Improving Teaching Through A Community of Practice
M. Sharon Herbers, Absael Antelo, Dorothy Ettling and M. Alison Buck
Journal of Transformative Education published online 28 December 2011
DOI: 10.1177/1541344611430688

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jtd.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/12/19/1541344611430688

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Journal of Transformative Education can be found at:

  Email Alerts: http://jtd.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
  Subscriptions: http://jtd.sagepub.com/subscriptions
  Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
  Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Proof - Dec 28, 2011

What is This?
Improving Teaching Through A Community of Practice

M. Sharon Herbers¹, Absael Antelo¹, Dorothy Ettling¹, and M. Alison Buck¹

Abstract
Four faculty members describe their collective experiences of being involved in a community of practice (CoP) designed to deconstruct individual teaching experiences through critical reflection and dialogue. The CoP began while conducting a research project to enhance the quality of a doctoral program focused on preparing graduates as agents of change in culturally diverse environments. The authors describe their experiences, present an emerging model of professional development, illustrate the process from two of their participants’ perspectives, and identify implications for other learning communities.

Keywords
transformative education, transformative learning, reflective learning, community of practice

Introduction
“One of the hardest things teachers have to learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 1). Brookfield challenges teachers to use critical reflection and democratic discourse to bring to light

¹ Dreeben School of Education, University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
M. Alison Buck, Dreeben School of Education, University of the Incarnate Word, 4301 Broadway, San Antonio, TX 78209, USA
Email: mbuck@uiwtx.edu
the shadows that harbor discrepancies between theory and practice. The purpose of this article is to describe the experiences of four graduate education faculty members involved in a community of practice (CoP) designed to deconstruct individual teaching experiences through critical reflection and discussion.

The aim of our collaborative inquiry in the CoP is to test various approaches to teaching through a reflective sharing process. This primary aim includes learning new ways to develop cross-cultural awareness, regularly engaging in reflective practice in order to improve teaching, incorporating practices for transformative learning processes, and challenging our personal pedagogies through the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and approaches.

The CoP was the next step in the evolution of a research project focused on enhancing the quality of a doctoral program by fostering a climate conducive to transformative learning in order to prepare graduates as agents of change in culturally diverse environments (Antelo & Ettling, 2006; Ettling & Buck, 2007). Researchers and teachers committed to the process of perspective transformation must be deeply engaged in the process (Ettling, 2006) and vigilant in questioning their own assumptions and practices (Herbers & Kimmel, 2007).

**The University Context**

Four faculty members began meeting as a CoP out of a common desire to improve their own teaching practices and to enhance their graduate programs in education at The University of the Incarnate Word (UIW). UIW is first and foremost a teaching institution, with a growing emphasis on research. The expectation of excellence in teaching is embedded in the culture. Our university’s intentions for its graduate programs are exemplified by the following portion of its mission statement:

The University of the Incarnate Word (UIW) is an institution that welcomes [and seeks out] to its community persons of diverse backgrounds, in the belief that their respectful interaction advances the discovery of truth, mutual understanding, self-realization and the common good.

UIW’s strategic plan specifically includes:

- Identification of outcome measures of cultural awareness for the UIW community.
- Ensuring that the concept of multiculturalism becomes a thread throughout the UIW curriculum.

To this end, considerable effort has been poured into recruitment and retention of a diverse graduate student body at the University. Faculty cultivate cross-cultural research in many of their courses and promote cross-cultural awareness and immersion experiences with students. These opportunities provide ample material for both
faculty and students to reflect on cultural diversity and to investigate the impact that diversity ignites in the learning environment. There is support within our institution and within our programs for questioning assumptions, collaborative inquiry, critical reflection, and dialogue.

The Roles of Transformative Learning Theory in the CoP

Arnold, Ryan and Australian Council of Deans of Education (2003) translate the desired outcome of educational reform to be the transformation of individuals and society. They claim that the students of the 21st century have the potential to actively create the communities in which they live and learn, rather than live on the margins of those they inherit. This is true of many of our graduate students and is reflected in the goals and rationale for our CoP.

Transformative learning theory, according to Mezirow and Associates (2000), affirms the fundamental purpose of development in the education of adults and describes that development as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future action” (p. 5). His theory rests on the practice of critical reflection on experience. He adds that “a mindful experience requires that the learner make an informed and reflective decision to act on his or her reflective insight” (p. 23). Warring and Huber (2004) describe transformative learning similarly, with the added dimensions of global and social justice awareness, understanding, and interaction.

