

Utilizing Peer Partnerships to Motivate and Engage Struggling Students

Introduction

January 27th, 2009. I entered the same classroom where my previous semester had ended and, having thought about it over the winter break, was confident that I knew exactly what my focus would be for my Critical and Creative Thinking Action Research course. This course would allow me to evaluate the teaching method that I was developing through my Synthesis. I would create a small group of students who would serve as an advisory committee. They would hold regular meetings and would evaluate my teaching. Having taken a peek at the course wikispace, I would tailor the tools we would be exercising in our 693 sessions, such as Focused Conversations and Critical Incident Questionnaires, to guide the students' discussions. This class would be directly related to my Synthesis work and would therefore support the ideas that I was continuing to develop through out the spring. Though I received curious looks from my classmates on the first evening of classes when I responded enthusiastically to inquiries on what the semester's work might entail, I was not deterred. This was going to be painless.

Evaluation and Inquiry: Part I

The level of confidence about my semester's work in 693 carried through during my first research sessions. There seemed to be no end to the sources that pointed to examples of students evaluating teachers at the collegiate, as well as the high school level. I realized after a time though, that there were very few models for this type of student evaluation at the middle level. I was only able to unearth one source that applied

this same concept to a middle school classroom. I reassured myself that if there was at least one, then there had to be plenty more examples of this type of action that I would be able to find and which allow me to shape my own project.

As I continued to progress with my Synthesis I began to see more and more that this work that I was doing in 693 was not going to support my Synthesis as much as I had once thought it would. My “Student Evaluation Group” Action Research project was too general and, in some ways, too exclusive based on the student participants that I had identified. I wanted to use this first real Action Research experience to enrich the branch of my Synthesis work that it was most closely linked with: the Classroom Community.* I then decided to drastically change my 693 focus.

The second version of my Action Research project was what I called the “Student Voice Project” (SVP). I was very inspired by the work of Brian Schultz and his fifth grade students at Cabrini Green Elementary school in Chicago. Schultz shared with his students the State mandated standards and then incorporated them into the curriculum design process. Having learned much during his journey, he describes the lessons gained in his account of their learning together in Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom (2008). Schultz comments that,

I realized that I did not always have to be the dominant classroom voice and could share authority with students. By giving students opportunities to help run the classroom activities, I would be more respected, and the days would not nearly be as long. (19)

I was so inspired by his description of his classroom as being a place where he nurtured open dialogue and participation with his students, cooperative learning and collaboration

* My Synthesis focuses on a method of teaching called Social Action Teaching that is divided into separate “branches”. One of the branches involves establishing a classroom climate that will support the work of the other branches.

between peers, and also focused on parent and community communication. My classroom, I thought, could certainly be transformed into one more like that of Brian Schultz. Students would lead discussion sessions and engaging activities based on their understanding of the Massachusetts History and Social Science standards. After school, students would pair up with other students reviewing concepts learned in class resulting in a classroom community that would still be buzzing even after the last bell of the day. In this model, students would lead the classroom allowing their voices to truly be heard.

Continuing my research with this new focus, I was able to find plenty examples of others using a similar model, many of which were at the middle level. One afternoon, I sat down to a free-write to envision what this model would look like in my classroom and I discovered that, again, this focus was not the right fit for both my Classroom Community branch of my Synthesis and my Action Research project. Though I do try to establish a classroom community from the first day of school that would, I think, support the climate necessary for the project, I felt that the components of the project were simply examples of good teaching. Having student acts as leaders within the class period, as well as after school, was not something that could be captured in the context of a class project. Rather, they are the aspects of my teaching that I strive to incorporate on daily basis. I decided to again switch my focus so that I would be able to use my 693 classwork in order to discover and develop something new.

