deeply and teachers’ capacities to teach strongly is now convincingly argued in the fields of educational research, educational psychology and relational psychology (Chu, 2000; Gilligan, 2003; Hensley, 2009; Noddings, 2003; Reichert & Hawley, 2010; Raider-Roth, 2005; Raider-Roth, Albert, Bircann-Barkey & Gidseg, 2008; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Spencer, Porche, & Tolman, 2003; Stieha, 2010; Way & Chu, 2004). Internationally, the political discourse of educational policy focuses on standards, accountability, standardized curricula highlighting teacher learning as essential to student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2003; Fitz, 2003; Koshoreck, 2004; Lam, 2005; Timperley & Phillips, 2003) although this discourse tends to ignore the centrality of teaching–learning relationships. Yet, the practitioners in the field, and focal recipients of the policies (the students), are alert to the consequences of trustworthy learning relationships or the lack thereof (Gidseg, 2007; Reichert & Hawley, 2010; Raider-Roth, 2005). We build our inquiry in this article on the assumption that healthy, growth-enhancing relationships are central to human learning at all stages of development (although here our focus is adult learning). We center our questions on relational dynamics and how the twists and turns of the fundamental human connections can support and impede teachers’ learning in a professional development context.

David Hawkins’ model of the “I, Thou, and It,” or the “relational triangle” as we have termed it (see Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009), is a key concept in our theoretical paradigm. Hawkins argues in his seminal article (1974/2002) that it is the interaction between the teacher, learner and subject matter that mediates all learning. Each player in this triangular model has an essential role: The teacher is the “diagnostician of learning” – the one who brings the “it” into the room, facilitates the learners’ relationship with the subject matter, and provides the “external loop” of feedback to help the learner move forward. The subject matter is a key mediator between learner and teacher: “it’s also a basis for communication with the teacher on a new level, and with a new dignity” (p. 57). For

Hawkins, the I–Thou (learner–teacher) relationship is linked with “confidence,” “trust,” and “respect” (p. 56). In constructing the relational triangle, we see that each corner has a key role in learning, and the “legs” or the relationship between each point, is central in sustaining the triangular nature of this learning gestalt.

With Hawkins as one foundational theory, we are also informed by relational psychology and relational cultural theory. This theoretical framework details the concepts of reciprocity, mutuality and empathy as developmental needs; they are essential to “growth-fostering relationships” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 17) in diverse women’s development (Eldridge, Mencher, & Slater, 2007; Rosen, 1997; Ruiz, 2005; Tatum, 2007; Turner, 2007). While relational cultural theory has its roots in the US, it has strong resonances with global examinations of the place of relationships in learning (e.g. Hartman & Samet, 2007; Youell, 2006; Zemblyas, 2007).

In particular, Carol Gilligan has argued forcefully for the role of relationships in human learning. In studying the functioning of girls’ relationships in their growth and development, Gilligan discovered the “brilliant but costly” juggling of parts of the self that girls and women do in order to maintain their relationships with selves and others. This brilliance has a consequence though; it sometimes requires the letting go of one relationship in order to maintain another relationship (1996, 2003). More devastatingly, the letting go of relationship can lead to a loss of knowledge, knowledge that can be threatening to the health of the relationships that they are striving to maintain (1992).¹ In our study, including a group of veteran female teacher participants, we saw a similar juggling – and in this case it is a juggling of relationship with peer learners, teachers, and the subject matter.

Additionally, we saw a juggling in relationship to self. We view a learner’s relationship with self “as a process of making connections” (Raider-Roth, 2005, p. 23) emotionally, cognitively, and experientially. That is, these connections are made through thinking, feeling and action (Damasio, 1999; Dewey, 1933; Miller & Stiver, 1997). This theoretical stance deepens our understandings of learner’s relationship with self and helps us attend to the negotiation of internal tensions, emotions, and understandings that learners may experience and construct.

Within this model, we learn that relational disconnections are inevitable and expected (Gilligan, 2011; Jordan, 2004; Raider-Roth, 2005; Tronick & Weinberg, 1997). Humans cannot always read the “other” well, and sometimes miss the mark in responding accurately to the needs of another. Whether these ruptures occur between self and other, self and text, or with the self, learning disconnections can be described as moments of “otherness” or the “inability to achieve mutual intersubjectivity” (Greene, 2000, p. 295). Disconnections that are not repaired can have devastating consequences. They can lead to a loss of trust in self, teachers and peers (Raider-Roth, 2005). Losing relational trust can lead to a dissociation from what one knows, making the construction of new knowledge difficult at best (Gilligan, 2011; Raider-Roth, 2005).

Research on classroom relationships teaches us that these disconnections, if not too severe, can be learning moments for teachers and students alike (Gidseg, 2007; Raider-Roth, 2005; Raider-Roth et al., 2008). These moments can propel the partners in relationship to repair what was ruptured, to communicate their needs and desires, to sharpen their capacity to express themselves, and to learn to build bridges of trust. We understand the act of repair not only as a reconnection between the learning partners, but also as a key step to growth and to new knowledge. The partners do

¹ The scholars of relational cultural theory, most notably, Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, and Judith Jordan, derived a similar theory about women’s negotiations of relationship, calling it a “central relational paradox” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 81).

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