Much has been written about the function of reflection in learning and pedagogy. To develop the complex skills and attitudes necessary for contemporary education practice, the habit of deep introspection must be encouraged. Introspection goes beyond reflection to influence embodied habits of mind. Introspection can transform reflection into the kind of responsiveness that can be flexible and informed by contexts of learning. Those contexts are now recognized as extremely complex and multifaceted, requiring teachers and administrators to have broad repertoires of pedagogical practice (Schuller, Brassett-Grundy, Green, Hammond, & Preston, 2002). Transformative learning theory provides a theoretical and praxis base to assist future educational and business leaders with the challenge of understanding and promoting the process of change. Today’s educational leaders are expected to effectively facilitate institutional and systemic reform along with demonstrating exemplary leadership.

As we have reflected in the CoP about how transformative learning theory fits into our practice with our students, its role within the CoP has also become clearer. We challenge ourselves and each other to cultivate the habit of deep introspection related to our practices in the classroom. As we dialogue together, new approaches and ways to integrate theory with practice often emerge not only to assist our students in their process of change but also to facilitate our own deep changes.
CoP Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Based on the work of cognitive anthropologists, Lave and Wenger (1991) created the term “community of practice,” and defined it as a community of practitioners where newcomers attempt to acquire the sociocultural practices of the community. Currently communities of practice are used in business, especially in knowledge management, education, and organizational development (OD). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, as cited in Laluvein, 2010, p. 177) identify a CoP as “an aggregate of people who, united by a common enterprise, develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs and values—in short, practices . . . Mutual engagement and learning are at the heart of the ‘community of practice’ which is defined both by its membership and by the practice in which the membership engages.”

Wenger (1998) has referred to a CoP as a group process involving a negotiation of tensions in the interplay of various dualities. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning can be viewed from the perspective of the learner as a process dependent on previous learning, and the present learning context.

Within this process four dualities can take place. The first one involves participation versus reification. Here, the members of the CoP engage in acquiring meaning through participation or through reification (Wenger, 1998, p. 232). That is, meaning is negotiated and enhanced by meaningful participation. Reification of knowledge is the result of codifying it into an institutional form intended to ease the learner’s grasp of it, for example, a textbook. The second duality, designed versus emergent, involves teaching and learning as two distinct features: What is taught may not correspond to what is learned; it is the interaction of the planned with the emergent that maximizes learning, and allows learning and teaching to inform each other. The third duality, identification versus negotiability, involves “a process of colonizing learning, of claiming a territory, of deciding what matters, and of defining success and failure” (Wenger, 1998, p. 269). In a CoP, members decide what to identify with and how to promote it, facilitating the negotiation of new identities. The fourth duality is local versus global. Using Wenger’s language, one’s learning has to apply beyond the classroom.

The traditional idea of thinking as an individualized process challenges our understanding about learning within a community. In contrast, being really present there, within the group, can contribute to deeper levels of awareness and achieve new learning that might, in turn, lead to significant change. In addition, a social process is developed within the group as a product of the exchanges, encounters, and innumerable interactions taking place. This is what we conceive as our CoP.

Defining the CoP Framework and Characteristics

According to Wenger (1998), a CoP is an attempt to promote formal change in professional practice. It involves three defining components: domain, community,
and practice. (a) Domain. This is a group of individuals with a shared domain of interests and concerns. They also have a clear commitment to the domain and professional competency, value their collective experience and learn from each other.

(b) Community. Members engage in joint activities and discussions, and share information. As a group they develop relationships promoting learning from each other. Interaction is a key to their success. (c) Practice. Members of this community are practitioners. They work to develop a shared repertoire of resources, experiences, and tools to solve problems, and promote scholarship and change. For Wenger, what community members do to advance a set of shared goals, constitutes practice.

Under this perspective, the CoP is a community of scholar–practitioners whose individual members, through interactions of participation and reification, engage in meaningful discussions to convert abstract formulations into practical actions resulting in a common goal. It is hoped that the whole process will improve practice, enhance research activities, and challenge us to greater common effectiveness. Our conceptualization of the process identified by Wenger is depicted in Figure 1.

**Integrating the CoP With Teaching**

The search for an improved practice becomes the ultimate purpose of the CoP. The operations of the CoP are integrated to conventional teaching models used in higher
education in an attempt to view instruction from a reflective perspective intended to share experiences related to teaching and devise ways to improve actual practice. As shown in Figure 2, most teaching models include a dynamic between educational imperatives and purposes. Societal demands as well as scientific, technological, and cultural trends, are translated by educational faculty into learning objectives. Learning theories and generally accepted approaches to teaching are then converted into a curriculum design illustrating the scope and depth of the content of the subject area to be learned. This curricular decision leads faculty to the preparation of the lesson or teaching unit and its component parts displaying the planning of the operational and organizational steps to engage learners.