One component of the Student Voice Project that I continued to be interested in was the idea of students helping each other one-on-one. One day, at the start of second period something interesting happened that allowed me to see exactly what this might look like in my classroom. The students were getting settled and Thomas, a student who

has been staying after on Mondays to stay organized asked me, yet again, to borrow a pencil. A student sitting near us jumped up from his chair and said, “Oh Tom, don’t you remember? I have your pencil!” He then took a perfectly sharpened pencil out of his pocket and handed it to Thomas with a smile. When I looked slightly puzzled Mikey explained, “Tom keeps losing his pencil so I am holding onto it for him.” Seemingly simple, this gesture was actually a wonderful opportunity for both Tom and Mikey. Tom is receiving a lesson in how to come to class prepared, without running the risk of receiving a negative consequence given that he has obviously not yet mastered the skill. At the same, Mikey has the opportunity to demonstrate his already developed organizational skills to another student, serving as a peer role model. From this short interaction, I was able to then narrow my focus.

Epicycle: Reflection and Dialogue

This brief interaction encouraged me to take some time to reflect on what my unique classroom needs were. I did a freewrite and tried to imagine what my perfect classroom would be. After engaging in this freewrite I reviewed what I had written a few days later. I discovered one recurring theme that I was surprised I had overlooked. In my writing, student collaboration and cooperation was a strong presence. In that classroom the special interests and strengths of some students complimented the challenges and weaknesses of others. Each student in the classroom seemed to benefit from the presence of another and all were mutually supported.

I took this experience to my fellow teachers. I began to ask others on my Team of teachers if they had ever witnessed an interaction like the one that I had. The math

teacher stated the names of two students who always seem to chime in when the other is trying to recall basic multiplication tables. The Language Arts teacher shared that there is one student in her class who seems to really appreciate the very quirky sense of humor of another student. The science teacher remarked that there is a group of three students in her room who went to elementary school together and although they seem to be the most unlikely trio, they always request to work with each other.

These conversations allowed me to expand my own lens and I began looking for these pairs. Within a few days of careful observation, I had identified several pairs of students that I thought would really compliment each other. I then tried to identify additional students with whom other, teacher-led interventions did not prove successful as well as some of the students who had steadily progressed during the school year. Students in this latter group were not necessarily the highest achieving students. Rather, they were students who possessed strong skills and demonstrated a willingness to assist others. I wrote each student's name on an index card, recorded their current average, strengths, weaknesses, and interests. I began to move the cards, pairing up different students until I believed I had the right chemistry. I became very excited for my next step and communicated this to the rest of the CCT 693 class through my first work-in-progress presentation.

Evaluation and Inquiry: Part II

After my presentation to my fellow Action Researchers, I carefully read the comments of my peers. Several comments asked questions like, "So what exactly will this Peer Partnership Project look like?" "Do you know what students will be doing in

these pairs?” “Sounds like a powerful idea but what does it mean in practice?” This dialogue, in the form of written comments from my peers responding to my presentation, completed my first visit to an Action Research epicycle and brought me right back to where I had started.

I was excited about the idea of peers helping peers but clearly had to do some more research in order to discover how others have used a similar approach. I began searching a variety of key terms such as “peer mentoring” and “student support”. This search yielded a few examples of past action that I was able to compare and contrast both with each other and my current vision for the project.

I learned much from my reading of the detailed accounts of others’ past actions and shared these findings with the 693 class during my second work-in-progress presentation. This return visit to the first phase of my Action Research process, though just as important as the first, propelled my project forward. It was at this stage that I began to actually imagine how the Peer Partnership Project (PPP) would look like in my classroom.

Epicycle: Reflection and Dialogue

I was excited to get my project off the ground, but as another CCT 693 classmate had said, “I didn’t want to be just the new thing in school.” I wanted to make sure that others were also excited about the prospect of students supporting each other and, perhaps more importantly, were willing to assist in the implementation of such a program. During a Team meeting, I brought up the idea of a peer mentoring program.

Another member of the Team brought up a program that was previously implemented school-wide. Called our “Advisory” block, the program was meant to meet some of the unique socio-emotional needs of a middle school adolescent. Each Wednesday morning every adult in the building would meet with a group of students to discuss school climate issues. Unfortunately, the program was implemented for only a year due to some concerns from the adult advisors in the building. During our Team meeting, a colleague recalled that we had not received any training before the program was implemented. Additionally, another Team member pointed out that, although they appreciated the extensive binder that was given to them before they actually began to meet with students, it would have been more helpful to either review the materials beforehand with other teachers or to be included in the development of the program.

