

Creating A Dialogical Learning Space: Action-Narrative Inquiry as An Alternative Approach to Teacher Education Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a case of creating dialogical learning space at a teacher education institution where I work as an educator. For the past five years, students and I have engaged ourselves in social actions through after-school programs for disadvantaged children and have employed such methods as reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and story-sharing to construct our own learning projects. It was a life-transforming experience for most of us, while we learned to develop trust, dialogue, and collaborative inquiry relationships among ourselves in our daily struggle with institutional and social constraints.

Based on the practical knowledge gained from such actions and reflections, I attempt to identify several key elements, which were essential for our continuous learning and growth to occur and develop. In the face of the oppressive force of control and discipline from the institution and from the social environment, it was critical for us to create and to sustain a space for continuous collaborative actions, reflections and dialogues. In the paper I will share narratives and analytical accounts concerning the process we have been through in the past few years. To gain a quick visual impression on who we are and what we have been doing, please visit our website (http://www.ed.nhcue.edu.tw/~dream_makers/) to see some photos.

Keywords: Action research Dialogue, Teacher Education, Narrative

The decade from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s was termed “the ten years of educational reform.” in Taiwan. One of the main changes was the deregulation of the teacher education system. Instead of a few government-controlled teachers colleges and universities, all universities were allowed to prepare teachers. Besides, the graduates were no longer guaranteed a teaching job at the state school. Consequently, the annual supply of new teacher candidates was doubled by 2000. Continuous decrease in the birth rate further increased the surplus of teacher supply. Institutions of teacher education in Taiwan thus encountered unprecedented challenges in regard to the legitimacy of their traditional mission and function, i.e., preparing future teachers.

Situated in such a crisis, as a teacher educator I also perceived new possibilities in my department at the teachers college to pursue alternative ways of thinking and actions. It was in this context that a group of undergraduate and graduate students collaborated with me to start a journey in 2005 to create a dialogical learning space for ourselves and for the children we attempted to work with in an after-school program. “The Dream-makers” was the name of the group.

We have gone through various stages of growth, having worked in communities and elementary schools. An action-narrative approach was employed to inquire into our practice and to sustain continuous dialogues. The learning space we created may not be conceivable ten years ago at this teachers college, which was historically a highly conservative and controlling, if not authoritarian, institution. In this paper, I

intend to give a reflective account of the developmental process of the Dream-makers' group in an attempt to grasp the significance of this journey.

I. CONTEXT AND ASSUMPTIONS

As mentioned earlier, the Dream-makers' struggle for a learning space took place at a time when the teacher education system in Taiwan was in crisis, which brought about a chance for alternative ideas and experiments. Historically, teacher education in Taiwan has been used as a means of political control since the Japanese colonization in the late 19th century up to Chiang Kai-Shek's regime after WWII. The late 1980s finally witnessed the democratization of the Taiwanese society with the fundamental structure of the education system remaining unaltered despite piece-meal reforms, such as selective deregulations in textbook publishing and expansion in higher education.

The teacher education system was no exception, which also underwent a certain degree of expansion, while continuing to follow a state-controlled, patriarchal, instrumentalist, and, to use Paulo Freire's term, the "banking" model of education in which students were seen as empty containers into which educators must deposit knowledge (Freire, 1990). This mode of pedagogy was tolerable in Taiwan's democratized society primarily due to the inertia of the system and the exchange value it presumably could offer to the student—a teacher's certificate and a teaching position in state schools. But such belief could no longer stand as before when the birth rate from 1982 to 1995 went down by 30 percent and no new teaching positions were available for most graduates from the teacher education programs in the past few years.

The impacts were so great that all teacher education institutions had to engage in some kind of self-transforming process. The National Hsinchu Teachers College, where I have been working since 1993, for instance, was transformed into the National Hsinchu University of Education in 2006, no longer taking teacher preparation as its primary mission. In my own department of education, which formerly prepared elementary school teachers only, my colleagues and students were anxious to find out a possible future direction. Paradoxically, I found that external impacts upon my department also resulted in certain internal cracks that had not existed before for creating alternative a learning space.