The next portion of the model involves this engagement with learners. This endeavor implements the teaching act by introducing specific teaching–learning strategies appropriate for the nature of the subject area, type of students, learning level, and intended educational purposes. It includes traditional strategies such as the development of a sequential list of activities and learning tasks, but also extends beyond these methods to experiment with a variety of means to involve and engage learners. Then, a collaborative evaluation and assessment of teaching effectiveness take place. Learning outcomes are used to assess the effectiveness of the teaching strategies and faculty performance. Results are then brought into the CoP for reflective discussion.

As can be observed in Figure 2, at least two interrelated learning loops are created. In one, faculty apply reflection on previous experience to integrate learning theories and align them to the teaching process. Students are engaged in learning processes and collaborative evaluations. Simultaneously, CoP members dialogue...
about objectives, learning engagement, and evaluation, leading to an improved practice. Then, new approaches can be developed and tested to disseminate research-based strategies for the betterment of the teaching and learning process.

The History of Our CoP

The context for our initial discussions in the CoP about improving our teaching was a commitment to preparing our students to be leaders and change agents in culturally diverse environments. We did not arrive at our initial monthly meeting with a blank slate, nor did any of us arrive with fully formed ideas about what the nature of our CoP should be. We explored our reasons for existing as a community of learners. We had in common basic background information about communities of practice, some similarity in our teaching philosophies, and our desire to reflect in community toward the goal of proactively improving our teaching. Members of the CoP embraced the idea that the educational experience is never *value neutral*. The position, perspective, and power of the teacher are always present in the classroom. In addition, Peat (2005) argues that the fundamental complexity and uncertainty of our world require a new level of understanding and collective creativity to discover new abilities for holding a variety of viewpoints in creative tension. For our group members, this meant that being at home in this creative tension in the educational setting requires us to recognize the importance of facilitating multiple ways of knowing, and to champion the significance of a classroom of diverse learners. Each of us already had a teaching philosophy that incorporates these ideas. We attempt to live them and carry them out in our practices in the classroom, but often we experience challenges in this endeavor. We realized that we could bring more emancipatory ideals into the classroom and facilitate new ways of knowing among our diverse learners by critically reflecting together on our classroom practices designed to facilitate transformational learning.

As we continued to meet each month and reflect individually between meetings, we assessed our needs, searching for meaning in our practice of teaching and in our research. As part of this process, we arrived at a summary statement for our group about teaching and learning: *College students facing multicultural contexts do not learn simply because we teach them, but because they get involved in their own learning process.* We questioned how we could use that statement as a lens to examine our practice. Applying the collaborative evaluation aspect of our CoP Model for engaged teaching, we began with a simple question to ask our students about their outcomes in our graduate courses.

Our dialogue in the CoP had revealed that students are often uncomfortable about planning and managing their own sources of learning. While some are ready and eager for this task, we all shared examples of other students who do not resist, but need tools and skills in order to pursue the task. Our desire was to become more sensitive and responsive to the resistance and anxiety experienced by our students without taking over the construction of their learning. One member provided a
review of Brookfield’s *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting* (1987) for our reflection and further discussion. Another member was planning to use Brookfield’s Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) in a class, reflect on the feedback, and bring it to the CoP for community reflection. Ultimately, all members of the group committed to administering the CIQ in each class twice during the semester. Over the next 2 years, we have continued to do so, summarizing the data collected, and bringing it to the CoP where we present specific concerns and critical incidents identified by the students and from personal reflection for the group’s reflection and insight. For our CoP, this approach has become an opportunity for rich conversation and interaction about our students’ ways of learning and improving our teaching. Having these conversations has become a source of ongoing awareness for our individual members about ways to live out our beliefs about adult learning. Interestingly, our use of the CIQ in multiple graduate classes has become a model of reflective practice among our students.

More recently in the CoP, we have been stating and reflecting on our teaching philosophies, sharing our practices, and continuing to delve into the responses of course participants. We are integrating prior research results to determine what was learned and what additional information is needed at the systemic level and by the individual teacher/learner. These discussions have helped us to establish our shared domain of interests, issues, and community concerns; develop our relationships in the community; share our practice and scholarship; and promote change (Wenger, 1998). As we began, we shared common beliefs about the importance of perspective transformation, challenging our assumptions, taking responsibility for one’s own learning, and the desire to prepare our graduates as 21st century leaders and change agents. We each brought different skills and experiences to the CoP. The added value of the CoP has come from the collaborative processing, questioning, and dialoguing together about how to challenge and nurture our teaching and thus our students. Our problem solving and negotiation of meaning through our interaction are ongoing. Learning takes place as CoP members participate in such problem solving and share knowledge to solve the problem (Wenger, 1998). Learning is “shaped by a shared desire to understand and experience events from multiple perspectives and a preparedness to consider various and diverse perspectives through dialoguing with others” (Laluvein, 2010, p. 181).