As we recalled the school-wide halting of the Advisory block, my Team members and I decided that this was certainly a model that we could use within our own group of students. We thought that perhaps we could each be assigned a small group of students that we would check in with on a daily basis. As I tried to steer the conversation back to the peer-focused model I had shared at the beginning, I mentioned again the idea of peer buddies. I shared with the Team the pairings that some of us had already observed. The Team was very open to the idea and one colleague remarked that she thought it would fit in nicely to the teacher Advisory concept. As a group, we began to propose some questions that needed to be explored. Is this program necessary for all of our students or just those that had appear to be struggling? What kind of parent consent would we need to obtain? When would the training and meetings take place? Who would lead them? Is this a program that we might want to implement next year or should we more carefully

plan and then begin it next school year? Eventually we decided that we would need to revisit this idea at another time, perhaps during one of our extended professional development days.

Through this conversation with my Team I realized several important things about the future of this project. First, others were excited about the idea of students helping students. Second, our Team model lends itself nicely to such a program. Third, such a program would be far less effective if implemented only in my classroom. Because of these realizations, I was happy that I brought up the program, even if we left the meeting with more questions than answers. I took all of these questions into consideration, along with my research of other peer mentoring models, when planning the Peer Partnership Project.

Proposing and Planning

Identifying Students

Ideally, the Peer Partnership Project will be implemented in the start of the 2009-2010 school year. Student participants will be identified through a review of our students' elementary school files. Though we usually do this at the beginning of the year anyways, this time we will be looking with a slightly different lens. Previously, we have put aside files of the students who have serious behavioral and/or academic and carefully observed them during the first few weeks of school. This time, we will also scan the files for students who have been previously identified as having strong social skills, effective organizational methods, and developing communication skills. This information can be

gathered through the standards that elementary teachers must assess students on as well as the teacher comments from previous years.

Creating Student Pairs

Our second step will also take place during the first few weeks of school. We spend much time during the first month of school getting to know our students, giving them opportunities to interact with their classmates, and generally, creating a Team climate. This time period will be a great opportunity to further examine the two lists of students we created during the initial file review. First, we will decide if we think each student would benefit from a peer mentoring relationship. Second, we will decide how to pair students up based on their learning needs and strengths.

Scheduling

At this point, it is too early for us to decide when and where these meetings will take place. Our school is eliminating an entire Team of teachers for next school-year and therefore, there will be many staff and schedule changes. Ideally, there will be time built into the school day for such a program. This would help send the message to students that this is an important and worthwhile program. At the same time, conducting meetings after-school would allow the partnership as much time as they need.

I would like to hold a breakfast once a month with all student participants and perhaps their parents as well. These breakfasts would be informal but would give us an opportunity to administer regular questionnaires, similar to the pre-service questionnaire that students will complete during the project orientation. Using the same questionnaire

before, during, and after completion of the program will allow us to monitor to what extent our students are acquiring the communication and organizational skills we are focusing on. As far as location is concerned, I am confident that the meetings should take place in our wing of the school because this is likely where students feel most comfortable in the building.

Orientation and Pre-Service Interviews

For such a program to be a success, every participant needs to be on the same page. We all need to understand what we hope to accomplish through the program, how we plan to achieve these goals, and why we believe they are important. Holding an orientation would be a great opportunity to communicate these ideas. Given the fact that my students are coming from an elementary school and this is their first experience with middle school, I would like to also invite parents to such an informational session so that they too can understand the expectations as a way to support their child's involvement. During this session, students would also complete an "About Me" pre-service questionnaire that would focus on how they perceive their habits, practices, and skills. After completing this questionnaire, a member of the Team would then sit with the child and discuss his/her responses to clear up any areas of confusion and to also give the student an opportunity to ask questions one-on-one.

