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TEACHER EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring intersubjectivity between student teachers and field instructors in student teaching conferences

Elizabeth Gayle Soslau^{1*}

Abstract: Student teachers are learners of teaching and emerging collaborative practitioners preparing to join school-based professional learning communities. Using situative learning theory, this 16-week multiple-case study explored whether necessary conditions were satisfied within field instructor-led conferences towards the goal of helping student teachers learn how to develop roles as participatory contributors. Systematically shared meanings of conference discourse and similar perceptions of control regarding topic selection were explored as indicators of successful conferencing. Findings show that even though field instructors aimed to engage student teachers in mutually understood conversations and share control of topic selection; these objectives were not fully achieved. Conference participants' perceptions of discourse and control must be aligned if field instructors are to help student teachers improve instructional decision-making and develop contributor roles as members within communities of practice.

Subjects: Primary Education - Teacher Education & Training; Teacher Education & Training; Teachers & Teacher Education

Keywords: teacher education; student teaching; conferences; intersubjectivity

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Gayle Soslau is an assistant professor in the School of Education. Her research focuses on teacher education and more specifically on the student teaching practicum. She explores questions such as: How do student teachers' social-emotional needs interrupt their ability to process their learning experiences? What opportunities do student teachers have to develop adaptive teaching expertise during field experiences and supervisor-led conferences? In what ways, can teacher educators promote student teachers' agency? She has published her work in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Action in Education*, and, *Education*. This current manuscript contributes to her scholarship regarding what and how student teachers learning during field experiences. Her clinical work includes coordinating the student teaching practicum and teaching graduate and undergraduate courses in teacher education diversity. Before pursuing her PhD, Elizabeth taught middle school in the Philadelphia School District.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The general public is continually seeking to learn how to improve the education system. This work responds to the concern about the preparation of teachers. Novice teachers or student teachers are learners of teaching and emerging collaborative practitioners preparing to join school-based professional learning communities. This explored whether necessary conditions were satisfied within field instructor-led conferences towards the goal of helping student teachers learn how to teach. Findings show that even though field instructors aimed to engage student teachers in conferences aimed at supporting teacher development, these aims were not always achieved. This paper signals the need to reform some aspects of teacher preparation.

1. Problem and objective

There are a numerous capabilities that define teacher excellence, and the ability to work within a community of practice is an essential one (Brown & Campione, 1990; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Matusov, 2001). Teachers are expected to transform their participation in professional communities of practice, so that they are able to jointly “pose problems, identify discrepancies between theories and practices, challenge common routines, and attempt to make visible much of that which is taken for granted about teaching and learning” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 293). The student-teaching practicum, and more specifically the post-lesson observation conference, is a context for helping student teachers learn how to engage in these types of activities towards the goal of transforming their participation and becoming contributors to professional communities of practice. The post-lesson observation conference is the lesson debriefing conversation that is generally directed by the field supervisor with the goal of improving the student teacher’s practice by reflecting on a previously taught lesson.

Intersubjectivity, or shared understanding of the learning activity, is a necessary condition of effective collaborative communication and must be established as a starting point for transformations (Anshel, 1992; Deetz, 1979). Intersubjectivity, as a starting point, can be understanding without agreement (Matusov, 1996), but a *shared understanding* about what is being discussed is critical if field instructors are expected to help student teachers learn from their teaching experiences, develop the necessary skills to negotiate and contribute to professional discourse (Smith, 2005), and prepare for engagement in future communities of practice. Intersubjectivity can be defined as the shared understanding about the topic being discussed between two speakers. In the context of post lesson observation conferences, the lesson debriefing conversations held between field supervisors and student teachers, intersubjectivity includes the coordination of improvement goals based on a common understanding of what actually transpired during the lesson. However, little empirical data provide support that student teachers and field instructors actually build adequate intersubjectivity during the activity of conferencing, which would support student teachers’ active participation (Collinson, 1999). Moreover, intersubjectivity is a mere starting point. That is, even if intersubjectivity is strong, control between the conference participants is not necessarily distributed in ways that help student teachers position themselves to take ownership of their own learning, or prepare them to be contributors to future communities of practice (Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). Topic selection and suggestions for improvement were used as indicators of control. The amount of talk time was also hypothesized as a marker for control of the conference.