Born in 1960 from a Christian family, I was the youngest son of a couple who migrated to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-Shek's troops in the late 1940s. My father was a police chief and my mother an elementary school teacher. My family occupied a privileged but non-mainstream status in the society because we were considered as non-Taiwanese elites. I did feel both marginalized and advantaged when I was a child among my Taiwanese peers. I sensed the discrimination against me as a non-Taiwanese, and yet simultaneously felt superior and guilty as an offspring of the ruling class.

Both my parents were artistic and dedicated Christians who initiated me to the world of spirituality. This may account for my persistent longing for inner freedom and a space of creativity. During my school years, I felt deeply suffocated and repressed by the endless schoolwork and tests aiming at nothing but winning the competition in the high school and the college entrance examinations. When I finally got into the college, I chose to become a philosophy major to maintain the space I needed for pursuing my spiritual liberty. From 1986 to 1993, I studied in the United States and earned a Ph.D. degree in curriculum studies. In my field of study, I encountered hermeneutics, constructivism, critical theory, feminism, post-modernism, and post-colonialism, which became the discursive resource for my later praxis in Taiwan. Such autobiographic account may be relevant to my later commitment to issues related to social justice and human subjectivity.

I tend to be identified with the knowledge that can cross boundaries and connect different groups of people. And this knowledge can be acquired, so I believe, only through reflective participatory actions in concrete situations. It is under such assumptions that I employed an action-narrative inquiry approach to

the Dream-makers' praxis in an attempt to create a dialogical learning space at the teacher education institution¹.

II. A REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

Generally speaking, the forming and development of the Dream-makers' group was a response to the call for a learning space in which both the students and I could breathe and grow at the teacher education institution where we were situated. The formation of the group has undergone several phases, which will be discussed below.

A. *The Newcomer's Crashing into the System*

The group of Dream-makers was formally established in 2005. Yet, its conception had occurred ten years before out of an unsuccessful collaborative action research project. Participants of this project included ten undergraduate students and me. We encountered a great deal of conflicts with the system and within ourselves. At that time I was just an inexperienced worker with poor social connections, not yet equipped with the contextualized knowledge and the very method necessary for struggling within the system. Nevertheless, we took the critical move, which anticipated the birth of Dream-makers ten years after.

In August 1993 when the educational reform movement in Taiwan was reaching its climax, the National Hsinchu Teachers College offered me a teaching position right after I earned the Ph.D. degree from Indiana University in the U.S. It was a great cultural shock when I first step into the campus of the National Hsinchu Teachers College, which the outside reformers considered as one of the most conservative educational institutions to be transformed. Most senior faculty members were alumni of government-sponsored teacher education institutions, sharing the same *habitus* or social dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977). I felt alien to my colleagues, defining myself as a dissident of the system and presupposing "them" to be the ones who were produced by the system and were reproducing it. I chose to put myself in an isolated situation fighting against an invisible, oppressive structure. Over several years, I felt like a lonely bird in the forest.

It was not until a few years later did I come to realize that the difference between my colleagues and me was not only in the attitude towards change, but also in the socio-economic background, of which most of my colleagues was relatively disadvantaged. At that time, reform and change to me were more like pre-determined abstract ideals to be executed rather than the paths I need to work out through reflective actions in concrete situations.

In 1995 I launched my first struggle with the system by organizing 10 undergraduate students in the teacher education program to create an alternative process of learning outside the department's official curriculum, which we considered undemocratic, out-of-date and lifeless. We met every two weeks in an evening to share each other's action plans and journal entries. Our intention was to resist the department's traditional teacher preparation program to find out our own ways of becoming teachers through individualized learning projects.

The group lasted one and a half year, proceeding in a quite unstable and unfocused, if not chaotic, manner. I was an inexperienced group leader, not knowing how to facilitate the group development and to get people to communicate effectively. The group was often stuck in confusion and silence without knowing what to do next. I expected each member to be independent inquirer to pursue his/her own goal of becoming an ideal educator, but the expectation proved to be unrealistic eventually. We did not see the goal fulfilled, and once felt very frustrated. The project came to an end after the department faculty meeting rejected our proposal for an experimental student-teaching course.