**Our Cross-Cultural Practices in the Classroom**

Applying the CoP process to real teaching–learning situations helps to diagnose our own practice, engage in careful analysis of our own strengths and weaknesses and ultimately find more effective strategies to promote transformative learning. We use a variety of practices with the primary goal of having our adult students become more self-aware and aware of different cultures. We seek for ourselves and our students a greater understanding about how to respect and appreciate others. Just as we reflect on the teaching–learning process in our CoP interactions, we also promote
reflection by our students on their learning and processes of interaction. In the next sections, two of us discuss our teaching and learning experiences related to involvement in the CoP, reflecting the experiences of all four of us.

**One Perspective**

Two theoretical models guide my teaching practice, transformative learning theory, and Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1984). Transformative learning theory describes a fundamental and deep change in perception (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). My colleagues in our CoP share the belief that graduate educators must foster perspective transformation by challenging participants to examine their structures of knowing, reflect on limitations of those structures, and modify those structures rather than continue to accept beliefs acquired only through assimilation and osmosis from parents, teachers, peers, religious leaders, the media, and other cultural forces. Our vision is that ultimately learners will take responsibility for their own learning, their own way of knowing. Through the CoP, the parallel process shifted to a deeper level. I, as the teacher, have developed a stronger sense of responsibility for my own learning as I engaged in meaningful dialogues grounded in actual classroom encounters and participant responses to specific events. I was not new to transformative learning theory or a novice teacher. I began teaching at the college level as an adjunct in 1986 and from the very beginning focused on student engagement, reflection, discussion, and active participation. This was different.

Researchers such as Cranton (2006) and Brookfield (2006) warn that educators must be willing to participate fully in the process by examining their own assumptions and perceptions. The call to action of the CoP was to determine if our teaching practices truly reflected the theories that we espouse. My specific research question: Is there a change in knowledge, perception, or behaviors as a result of students participating in this course? The deeper question emerged: Do I need to modify my practice or my theoretical framework based on the outcomes identified by the participants?

The revelation of discrepancies between theory and practice. I purposefully selected Brookfield’s *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* as one of the texts for a College Teaching course. In the first chapter Brookfield acknowledges the influence of Mezirow and Myles Horton on his professional development. Mezirow’s theory was the theoretical foundation for my dissertation and I have spent 10 years researching the early history of Highlander Folk School. Therefore, I must ask: Is my adult education classroom truly democratic and emancipatory? No. I will give an example of when it was democratic and when it was not.

The hallmark of this particular class is cocreation. I enter the classroom without a course outline (the only course I approach in this fashion). My assumption is that if participants want to learn about creating a college course, they should know what it feels like to face the blank page. The student reaction is always a mix of shock, awe,
excitement, and anxiety. It takes several hours to identify what participants know, their gifts and experiences with college teaching, their expectations of the course. I have attempted a preclass questionnaire with little success; the actual sharing in the group has proven more effective albeit more time-consuming. There is one course assignment that is nonnegotiable; every participant will create a syllabus for a course she could teach at some future date. The class determines what topics will be addressed, what assignments will be required, and what weight will be assigned to each. Course outlines from other semesters are available.

**One group pushed the boundaries.** They wanted the freedom to have one assignment of their own creation in order to incorporate a research paper on a particular topic, a service learning project, an observation or an interview of a respected professor. In previous classes I had the philosophy of “One for All and All for One.” A reflection-in-action, internal dialogue ensued. The proposed assignment seemed more fitting for a democratic classroom as long as it did not require the professor to do all the work in finding an appropriate method of assessing the product and process. This was directly stated to the participants. The negotiated limit was that the project plan with an accompanying tool for evaluation had to be approved by the professor. The evaluation tool could be a rubric, a grading criteria guideline with specific points assigned or some other method of assessment. The results were rewarding for individual participants, as indicated by oral reports and anonymous comments on the final administration of Brookfield’s CIQ. An added benefit was the knowledge gained by participants about assessment and the sense of joy in digging more deeply into a topic of personal interest which was evident in some of the projects. There was a stronger sense of ownership. The involvement in the CoP and our commitment to congruence with our personal philosophies of education set the stage for this encounter.