This study explored both the strength of student teachers’ and field instructors’ intersubjectivity and participants’ sense of control. Intersubjectivity and control were explored by investigating the student teachers’ and field instructors’ independently reported interpretations of their post-lesson observation conferences and perceptions of who controlled the activity of conferencing. The following questions were addressed:

- (1) How frequently do conference participants report similar or dissimilar interpretations of discourse and does the frequency change overtime?
- (2) What is the difference between student teachers’ and field instructors’ perceptions regarding topic selection during conferencing?
- (3) Does *sharing the floor*, or equally distributed talk time, influence perceptions of who controlled the conference?
- (4) What do conference participants say about the importance of, and attempts to, share control and develop matched interpretations of conferences?

2. Theoretic perspectives and contributing literature

Proponents of the sociocultural perspective define learning as “the strengthening of practices and participatory abilities” within a community of learners (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996, p. 23), or as

the transformation of participation (Rogoff, 2003). In the supervisory conference, which houses a community of learners, is a context for learning where both intersubjectivity (Matusov, 1996) and sharing control can support participants' contributions.

Dewey (1938) described the role of the teacher as someone who must "have that *sympathetic* understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning" (emphasis added, p. 39). University field instructors must go beyond epitomizing the teacher that Dewey described because a *sympathetic* understanding is not enough. Rather, field instructors must recognize their position of power and deliberately work to distribute the power to the student teacher by building intersubjectivity and sharing control. Other researchers concur and argue that student teachers are subjected to constant renegotiations of power and control (Valencia et al., 2009). The potential for this mind-knowing process, coordination of conferencing goals, and sharing of control of topic selection, seems to be greatest during the field instructor-led conference, held between the student teacher and field instructor, because the cooperating teachers' direct presence is not influencing the learning context. The contextual removal of the cooperating teacher in a post-observation conference is critical because researchers have shown that student teachers will acquiesce to cooperating teachers' control, since maintaining a daily workable relationship is paramount (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Chaliès, Ria, Bertone, Trohel, & Durand, 2004).

3. Participants and context

There were three dyads consisting of one university-based field instructor and one full-time student teacher. All field instructors held master-level degrees in education and had more than 10 years of classroom teaching experience. The student teachers were all white females ranging in ages from 20 to 22 years old. Each student teacher completed two eight-week placements, one in an elementary school and one in a special education classroom or a middle school classroom. All students in the teacher preparation program earn dual certification and must complete two placements to be eligible for both credentials. All data were collected at the school practicum sites.

4. Mode of inquiry and data sources

According to Cole (1996), moving "beyond the study of individuals alone to consider how learning occurs within enduring social groups ... and communities" one can study "notions of cultural practice and activity as fundamental units of analysis" (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 15). Over the course of a semester-long student teaching experience, I used a multiple-case study design to investigate intersubjectivity between three dyads of university-appointed field instructors and their student teachers. For each dyad, I observed four conferences and conducted post-conference interviews with each participant, resulting in 24 interviews (see Table 1).

The interview protocol include five questions designed to prompt participants' reports of their interpretations of the discourse and determine perceptions of control over the activity of conferencing (see Figure 1 for protocol). Audio-captured interview responses were transcribed verbatim and aligned in a two-columned chart; similarities and differences between student teachers' and field instructors' responses were noted. Amount of utterances was calculated by counting the lines of transcribed dialog spoken by each participant. Intersubjectivity, perceptions of control, and amount of utterances were graphically represented to facilitate analysis of how intersubjectivity might change overtime and manifest differently for each dyad.

Finally, I administered a retrospective survey to capture participants' perceptions about the importance of developing a shared understanding of conference discourse and the importance of helping student teachers gain voice and agency (control) during conferences. This survey was distributed three weeks after the conclusion of the student teaching experience. Data were aggregated based on question type and general findings are posited based on representative responses.

Table 1. Data collection and participants

Dyad number 1		Dyad number 2		Dyad number 3	
Dolly (Supervisor)	Abby (Student teacher)	Alice (Supervisor)	Eva (Student teacher)	Sandra (Supervisor)	Chrissy (Student teacher)
16 September, Week 3 1-observation, 2-interviews		9 September, Week 3 1-observation, 2-interviews		10 September, Week 3 1-observation, 2-interviews	
7 October, Week 6 1-observation, 2-interviews		30 September, Week 6 1-observation, 2-interviews		1 October, Week 6 1-observation, 2-interviews	
12 November, Week 11 1-observation, 2-interviews		4 November, Week 11 1-observation, 2-interviews		5 November, Week 11 1-observation, 2-interviews	
3 December, Week 14 1-observation, 2-interviews		3 December, Week 14 1-observation, 2-interviews		2 December, Week 14 1-observation, 2-interviews	
Total dyad number 1 4-observations, 8-interviews		Total dyad number 2 4-observations, 8-interviews		Total dyad number 3 4-observations, 8-interviews	

Figure 1. Interview protocol.