¹ I am indebted to Professor Hsia, Lin-Ching and Professor Wong, Kai-Cheng at the Catholic Fu Jen University, from whom I learned through our collaborative social practice about narrative inquiry (White & Epston, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995) and the method of critical reflective action (Agyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985; Schön, 1983).

Nevertheless, the group experience was profoundly rewarding and enlightening especially in the end when we finished our action research group report, in which we collectively reflected upon the whole learning process over again. What was most precious to us was that we tried. Rather than being passively disciplined and institutionalized, we exercised our freedom as individuals to create an open learning space for ourselves. It was an honor for us to engage in a journey to search for our ideal image.

I also became aware of the limitations against which we were struggling. Although we made our own space and set a general goal, we did not have tools at hands and did not develop a supportive social network to sustain the group's efforts. Moreover, there should have been a field of practice where we could try out our ideas and accumulate experiences out of the practice. In a certain sense, the chaotic process of the group development also reflected the state of my life development at that time—it was just the beginning stage of a long journey.

B. Learning to Live within It

My crashing with the system hurt. The pain I experienced compelled me to figure out a way to live within this system. Initially, I tried to separate myself from my colleagues, making connections only with like-minded workers outside the teachers college. Perhaps, at that time, I needed a private space to heal myself. To do this, I literally rent a studio as my office cross the street of the teachers college to make the gesture of separation. During this period of self-imposed exile, I started a personal action research project and tried on various occasions such as in the classrooms, at conferences or workshops, to make my voice heard by all means, and to reflect upon my relationship with the system in the society. Meanwhile, I worked with various groups of teachers and graduate students on topics related to action research and narrative inquiry, which, in turn, helped me become more self-reflective and more sophisticated with those methods than before.

The catastrophic earthquake on September 21st of 1999 was a symbolic turning point. The earthquake made a crack on the wall of the studio and I decided to move back to the campus. The fierce shaking I felt during the earthquake made me realize that we were on the same earth no matter how different we were. My initial view on my colleagues could no longer remain unchanged. They were no longer categorically seen as a bunch of reactionary conservatives, but as individual human beings with unique stories of their own just like me. I wanted to understand each of them with goodwill and to make myself understood as well. I tried to make myself a trusting and supportive colleague to them, and hopefully, vice versa.

C. Development of the Dream-makers' Group

The development of the Dream-makers went through a circuit somewhat like what Donald Schön (1983) called “reflective conversation with situation.” For instance, a problematic situation I perceived called for my response, I acted upon the situation and listened to its “talking back,” and then I reframed the way I defined the situation, coming up with new actions to continue the dialogue with it.

In the early 2000s, when the percentage of unemployment of our graduates started to climb up, a depressing and anxious atmosphere arouse among the faculty members and students in the department. The existing teacher education program we offered to students appeared to be more and more irrelevant and senseless. I could hear the unspoken voice among the students, saying, “Why am I learning this useless stuff from you if there is no teaching job out there for me after graduation?” Planning about transforming the function of the teachers college was under way, and apparently there would be no quick answer. The daily face-to-face contact with my students in the classroom thus became increasingly unbearable to me. I felt I needed to do something to get us out of this morass.

D. The first round (September 2005- January 2006).

My first round of action proceeded with the project of “after-school children's clubs” on Friday afternoons at an elementary school located near an industrial park 40 minutes of driving away from the university. The project was funded by the government to support after-school childcare activities at

elementary schools. Operation of the project was in some sense a continuation of the earlier action research project conducted ten years before. The students and I were equally discontented with the existing teacher education program and we decided to find our own way out.

On the other hand, two conditions were different. First, the goal of the 1995 project was to pursue an ideal image of the state school teacher, while the 2005 version followed a different line of thought, which was market-oriented, aiming at preparing students to work for private educational enterprises in the free market. This way of thinking contained some inner contradiction, which I could not discern until later.

