Becoming a Youth Worker in a Classroom Community of Practice

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Abstract: Traditional university classrooms are more conducive to learning about youth work than they are learning how to become a youth worker. In this paper, I explore how a university classroom can function as a community of practice (CoP) in which actionable youth worker expertise is transmitted. Through narrative analysis of two youth worker dilemma stories, I show how a classroom-based CoP facilitates the development of three youth work 'abilities.' These abilities include: how to frame complex and ambiguous youth work problems; how to bring personal knowledge into practice; and how to reflect-on and -in practice.

The fundamental aim of youth work is to build trusting and mutually respectful relationships with young people. Youth workers create safe environments for young people to connect with supportive adults and peers and guide those harmed by oppressive community conditions through a process of healing. Youth workers help young people to develop knowledge and skills in a variety of areas including: academic, athletic, leadership/civic, the arts, health and wellbeing, and career exploration. In short, youth workers create transformative experiences for young people in formal and informal spaces outside of homes and schools.

Efforts to professionalize youth work in the United States largely have focused on establishing youth worker competencies (Akiva, 2005; Vance, 2010). Starr, Yohalem and Gannett (2009) define competencies as basic knowledge, skills, or attitudes in a specific domain. Advocates for competencies argue that they allow for clear standards of practice, consistent job requirements, reliable evaluation procedures, and identifiable career pathways (Vance, 2010). Yet, others question whether the acquisition of competencies ensures expertise. Walker and Gran (2010) argue that competency models set benchmarks, but do not guide novices to advanced status. More problematic is that a competency focus tends "to reduce practice to the most measurable, reducing youth work to a technical skill," (Ibid, p. 2). An unintended implication is that youth workers could demonstrate competence in child and youth development on a test, but be unable to handle a child-related challenge at work.

An *expertise* frame, on the other hand, focuses on the successful application of knowledge and experience in context. In the face of dilemmas, expert youth workers "orchestrate multiple competencies into a full range of behaviors necessary for effective practice." (Walker & Gran, 2010, p. 3). The reference to 'orchestrate' implies that expertise involves a complex process of combining and blending different types of knowledge and skills in context specific ways. This dynamic process allows youth workers to read and understand people and situations in order to resolve the everyday and extraordinary dilemmas of practice.

Three 'abilities' that facilitate the development of youth work expertise are (1) how to frame complex and ambiguous youth work problems (Larson & Walker, 2010); (2) how to bring personal knowledge into practice or 'self-in-action' (Krueger, 1997); and (3) how to reflect-on and -in practice (Emslie, 2009; Schön, 1987). A competency approach to youth worker professional education is not conducive to learning these abilities. I argue that novice and experienced youth workers can develop and/or deepen these abilities through classroom-based communities of practice (CoP) if the CoP is informed by specific design principles.

Cultivating Youth Work Expertise in a Classroom Community of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is not the acquisition of knowledge by individuals so much as a process of social participation and a movement from periphery to center in a community of practice. This process involves identity development in which one learns the language, actions, and practices that constitute the community. While it may seem contradictory for a classroom to be a community of practice, I have been working with three design principles that allow novices to learn from the situated knowledge of experienced youth workers and for experienced youth workers' learning to deepen through reflection (Ross, 2012).

First, having experienced youth workers from the local community learning alongside traditional college students is a core feature of this classroom-based youth work community of practice. The youth workers tend to be more diverse racially, span a much wider age range, and are more balanced in terms of gender than the college students. The youth workers have many years of work experience, but tend not to have formal training or degrees in youth work; in fact many do not have college education.

Second, holding the course in 'practice-space' (i.e. at a community-based youth development organization) creates a teaching and learning environment that is more comfortable for the youth workers than the college students. The students have to leave their campus bubble to get to class. While unfamiliar to most of the students, the youth workers know the space, having worked, run programs, and/or attended events there. The class location privileges youth workers' knowledge and de-centers expertise away from me as the professor.