1. What was the main focus of the conference? [probe for descriptive comments]
2. What do you think the student teacher should work on for next week? Or, What do you think your field instructor wants you to work on for next week? [probe for desirable changes]
3. If you had to select a domain (from the university-sanctioned formative observation feedback form) that most of the conversation was related to, which domain would it be?
4. What is one big-take away message that you think the student teacher will think about when she goes home? Or, what is the big take-away message that you'll think about later tonight?
5. Who do you think controlled the conference including the topic selection and flow?
 - a. How do you know?
 - b. If you had to assign a percentage to describe who controlled the conference with 50%/50% indicating that the control was equally shared, what percent would you assign to each person's control?

5. Findings

5.1. RQ number 1 How frequently do conference participants report similar or dissimilar interpretations of discourse and does the frequency change overtime?

Similar to findings from discourse analysis research aimed at investigating teacher collaboration (Hui & Russell, 2007; Ramirez, 2007), intersubjectivity varied across the dyads. Participants reported contrasting understandings about the main topics of discussion, desirable changes to teaching practices, and who controlled the topic selection during the conferences. Comparatively stronger levels of intersubjectivity were apparent during the final conferencing period. Figure 2 shows the amount of questions that each participant pair answered similarly for each paired interview session over four data collection points.

During the middle of the practicum experience, two of the three dyads developed deeply contrasting understandings about the topics discussed during conferences. This finding is important for obvious reasons. How are conference participants supposed to discuss and co-plan for instructional improvements if they do not share the same understanding about the content of their conversations?

Figure 2. Number of similar responses reported out of five interview questions.

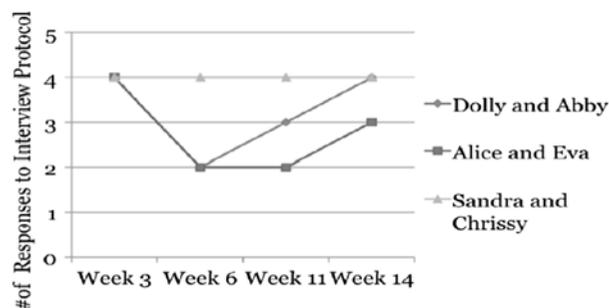


Table 2. Reported percentage control of the conference topic selection and flow

	Dyad number 1		Dyad number 2		Dyad number 3	
	Field instructor: Dolly		Field instructor: Alice		Field instructor: Sandra	
	Student teacher: Abby		Student teacher: Eva		Student teacher: Chrissy	
	FI's report	ST's report	FI's report	ST's report	FI's report	ST's report
First conference	50/50 Split		50/50 Split		50/50 Split	
Second conference	70/30 ST	75/25 FI	50/50 Split		70/30 FI	60/40 ST
Third conference	50/50 Split		50/50 Split	65/35 FI	60/40 FI	65/35 ST
Fourth conference	65/45 ST	70/30 FI	50/50 Split	70/30 FI	80/20 FI	50/50 ST

Additionally, a shared sense of goals for improvement seems to be a prerequisite for teacher learning if that learning is based on developing understandings during post lesson observation conferences. This finding suggests that these conferences were not adequately functioning as a context for teacher learning.

5.2. RQ number 2 What is the difference between student teachers' and field instructors' perceptions regarding topic selection during conferencing?

With the exception of the first conference, participants' rarely held similar perceptions of who controlled the conference. Table 2 provides an overview of the participants' perceived control.

Though field instructors from dyads number 1 and number 2 reported that the student teacher dominated or shared control of the conference, student teachers reported that field instructors held control. This is an important finding because student teachers likely did not develop a sense that they were contributing agents in their own learning or in the communal practice. Agency development is an essential component of teacher learning and is a prerequisite for interacting in communities of practices (Liston & Zeichner, 1991). How will student teachers learn to position themselves as active participants and contributors in future communities of practice, if they do not perceive themselves as having control in conversations aimed at helping them engage in their own learning process?

5.3. RQ number 3 Does "sharing the floor," or equally distributed talk time, influence perceptions of who controlled the conference?