**The eyes of the students.** Another incident provided opportunities for significant sharing with CoP colleagues. In an adult learning class during the previous semester a participant told me about a local quilting project involving members of two African American churches and a predominantly White church. The result was a beautiful quilt depicting the underground railroad bordered by symbols of the journey to freedom. I like to have College Teaching participants involved in an extracurricular campus activity to illustrate concepts presented in discussions of Involving Colleges (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991). In the previous year, class participants hosted the screening of a film, *The Power of Good,* and volunteers had facilitated discussion with the audience at a campus wide Peace Day event. I shared with the class the information about the quilting group and the possibility of hosting a forum for Peace Day, an annual event. The response was tepid but plans proceeded, one person elected to coordinate the event as his individual project.

I was stunned when several participants voiced that they did not see a connection between Peace Day and the quilting project. Questions such as “What does the Underground Railroad have to do with Peace?” were openly expressed. Through
discussions with my colleagues and class participants, I came to realize that the vast majority of graduate students had no prior experience with the annual celebration. Readings were available but I had failed to provide enough background in a way that was meaningful to class participants. Peace Day is a memorial to a faculty member who was slain by a homeless man he was trying to assist; the emphasis is social justice and understanding. I grew up in a segregated society and the connections between freedom, interracial collaboration, and peace are evident to me. The quilt is an example of people of diverse backgrounds coming together and finding new meaning in old stories.

Only a few volunteers came forward to assist in the planning such as creating flyers and publicizing the event across campus. The CIQ indicated that many of the students did not buy into the project. The questions and discussion with the CoP enabled me to see more clearly Blacks and Whites coming together to work on a quilt of the Underground Railroad was significant for people of a certain age and background. Many of our graduate students grew up in Hispanic communities and knew very little about the everyday injustices experienced by Black Americans in the struggle for civil rights.

Another factor emerged in the discussions of the CIQ with the class. One person pointed out the class really did not have a choice. Lip service by the professor suggested the class could refuse to participate and she would find another venue to bring the quilters to campus. This was a significant revelation. Frank discussion followed and leaders finally emerged from within the group.

In the week prior to the event, there was a flurry of activity. One person gathered written questions, another served as emcee, another created an evaluation form, while others crafted certificates of appreciation. The evening was staged like a grand opening, including the gift of a dozen roses for each panelist. Although attendance was disappointing, the panel was a moving experience for the class. The quilt was beautiful, the quilters were eloquent. Six women shared stories from their heart about how they came together, literally and figuratively, to produce not only the quilt but a play about the Underground Railroad.

In the following class session, some participants voiced regret that they had not been involved at a more significant level. A haunting realization lingered that I had not seen through the eyes of the students. I understood that I did not provide enough background for why this mattered and self-corrected. This led to some changes, but when a student leader presented a video interview with Peace Day founders through YouTube, class participants invested in program planning. The open discussion, the willingness to say “I see your point, there was a double message,” led to the collaboration and evaluation phases of the second part of the CoP model. The lesson learned is to address the needs of diverse learners by spelling out the purpose, the theories, and the relevance when a proposal for action is introduced. I cannot assume that others will make the same connections I have or assign the same value. Ultimately, the class may choose not to participate and I will have to respect that decision.
I found the answer to my question: Do I need to modify my practice or my theoretical framework based on the outcomes identified by participants? Yes, I need to strengthen ties to the theoretical frameworks and the research. One brief example will illustrate the lessons applied in a subsequent class.

In a program development course, all participants were working within church organizations. We were reading Palmer’s *To Know as We Are Known* (1983) and actively engaged in planning a retreat for graduate students (in this case, class participants). The class was divided into teams for program planning, logistics, and evaluation. In one of the last planning sessions there was still a sense of “we could do this, or we could do that.” I remained silent and listened. One person went to the blackboard, wrote out the agenda and identified the missing elements. It was clear there were only two brief periods which were open, class participants quickly selected activities and assigned responsibilities. Every participant was involved in planning, delivery, and implementation. In the debriefing, participants stated that they experienced what Palmer described as the definition of teaching: “to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced” (p. 68). They recognized the need of the instructor to create a space through silence for the leadership to emerge from within the class. This example was markedly different from the Peace Day planning because the class participants saw the need for a retreat, personally and professionally, and because they had a theoretical framework for the process. They were actively engaged in creation, collaboration, and evaluation.