Third, the class focuses on the practice of youth work. I focus on practice by organizing the course around case studies of youth work dilemmas. The dilemmas come from two sources: 1) interviews I conduct

with experienced youth workers and 2) from the students' required dilemma journals. In addition to describing the dilemma the youth worker faces, the case studies provide some biographical information. Each case study is accompanied by one or two scholarly readings and a set of questions to guide class discussion and written responses. In the dilemma journals, students are asked to provide a deep description of a challenge they are facing, to include the outcomes of their actions, and to reflect on how they handled the dilemmas. Students share journal entries in class to hear how others would handle the problem as well as to provide an opportunity to analyze the causes and structure of the problems. Students who are not youth workers are required to 'apprentice' with experienced youth workers so that they will have a source of dilemmas to draw on. I call them apprenticeships so that students realize they are meant to learn from the youth workers and not 'help' the youth.

To facilitate students' ability to contextualize and analyze the dilemmas, I introduce several conceptual frameworks (e.g. ecology of human development; Positive Youth Development; and Social Justice Youth Development). The class-based dialogues and written reactions to dilemmas cultivate youth workers' ability to reflect-on-action and ultimately encourage them to reflect-in-action. I obtained IRB approval and student consent to audio-record classroom conversations and use the dilemma journals for research purposes.

These three design principles create an environment in which novice and experienced youth workers learn what it means to 'be' a youth worker and not just learn about youth work. I demonstrate the teaching and learning that occurs in this classroom-based community of practice by presenting excerpts from two youth worker dilemma narratives; both youth workers were also students in the class. Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research in which people's stories are the unit of analysis (Bleakley, 2005; Bruner, 1991). Names of people and gangs have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

The first is Ricardo's story about an incident involving a young person who brought a gun into his youth program (Ross, 2013). Student reactions to his story demonstrate how a dilemma focus allows novice youth workers to learn how to frame ambiguous and complex dilemmas. The second is Jessica's story about managing the aftermath of a gang-related shooting that involved members of her organization. In this story I show how guided questions allow an experienced youth worker to develop a more reflective stance toward youth work. Ricardo's and Jessica's dilemmas are written from their point of view, mostly in their own words.

Case One: Framing Complex and Ambiguous Youth Work Dilemmas

Ricardo is thirty-one and has been in the youth work field since he was 16. He works at a drop-in youth center. He is a physically large man but soft spoken and approachable. When he was fourteen, Ricardo started going to the YMCA to play basketball. His neighborhood was tough and his mom had to work a lot of hours to keep the family going. He said going to the Y, "Gave me a mental break from having to watch out for where we were walking, and what kids we would run into." Even though he had the Y, he admitted he still did some, "stupid stuff" like stealing cars and going joy-riding. Many of his close friends carried guns, "sometimes it was like the Fourth of July, kids would just let off shots." He saw his friends graduating from selling weed to cocaine. They would invite him along asking him if he wanted to make some money. But by that time he had already started working with youth. He wondered, "Why would I do something that isn't going to show me love back? Especially when these little kids are looking up to me?" A lot of his friends thought he was a "cornball" for choosing work and school over them. Ricardo, however, completed college with a degree in human services.

Ricardo's Dilemma

Not long ago I dealt with something that I have never had to deal with. The day started normally, but soon Nicki, the GED teacher approached me, looking worried. She told me that Lisa, one of her students, came into her office during a break, wanting to go home. When asked why, Lisa broke down and told her that while she (Nicki) had stepped out to answer a phone call, two students started talking about a recent fight. Anthony, one of the students, said that he didn't feel safe in the streets and had to do something about it. Lisa pretended to not look, but out of the corner of her eye she saw that Anthony had a gun tucked under his shirt.

I quickly realized we didn't have a protocol for this. I informed the Executive Director and we talked about calling the police. But then we thought about Anthony. I knew he wouldn't be a kid that would be pulling out a gun to shoot me. He's tough; he's gone through stuff. But I've been around some pretty crazy people, and he didn't come off that way. He had been coming to GED, he had a kid on the way. He was trying to do the right thing. I thought he is probably scared. I thought it was probably not even a real gun and if it was real, I thought it might not be loaded. I thought that he's probably trying to prevent people from beating him up-versus the 'I want to go hurt somebody'. And I thought about him bringing it here was more about him getting here safely, versus him thinking 'I'm looking for somebody to shoot'. I didn't think that Anthony would hurt somebody here. He loves this place. If it was a kid I didn't know, then I might have thought differently.

