

2015-06

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Brown, B., Eaton, S., Dressler, R. & Jacobsen, M. "Professional Collaboration as Responsive Pedagogy" (2015). In Preciado Babb, P., Takeuchi, M., & Lock, J. (Eds.). Proceedings of the IDEAS: Designing Responsive Pedagogy Conference, pp. 101-108. Calgary, Canada: Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

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PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION AS RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

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In this paper, action research is explored as a process for professional learning and collaboration among post secondary teachers. Qualitative data from reflective journals maintained by instructors who taught multiple sections of a masters research course over a two-year period informed the exploration of responsive pedagogy. Action research is discussed as a methodology used by instructors to reflect on practice in order to engage in continuous quality improvement of learning in higher education. The authors share how action research proved to be a valuable methodology used to guide this reflective experience and can be used to inform ongoing instructional design processes and future research.

Keywords: Action research; Collaboration; Professional learning; Reflective practitioner

RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

Signature pedagogy is defined as teaching that is representative of the profession or the discipline (Shulman, 2005). In the learning sciences, a field that studies teaching and learning, it is understood that collaboration can contribute to collective learning (Sawyer, 2014). As such, the authors engaged in professional collaboration using an action research methodology while teaching a research course in a Master's of Education Program in blended and online formats.

2015. In Preciado Babb, Takeuchi, and Lock (Eds.). *Proceedings of the IDEAS: Designing Responsive Pedagogy*, pp. 101-108. Werklund School of the Education, University of Calgary.

The focus of the team collaboration and action research study was to reflect on practice and improve learning experiences for students while the learning was taking place and to inform future course iterations. The instructors shared common practical problems while teaching the course and aimed to use action research as a way to study these issues. A dynamic action research process provided the authors with an opportunity to interrogate their practice and engage in professional learning conversations. While examining the action research process, three descriptive themes emerged: collaboration, challenges, and reflection. These three themes describe the common points of dialogue and debate that informed a responsive pedagogy used in a graduate level research course.

METHODOLOGY

An action research design can be used by a group of teachers in order to improve quality of their teaching (Mertler, 2014; Parsons, Hewson, Adrian & Day, 2013). Drawing on Creswell's (2015) six characteristics of action research, the authors engaged in ongoing professional collaboration using action research. The focus was to improve understanding of action research and to inform improvements in teaching. Each instructor maintained a reflective journal while teaching multiple sections of the research course over a two-year period to examine their own practice and reflect on their own teaching. The collaboration involved the instructors meeting and consulting with one another regularly as well as providing each other with feedback. This dynamic process of reflection-action occurred iteratively. As part of the process, the instructors developed a plan of action and ideas for sharing their research. Creswell's six characteristics of action research are depicted in Figure 1.

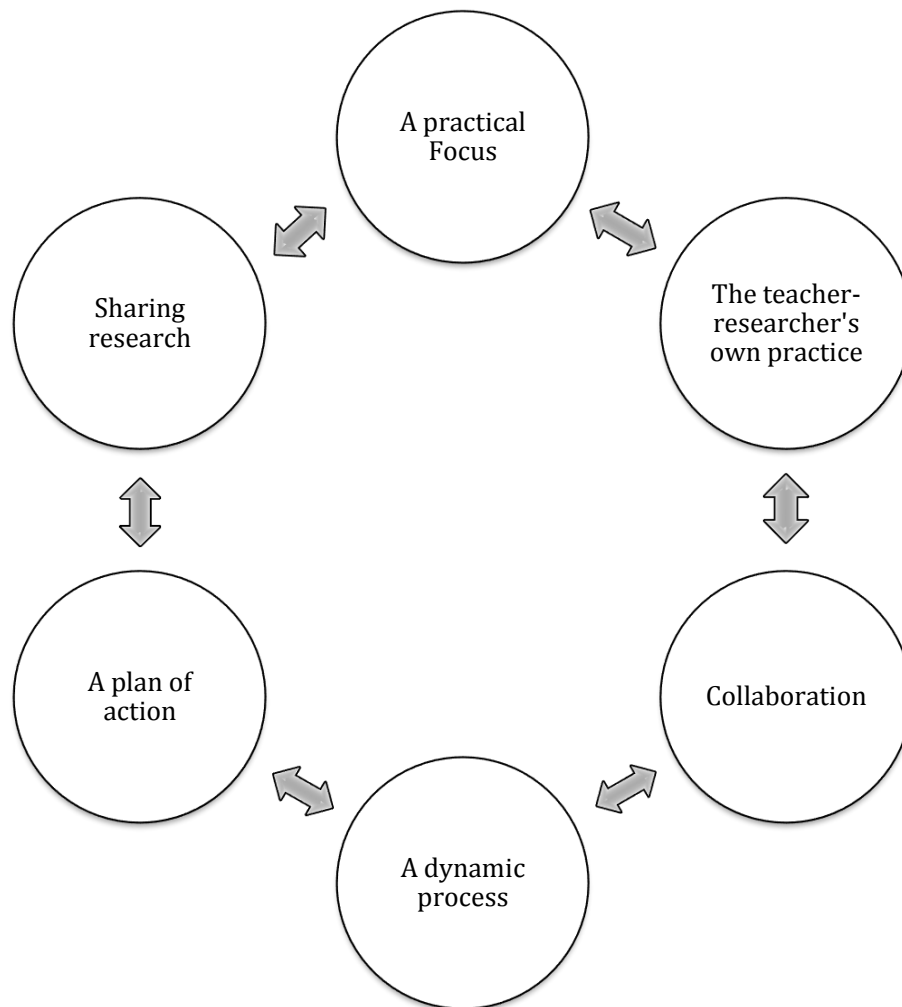


Figure 1: Characteristics of action research informing a professional collaboration (adapted from Creswell, 2015).