I have experienced an additional benefit from involvement in our CoP, support through the tenure and promotion process. In the beginning, I had positive student evaluations and I had no desire to expose any Achilles’ heel. My dominant learning mode is active experimentation (Kolb, 2005) and I may inadvertently skip steps needed for abstract learners to make sense of learning experiences. As a result of the CoP, I have observed the way my colleagues promote abstract conceptualization. I clearly see my own strengths and those of peers. Furthermore, I have had the privilege of witnessing educators willing to act on social concerns in domestic and international settings. I have gained a deeper and clearer vision of community in the classroom and among faculty. I have learned how to gently challenge myself to model the democratic practices described by Brookfield and Horton, the transformative practices described by Mezirow, Taylor, and Cranton, and the social action practiced by my colleagues.

Another Perspective

One of the unique purposes the CoP served for me was mentoring and enculturation to the University and the School of Education. I had seen the mission related to creating global leaders and developing cross-cultural awareness as a student in our PhD program and through previous work with one of my colleagues. I had college teaching experience in a small, primarily liberal arts university, in its very traditional business program, but I was new to teaching in this environment. The CoP was an
opportunity for me not only to contribute, but to learn from faculty with similar teaching philosophies who are all at different places in their careers and who have diverse interests. CoP members were always willing to honestly share their challenges in the teaching/learning process as well as the triumphs, to listen, and to assist me or another member in processing their classroom experiences or suggesting alternate approaches or goals. Some meetings resulted in a tangible outcome we could articulate and implement in attempting to make our ongoing practice consistent with the ideals we believe and espouse. Overall, the reflective process of each meeting, our growth in community, and the encouragement for ongoing individual reflection have helped me to remain focused on taking advantage of the opportunity for real change myself and ways to foster it among my students.

**Course experiences.** Effective Teams and Groups is an adult learning course for our master and doctoral students. One of the key aims of the course is for participants to share knowledge, theoretical frameworks, skills, approaches, and philosophies regarding the effective functioning of all types of adult groups. The composition of the class usually exhibits some cultural diversity, and this semester was no exception as students represent several countries and ethnicities, as well as a variety of professional and educational backgrounds.

Like my colleague, transformative learning and experiential learning inform my practice. Another prominent theoretical framework for me is OD. Based on the theories of behavioral science, OD is an ongoing, systemic effort to increase the organization’s overall health and effectiveness. The focus is on recognizing and changing organizational processes. OD efforts often utilize a change agent or facilitator at certain points to assist an organization in learning to solve its own problems. Like transformative learning, the goal of OD is to increase capacities, in this case, capacities for enhanced functioning of an organization through improved communication, interpersonal relations, problem solving, decision making, collaborative leadership, conflict resolution, and other group-oriented processes (Lewin, 1958; Schein, 1998; Senge, 1990).

This particular course not only presents a unique opportunity to learn about group behavior in various cultures and parts of the world, but to practice it and reflect on real-life experiences of group development, communication, building relationships, addressing conflict, and task accomplishment. The students work together in small groups to observe and evaluate some major aspect of group behavior in an organization of their choosing, creating both a written paper and a classroom presentation. Working on their own group development, observing and reflecting on the group process, and learning about their individual roles in the group are integral to the work of the group throughout the semester. Thus, learning the theory and concepts is combined with observing/reflecting on their own group process and that of an outside group, and sharing their learning with others in the class. It is hoped that this approach will provide opportunities for transformative learning to occur, and that changed perspectives will impact future group behavior, leadership, and facilitation.
Activities for self-assessment and group assessment of group process. I select the work groups to help ensure diversity within each group, and because it is more realistic than being able to choose with whom one works. We utilize several activities to reflect and share about individual behavior in the group and the processes occurring in the group, often using one person in an observer role during exercises to provide feedback to the rest of the group (another common technique in OD efforts). For example, one assessment at the end of a group discussion involved having each group member rate task accomplishment, feelings about their participation, communication, the level of cooperation, and so on. (Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004, p. 53). Upon completion of several of the in-class group experiences, there was a related survey on some specific aspect of group behavior, such as collaborative relationships, to evaluate areas of strength and areas for improvement in their own group (McIntyre, 1998, pp. 104–105).

Prelearning/postlearning survey about group behavior. I utilized a questionnaire during the second week (prequestionnaire) and last week (postquestionnaire) of class to identify students’ self-perceived changes in knowledge and behaviors. The idea and format for this questionnaire came from discussions in the CoP about the Model for Engaged Teaching and a colleague’s use of a similar questionnaire. Questions addressed students’ definitions of a team, factors that contribute to and limit their effectiveness on a team, expected and actual learning, and the value of intentional team development activities. Along with other individual and collaborative student evaluations in the class, I intended this survey as a reflective tool for the students, while their responses served to provide me another opportunity for reflection and to analyze the need for changes in my practice. I have brought the results of this and subsequent assessment tools into the CoP for reflection and discussion about ways to enhance the transformative learning opportunities in the course.