Second, I was much more equipped, experienced and established than before. I was no longer a newcomer, but one of the senior members in my department. My colleagues showed no objections to this project for which I granted the participants four credit hours. I was also relatively familiar with methods of managing the group process and conducting action research. Resources and connections that had not been available ten years before were then at my disposal, for example, the cooperation with the elementary school for the project. The significance of the relevance between the event of the 1995 project and the 2005 one is quite instructive to me as an action researcher. Each round of action is but one maneuver preceding the following one in a long crusade.

The 2005 project came to an end when the semester was over. It was a fruitful learning experience involving 8 graduate students, 11 undergraduate students, and 106 children. We practiced skills related to program planning, community survey, curriculum development, and teaching. However, we did not continue this project, primarily due to the long distance, which made the project too time-consuming, exhausting and costly. More importantly, although we successfully crossed over the wall of the university and put our ideas into practice at the elementary school, it was still a much protected, low-risk environment. I felt we could challenge ourselves further by forming a self-sustaining learning organization to face the competitive market in the society. So I invited the same group of students to conduct a new project for the following semester to formally establish a working group, which the members named the Dream-makers.

E. The second round (February 2006-January 2007).

During the second round of action, the Dream-makers attempted to enter local upper-middle-class communities to run holiday camps on Saturday mornings for children. We had to convince the parents to send their kids to the camps and to pay the fees to finance the project. It was a highly challenging task, especially when we met “the customers” to present our “product.” It was an enlightening experience for us to see educational work as a commodity in the social relation between the producer and the consumer. That was quite different from the ordinary parent and teacher relationship in the state school context.

Were we successful? For the first semester, we did attract dozens of children to the program and attained our objective. Our group work was productive and yet heavily intensive, covering almost every aspect of the enterprise operation. We often had long meetings lasting several hours up to midnight to prepare for the activity of the next day. There was a strong sense of accomplishment among the first generation of Dream-makers.

However, we came to a frustrating period in the following semester. Members of graduate students left the group to prepare for their Master’s thesis. New undergraduate students joined the group to work with initial members of the first generation. The new composition of the Dream-makers’ body generated a very different group dynamics. Boundaries existed between the old and the new members. The project seemed to be regarded as some kind of course assignment rather than a collective journey toward the shared goal. I was not able to resolve the problem. The weekend activities proposed to the community failed to attract enough children and had to be cancelled.

To cope with the crisis, we changed our strategy for working with the community by offering free-of-charge services such as the weekend story-telling theatre and the arrangement of the community’s

Christmas Eve Party. The semester ended with a sense of accomplishment. However, most members who were seniors decided to leave the group to concentrate on something else, such as preparation for job-hunting. Eventually, only one member, Chien, the group leader of Dream-makers, decided to stay. I was faced with the dissolution of the Dream-makers. The learning space that had been opened up with so much effort was about to disappear.

“Shall I continue?” I asked myself. Chien and I would not want to give up. Both of us felt a need for this learning space to exist in the department, or many people like us would feel suffocated in this closed environment. We decided to strive for the rebirth of the Dream-makers. “But how?”—that was the next question to be answered. Evidently, we could no longer continue with the same mode of thinking and action, the situation demanded us to listen to what it had to tell us.

Here was what I grasped from my listening. The learning space could not be sustained with so many turbulences and discontinuities. The way we worked with the community was too exhausting and unpredictable. More importantly, an inner contradiction existed between our end and the means, as shown in the fact that many members did not feel sufficiently nourishing and worthwhile after so much commitment put into the work. A disparity existed between how much we devoted and how much we accomplished. “Why are we doing this after all?” was a question never answered clearly.

The upper-middle-class community did not need us to be there, only if we could offer something valuable to them. But what could we really offer? And why must we offer it to them? What was truly valuable to us anyway? The free-market logic was not commensurable with the inner call for a learning space. The original intention for me to search for such a space did not arise out of a free-market business mind, which was far away from my innermost will. That I took the students to the market to do business as a way of searching for a learning space was a mistake. That was not my specialty, and was not my destiny, either. The last work we did with the community was free service that was already disconnected with the free-market logic. I felt inspired from such an experience, which made me think to do something else we really need to do for people who really need us to do it.