The differences between line counts are provided in Figure 3. If utterances were distributed equally, the difference would be close to zero. Conversely, if one participant's utterances dominated the conference, the difference would be much greater. Data in Figure 3 show that amount of discourse became more equally distributed overtime.

Figure 3. Difference of lines of talk between field instructors and student teachers.

Note: The Y-axis (ordinate) is the difference in the number of typed lines of talk.

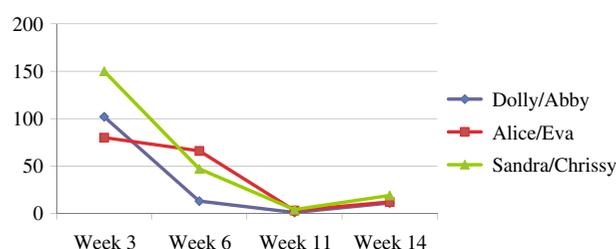


Table 3. Participant who had more lines of dialog

	Conference number 1	Conference number 2	Conference number 3	Conference number 4
Dyad 1	Supervisor	Supervisor	Shared	Student teacher
Dyad 2	Supervisor	Supervisor	Shared	Student teacher
Dyad 3	Supervisor	Supervisor	Shared	Supervisor

All dyads had line counts within five lines of each other for the third conference and two student teachers had more line counts in their last conference (see Table 3).

Even though amount of utterances was almost equal during the third and fourth conferences, participants reported that control was unequally shared (e.g. 70/30 and 80/20%). This shows that factors other than “sharing the floor” influence perceptions of control.

5.4. RQ number 4 What do conference participants say about the importance of, and attempts to, share control and develop matched interpretations of conferences?

The participants’ collective responses to a retrospective survey showed that they valued mutual holistic understandings of conference discourse as well as shared interpretations of which participant controlled the topic selection and flow of conversation during the conference. All participants wanted to ensure that similar interpretations of discourse were developed, and field instructors wanted student teachers to feel in control and a sense of autonomy when selecting topics to discuss during the post lesson observation conferences. However, these objectives were not always met.

5.5. Why is building shared understandings and sharing control so difficult?

Sandra (all names are pseudonyms), one of the field instructors, explained, “I’ve learned from past experience. If I tell the student teacher what I think first, they tend to just agree and then they have nothing to add or to say.” Sandra tried to provide this explicit participatory practice by having the student teacher start the conference and negotiate her own self-assessment. Similarly, Alice encouraged her student teacher, Eva, to orally reflect on her teaching before providing feedback. However, data show that while Sandra’s student teacher reported that she felt in control of her participation, Alice’s student teacher did not. Since “transformation of participation involves constant renegotiation of responsibility for the activity” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 11), the act of the student teacher speaking first may not necessarily promote a feeling of empowerment, nor will asking the student to rate themselves according to a predetermined set of standards.

Additionally, all of the student teachers reported the need to follow the instructional norms set in place by their cooperating teacher. As Dolly explained, practicum classrooms do not function with the sole purpose of educating student teachers, rather student teachers are “guests in the classroom” and ultimately “the cooperating teacher is responsible” for the pupils’ academic success. This underscores the importance of student teachers learning to negotiate discourse. Since transformations of participation include, “redefining membership in a community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 11), student teachers need to learn how to negotiate acceptable experimental practices with their cooperating teachers. The field instructor-led conference could provide the training ground for this negotiation process.

5.6. Significance

Shulman and Shulman (2004) posit that without systematically monitoring their own participation within a community, student teachers would “lack the capacity for learning from experience” (p. 264) and would therefore become stymied in their pursuit of learning from their own teaching. Data analysis show that the activity of conferencing does not fully support student teachers’ development as active participants, which inevitably hinders their transformations of participation in current and future communities of practice. If student teachers are to become agents of change in

schooling systems (Liston & Zeichner, 1991), field instructors have to systematically help student teachers develop the perception that they are necessary contributors to communities of practice (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Additionally, if the goal of the conference is to help student teachers reflect on and make changes to their instructional decisions (Chaliès et al., 2004; Glickman & Bey, 1990), it is essential that field instructors and student teachers share similar perceptions about the content of their discussions. The post-lesson observation conference should serve at least two goals: (1) guiding teacher learning through reflection and self-assessment and (2) building of communal participation skills. This study highlights that these two desired outcomes of engagement in post-lesson observation conferences, are not readily recognized or easily achieved.

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