FINDINGS

Carrying out action research on teaching action research proved to be a valuable reflective experience and can be used to inform ongoing instructional design processes and research. The instructors engaged in action research through (a) reflecting on practice to continually be responsive and make improvements (b) collaborating to construct shared meaning, and (c)

discussing and debating common issues with teaching the course. The following illustrative examples demonstrate how the instructors used action research to inform their practice (These findings were presented at the IDEAS 2015 Designing Responsive Pedagogy conference in the form of a role play card game. These cards can be found at: <https://goo.gl/C5z7hW>).

Reflection

As part of the action research process, the instructors collaborated and consulted with each other on a regular basis to discuss concerns about teaching and provide each other constructive feedback. The collaboration was an iterative process of reflection-action (Parsons et al., 2013) in which they used their collaborative learning experience and reflections to inform subsequent iterations and improvements to course design. The instructors engaged in a spiral of activities between reflection, data collection and action to improve instruction and meet the needs of learners. They shared their professional learning from engaging in action research with the broader research community through conference presentations and articles. In this way, the instructors reflected on their teaching for continuous quality improvement.

Collaboration

The instructors collaboratively engaged in this research about their practice to improve quality of their teaching and instructional design through ongoing and cyclical stages: planning, acting, developing and reflecting (Mertler, 2014) and constructed shared meaning in the several ways. The instructors used research journals to record professional insights, observation and ideas occurring as they engaged in action research to study and improve their practice alongside their peers. The instructors maintained reflective journals and notes from communications and meetings to improve practice and used these as part of a dialectic process of reflection to improve the quality of courses.

The instructors communicated with each other electronically and in-person to exchange ideas (i.e. ask questions, share student exemplars, etc.) about practice as part of the action research process. While planning and teaching their courses, the instructors used shared online documents to collaborate further. In these ways, the instructors achieved more adaptive and coherent learning designs through intentional collaboration, reflection and responsive pedagogy.

Challenges

Three specific teaching challenges were identified and explored through this action research. First, negotiating ethical challenges can be daunting for students as novice researchers and with time limitations set by course end dates. As a result, the instructors developed a variety of options for students to engage in action research experiences that were not dependent on receiving ethics approval. Second, supporting students in writing action research proved challenging. The instructors supported students in examining and synthesizing literature by providing exemplars from previous students and using sample writing to help students understand the learning criteria and deepen their understanding of action research. As well, instructors provided feedback to students during draft writing stages of their action research reports. Students were challenged to understand ethical considerations in their own action research projects. The instructors shared ideas about improving scholarly writing, including guidance on ethical issues and proper attribution to sources. Third, there is an element of risk-taking involved in sharing work and providing constructive critique to others. The instructors developed structures to support collaboration and peer feedback loops such as collaboratory studio groups (Grego & Thompson, 2008). Studio groups (i.e. groups of 3-4 students) reviewed drafts of work before they were submitted to the instructor. It was a standard expectation for all students that learning in scholarly

community of inquiry involved making work visible and sharing with others (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Students worked in these studio groups with peers and provided feedback about their draft work, and were expected to incorporate peer feedback into their own work. The instructor facilitated this peer feedback by allowing groups to self-create or configure groups based on topic similarity, geographical location or complementary writing strengths, to name a few. These studio groups could negotiate schedules for peer review or use milestones set by the instructor. Through action research, the instructors were able to develop several teaching strategies for each challenge that arose and share them with one another for improvement of their teaching practice.

DISCUSSION

Collaborative partnerships in pursuit of improving learning and developing a responsive pedagogy is a valuable form of professional learning. The authors argue that using an action research approach in collaboration with peers provides meaningful opportunities for shared meaning construction and can inform a responsive pedagogy. The instructors plan to continue building on their action research agenda and engaging in design, implementation and evaluation of courses in blended and online formats.

A limitation of this study is the data collection based on reflective journals of only three course instructors. Additional perspectives would strengthen the data analysis. For example, collecting data from students in the courses could be considered for future research agendas. Furthermore, the authors did not attempt to compare the possibilities and challenges in teaching blended and online versions of the research course but might consider this aspect for future study. Overall, the authors have grown from this professional learning experience from both an instructional and leadership

perspective. This study has potential to inform teachers, leaders and institutions interested in using an action research approach for professional learning and growth and in developing a responsive pedagogy for learners.

CONCLUSION

Action research was used as an approach to inform course improvement and responsive pedagogy in teaching multiple sections of a blended and online graduate level research course. The action research involved four iterative stages of planning, acting, developing and reflecting (Mertler, 2014). Data were collected from three instructors' reflective journals maintained over a two-year period. Creswell's (2015) key characteristics of action research are reflected in this work and continue to guide the authors with studying their practice and instructional design (a practical focus, the educator-researcher's own practice, collaboration, a dynamic process, a plan of action and sharing research). Findings reveal responsive pedagogy through reflection and collaboration that provided professional learning, especially in the areas identified as challenges within the action research course. These instructors found that using an action research approach to study their practice was a valuable approach for instructional design and developed a responsive pedagogy in teaching graduate students in blended and online courses. Future study could involve a deeper exploration of how instructor collaboration informs student learning and assessment.

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