In many areas, there were qualitative differences between the presurvey and postsurvey responses. For example, the early definitions of a team focused on the textbook idea of a group working toward several goals or one common goal; there were few mentions of the importance of cohesion and collaboration. The end of class survey responses strongly focused on the importance of collaboration and working together to achieve goals.

At the beginning of the course, most students did expect to change as a result of participating in the course, based on their learning about teams and group dynamics. Though a few mentioned the ability to transfer what they learned through intentional team development exercises to other situations, many were somewhat unsure of what value such exercises might have. At the end of the course, students were much more specific about the actual changes in their knowledge or behavior, what they were learning from group process feedback, and about being able to transfer their learning in the course to their business or classroom teams.

Bringing these results into the CoP for dialogue with my colleagues helped me focus on additional ways to facilitate collaborative learning, each learner’s
construction of knowledge, and insights about the transfer of learning earlier in the course. This dialogue within the CoP and my reflection on the student responses have led me to make three decisions: (a) to spend more class discussion time on the importance of team effectiveness for the individual, team, organization, and society; (b) to collaboratively develop team building strategies for specific needs; and (c) to allow time at the end of the course to provide feedback on the survey results and hear additional insights and observations from the students.

Later developments. More recently, I cotaught a program development course with one of my CoP colleagues. The size of the class sometimes presented opportunities to reflect on and rethink how we facilitate collaborative and participatory learning, which was also documented in the CIQs. In addition to our own reflective dialogue as coteachers, the CoP encouraged us with suggestions and challenged us to relax our agenda and create more time and space for small group discussions. I have also adopted some of these ideas in the Effective Teams and Groups class (such as inclusion of a minilecture on the nature of dialogue and an activity on active listening). I am hopeful that future feedback will give some indication of a greater willingness by students to reflect with their group members about their own group process and how it can be improved, share some of their insights with the entire class, and commit to future application.

Our Transformative Process

As we have shared our CIQ summaries, we have come to a preliminary conclusion that their use is one way we can further encourage and model reflective practice and dialogue in our classes. Even more so, we have raised a number of questions about the meaning and use of the CIQ data, questions that we are currently still processing in the CoP. Some of these questions include:

- In using the data to improve our teaching and programs, what should the focus of our improvement efforts be? How are we experiencing transformation?
- Can we improve the quality of the data we receive from students so that it is more useful?
- Can we connect the data from the CIQ results to the development of particular student competencies (such as dialogue, collaboration, depth and variety of critical reflection methods, analysis and synthesis of ideas or others)?
- Are students seeking transformative learning? What are the signs? Is their discomfort with something other than concrete, immediately valuable experience due to a disorienting dilemma?
- How can we best facilitate transformative learning? How can we meet students where they are, but not leave them there, through a balance of challenge and encouragement?
Can we tell if transformative learning is occurring among students with respect to awareness and openness toward other cultures?

What should our future objectives for the CIQ and the CoP be for our own learning and doing; how do we evaluate whether we are achieving those objectives?

So far, we have a few significant insights: (a) As teachers, we need to continually invite our students to make connections; (b) To encourage deeper, higher quality thought, “less is more”—it takes time and space for reflection, listening, and discovery; (c) We will always need a variety of approaches (individual, small group, writing, role-play, verbal, etc.) and can help each other with ideas; and (d) There are times when we need to help our students (and ourselves) deal with the unanswered questions and delayed understanding that are part of this process and will not be immediately resolved.

Each of us has been personally affected by the experience of our CoP. We have altered our teaching practices, reconsidered course objectives and examined the appropriateness of texts and activities. We know that our engagement with students has grown significantly. We have not tracked any changes in student performance with relation to their final grades for our courses, but we do recognize that classroom interaction and response have increased as we focused more attention on collaborative processes. Formal and informal feedback from students indicates they are assuming a greater sense of responsibility in their learning.

Very importantly, we have developed a deeper sense of trust and openness among ourselves in a faculty partnership. Sharing our challenges, as well as our insights, has given us a space for reflective teaching. Colleagues are interested in our process and are inclined to seek a similar opportunity. We have decided that our next step will be delving more intensely into the process of contemplative dialogue among ourselves and as a teaching methodology. Most of all, as scholar–practitioners, we are committed to bringing to light the discrepancies between our theory and our practice.