Training

Given that I am focused on this program for my 693 project, I have thought more about the training aspect of the program than the rest of my Team. Because the other

models I looked at identified training for both mentor and mentee students as important, I plan to spend more time with this component during my summer planning. I have discovered a great student-friendly resource though that I believe can be relied upon much for the training aspect of the program. “Helping Skills for Middle School Students” (1992) by Robert D. Myrick and Don L. Sorenson nicely scaffolds the mentoring process by first sharing activities that students can engage in that will help them to understand the purpose of a mentor-mentee relationship and then moves into effective communication skills. From this source, and its accompanying adult resource, I envision a three session training before the meetings begin to take place. During Session 1 we would start off with icebreakers to give students the opportunity to get to know others in the program. Most of the time of Session 1 would be focused on an overview of the unique needs of middle school students and how they can support each other. During Session 2, students would brainstorm the skills that they believe they should possess before they enter high school and also analyze some of the problems facing middle school students in our community. Session 2 would end with students brainstorming coping strategies that they think might be successful with some of those challenges. Session 3 would be focused on listening and responding skills. These skills can be modeled for students, practiced in pairs, and then demonstrated to the whole group through skits and role-plays.

Program Evaluation

Each of the models that I had researched identified a need for regular program evaluation. Several tools will be used to evaluate the Peer Partnership Project. Each

student pair will be assigned a teacher to be their coordinator. The coordinator will maintain a file for each student. This file will contain their pre-service questionnaire, as well as mid-service questionnaires, and information regarding their academic performance such as report cards and progress reports. During our weekly Student Study Team meetings (which will not be affected by the scheduling or staff changes for next year) we will review these files to identify any changes or improvements in student performance. This information will be regularly shared with students individually, without their peer partner. During these meetings, students will also be able to raise any concerns or questions they might have to their coordinator. At the end of the program, all students will complete a final questionnaire and have an exit interview. We can, again, discuss the results of these interviews to decide if the program should be implemented again and if so, what should be changed and improved upon.

Celebrations and Awards

One of the models that I researched identified that some students felt that they were not appreciated enough for their commitment to their peer mentoring program. Because I try to recognize all of my students for their accomplishments, this is certainly something that I would like to do in the Peer Partnership Project. Students could receive recognition for their involvement during our regular Team celebrations. In addition, students could be recognized during the monthly breakfasts in front of parent. I also believe that sharing their files and discussing the contents of them on a regular basis will be gratifying for students.

Conclusion

What I found most interesting about the development of my Action Research project was the tone of the work. Initially, I was so focused on how *I* would research, develop, implement, and evaluate *my* work. It was not until I began to really move through the cycles and epicycles that I started to think of the project as one that could actually be adopted by others. Bringing the idea to a Team meeting and using the knowledge and expertise of my colleagues allowed me to see the utter importance of developing a strong, supportive constituency. Too many times in the past, I have developed an idea in isolation, intimidated to expose it to others. Though I have always felt excited about my ideas, I am reluctant to share them with others. Sometimes I am fearful that they are going to think that I am a little overzealous or that my efforts are in vain. By genuinely allowing this work to be shaped and adapted by my conversations with colleagues, I think I was able to see my project in a new, rejuvenated light.

I am confident now that this work will not be in vain. Starting the thinking and planning for this project this year will allow us to implement the program at the beginning of next school year which is the ideal time to implement such a program. Because my Team is already familiar with the project and the research that supports it, we can revisit the planning process together and then move into the implementation stage. Though there have been plenty of instances where my work has been more focused on my goals, my needs, and my interests, I do not feel that this is the case with my Action Research project. Rather, it is a project that has been embraced by others. To be honest, I would not have been motivated to take this step unless it had been built into the Action Research process (i.e. a 693 requirement). Ironically, if I had not followed

through with this step than my work definitely would have been in vain. If I had walked into a Team meeting with a complete project designed, it would have been rejected because I think others would be weary of the motivation behind it. By actively building a constituency, I have had the opportunity to collaboratively create a project that will be relatively sustainable.

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