F. The third round (February 2007-present).

When the next semester started, I continued to offer four credit hours of courses to recruit members for the Dream-makers. Chien was my co-worker and played the role as the group leader. There was a fundamental change in the character of the Dream-makers. We returned to the elementary school as our working site, but the location changed. I chose the Hsin-chu elementary school right cross the street as our cooperative partner, only five minutes of walking away from our university. We proposed to offer the elementary school free after-school child-care educational service for children from disadvantaged family.

And this time, our goal became increasingly clear—to develop long-term, in-depth nourishing relationships with adults and children we worked with. The primary concern shifted from the previous one that concentrated on producing marketable educational products to one that focused upon the growth of individuals and human relationships, including ourselves.

Guided by this rationale, during the past few years we persistently engaged ourselves in developing a learning process that was meaningful to both the children and us. The whole group included about 30 children and 12 Dream-makers with slight variation each semester. Meanwhile, we formed several sub-groups, of which each included 10 children and 4 Dream-makers, operating in the form like a family

with brothers and sisters. They called me Uncle Flower as someone oldest and likable in the big family. In order to take care of each individual’s growth, we strived to study each child and each member among us through writing and sharing action research journal entries during our reflective meetings.

Outside the official teacher education curriculum in the department, we held our own internal training workshops during weekends as well as the summer or winter breaks, ones which were organized based on the developmental needs I observed over time or proposed by the members out of their special interests.

Basic annual training sessions included the narrative and action research method, the Satir family therapy and communication model, and the Waldorf pedagogy.

To sustain such learning space required connections of various favorable conditions, which seemed to flow together gradually when we positioned ourselves in the right place and moved in the right direction. The re-orientation of our mission won substantial support from my colleagues as well as from parents and teachers of the elementary school. We received from them various resources and donations. For instance, the department chair agreed to offer the Dream-makers' group an activity room on the top floor of our education building as our base of development. Meanwhile, we acquired an internet space from the department to build our own website. Part of our funding was included in the department projects proposed to the university and the Department of Education. In return, we already became a unique asset to the department as a distinguishing feature. The same was true of our cooperative relationship with the Hsinchu Elementary School from which we received much administrative and moral support.

Of course, the development of the Dream-makers' group was by no means a lineal, smooth-going process. It was like a Morning Glory growing out of the cracks in the cliff, scrambling over the rocks in order to find a space for its survival and development. Each generation of the group always had to meet its unique challenge to survive the crisis. The crisis could take place at various levels and aspects, such as the choice of fundamental goal of the group, forming of shared faith, communication, conflict resolution, division of labor, financing, transition of power, accumulation of knowledge, etc, as would be encountered by all NGOs.

Indeed, there was an image of NGO on my mind along with the development of the Dream-makers' group, which I expected to become an autonomous, self-sustaining organization some day. However, the most challenging task for me was to renew my role every year as the main founder and the advisor in relation to each new generation of Dream-makers. As they were all students, no one was permanent in the group so far, except me. It took much effort to start over a new relationship with inexperienced members, as the old members stepped down due to graduation or personal decision to leave. Emotional fatigue attacked periodically. I have been struggling for, and puzzled by, the image of a farmer, who is able to devote himself to cultivating the crops year after year with vigorous spirit.

III. CONCLUSION

In the reflective narrative I attempted to describe the repressive institutional context in which the students and I strived to create a meaningful learning space for ourselves. We tried to cross over the wall of the teachers college and to create a path toward the self-image we wanted to search for. The journey was a dialogue between our beings and the situation, constantly re-shaping who we were and recreating the following situation.

The whole journey was transformative to me and to the members of the group. Although our efforts may not change the situation of teachers' surplus, and the problem of unemployment may get increasingly severe in the next few years, we made a choice to learn to be reflective workers and life-long learners—even though our members may not be schoolteachers in the future.

The struggle still goes on. The learning space would not be available without determined actions to create and to sustain it—like the growth of the Morning Glory on the cliff.

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