Conclusions and Implications
Previous research has documented the significance of reflection on experience as crucial to transformative learning (Snyder, 2008). In this article, we have sought to illuminate some of the processes through which that reflection occurred in several graduate courses and within our CoP. More significantly, our inquiry has highlighted the effect of transformative learning on us, the educators. Participating with colleagues in a structured CoP has heightened our understanding of our strengths and our limitations in the classroom setting. We have risked innovations and put to rest a few trusted practices. We are considerably more observant in the classroom and rely much more readily on student feedback. Our interaction in the CoP has allowed us to discover a pedagogical richness that we can freely offer to one another in mutual accountability.
Reality is the most important element in model development. Our CoP has engaged itself in a challenging effort to isolate and observe the reality of our teaching in the classroom. Therefore, it has been helpful in our experience to look at teaching as a process having a beginning and an end. This condition allowed us to engage in a cognitive approximation of the practice at hand and its corresponding improvement. This is not an easy task. CoP members must genuinely engage in deep reflections and contemplative dialogues in an attempt to make every abstraction a concrete experience in which, through a process of reification and participation, all teaching situations become an object of concrete meaning of the realities of teaching conducive to improvement. It is the experience of this group that unless a well-intended interaction is felt and nurtured by each one of the members, the summum bonum or the highest perceived good of teaching will (might) preclude the improvement efforts.

In addition, dualities related to designed and emergent practices seem to help in informing teaching and learning. Oftentimes, what is planned and what is learned differ. There are enormous conditioning factors impacting teaching and learning. One could plan to teach someone to learn how to play pool and the learner might learn something totally different from the intended teaching due to powerful motivating forces that move human action. Claiming territories, the third duality of identification and negotiability, represent a situation in which teachers decide what is worth learning, the nature and sequence of teaching activities, as well as what is success and failure. In the final duality, local versus global, clearly CoP members might exert strong control over the teaching process and about the nature of learning intended for students, but the learning outcomes and their potential use are left up to the individual learner. We hope that the end results of teaching are fully appreciated by the students in real life.

We hold ourselves to be continuous learners as we engage with our students in the familiar and nonfamiliar territories of course content in a curriculum that portends to address social injustice and work for the common good. Today, as faculty in higher education, we are confronted with the challenge of continuous learning, be it in alternative teaching methodologies or new forms of technology. No matter how experienced we may be, students approach our courses with expectations of involvement and choice. The CoP format offers faculty one model of facilitating continuous professional development and strengthening our commitment to shared learning.

“Where the context of learning is a shared concern, the knowledge produced becomes the living knowledge and shared wisdom of that community, reflective of the relationships forged and relevant not only to each participant, but to the community as a whole” (Shields, 2009, p. 355). Creating a space for living knowledge has become our goal.

Finally, Warring (2006) discusses the use of reflective self-reporting and assessment of the identity development process to determine the impact of college courses on students’ growth for social justice and global awareness. He argues, as Cahill and Adams (1998) have documented, that a person must reach
a certain stage of development to more fully recognize and address various forms of oppression and the need for social change. It is our conscious intention to create an educational atmosphere that fosters this level of personal development in conjunction with intellectual growth. It is our desire that our graduates perceive themselves as leaders in a global society, with a responsibility to make a positive difference in their communities and with the tools to do this effectively. We are now convinced that a significant pathway toward this goal is the reflective engagement on our own practice.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References
International Conference on Transformative Learning (pp. 186-191). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico College of Education.


**Bios**

**M. Sharon Herbers**, an associate professor in the Dreeben School of Education at the University of the Incarnate Word, teaches graduate level courses in adult education. Her research interests include transformative learning, social justice education, and creative approaches in teaching and learning.

**Absael Antelo** is an associate professor at the University of the Incarnate Word teaching graduate level courses in organizational leadership and coordinator of the Higher Education Concentration of the PhD Program in Education. His research interests include followership within an organizational leadership process, intercultural learning, and new approaches for engaging doctoral students in the learning process.

**Dorothy Ettling** is a professor in the Dreeben School of Education at the University of the Incarnate Word. She is also a founder of Women’s Global Connection, an organization that promotes the learning and leadership of women locally and globally. Her research interests focus on women’s empowerment and personal and organizational change processes.

**M. Alison Buck** is a consultant in organizational leadership and learning and an adjunct professor at the University of the Incarnate Word teaching graduate level courses in adult education and organizational leadership. She is a board member of Women’s Global Connection; her research interests include women’s leadership and approaches to facilitate transformative learning.