We decided to pull Anthony into another room to talk rather than call the police. I was quiet at first, but soon I found myself telling Anthony, "some students have left, we think maybe because they saw a gun on you. Is this true?" Anthony admitted it. He said it was a BB gun. I said, "I'll believe it when I see it." Anthony handed it to me. I have to say, it did look like a gun. Anthony had taken the safety off, the orange part that

makes it noticeable that it was not real. When I held it, I knew by the weight that it wasn't real. While I started to breathe easier, I knew because he took the safety off that it would have been considered a concealed weapon.

We talked to Anthony about how dangerous it is to carry a gun and the implications of him carrying a concealed weapon given his criminal background. During this conversation, Anthony admitted that he was having trouble with youth in his neighborhood. We wrapped up by saying that we would give the BB-gun back and we would not alert police but next time our hands would be tied and we would be forced to call. We called his mother to confirm his story; we also connected him with the onsite mental health counselor at the center.

Thinking back on this incident, I know it's better to find out what's going on than it is to jump to conclusions. If we had called the cops we could have easily solved the problem or we could have exacerbated the issue. If the gun was real someone could have been hurt upon police arrival. Since the gun wasn't real we could have sent a youth to prison for an issue we could have resolved internally. We could have sent him on his way with the BB gun, but, if somebody was going to beat him up and he pulled that out and they had a real gun, then what? The question is, are you putting yourself and others in serious danger? The relationships you have with your youth determine the kind of actions you will take when they make a mistake. I am thankful that the humanitarian in us allowed us to make the right decision.

Student Learning in the Community of Practice

The class spent a long time discussing this case, eventually coming to the conclusion that Ricardo and the other staff did the correct thing by not calling the police. Students then wrote responses to a series of questions. Aside from being in awe of how Ricardo was able to stay calm, two themes emerged from an analysis of the students' responses. The first is that many students began to have a deeper understanding of the importance of 'personal' knowledge in youth work. These excerpts from students' case study write-ups exemplify this theme:

> Ricardo grew up involved in youth organizations that helped people who were struggling. Because of this, I believe he is much more understanding of youth like Anthony who appear to be "bad" or a lost cause. Rather than jump to assumptions and take legal action, he knew he could connect on a different level with Anthony and find out what was really going on.

Another student wrote:

> I don't know that I would have been able to make the same kind of choices that Ricardo made. I don't bring the same kind of background knowledge to youth work, and would not be able to distinguish between a BB gun and a real gun, or be able to "read" a youth the way Ricardo did and determine he was not trigger-happy. I would probably just have called the police. My priority would have been to keep everyone safe.

Some of the students began to recognize gaps in their knowledge and realized that they would need to be able to execute a different type of strategy if they were to encounter a similar situation.

The second theme relates to the intangible skill of how to appraise and respond to complex problems of practice. Again, drawing on evidence from the students' case study write ups: "Ricardo took into account all the factors affecting the situation, utilized his knowledge and networks, and came up with an appropriate solution." Another student wrote, "Ricardo guided Anthony through the thought processes that youth should be having on their own before making a choice (e.g. the potential consequences of getting caught carrying a concealed weapon, etc.) so that they can see how to arrive at a good decision on their own."

Ricardo's narrative shows how dilemma stories make youth workers' thought process and problem analysis visible to novice and experienced youth workers. Ricardo's participation in the class facilitated the students' learning in that they were able to dialogue directly with him and hear the reactions and questions of youth workers and other students in the class. Their learning was reinforced by being able to read the case and respond to questions in writing. While students read case studies and provide written responses in a typical university course, the fact that Ricardo was a student along with other experienced youth workers allowed for a more authentic form of dialogue in which novices could begin to develop the language and thought process needed to handle pressing dilemmas.

Case Two: Reflection On- and In-Practice Deepens Youth Work Expertise

In this section, I present a dilemma Jessica shared with the class. Jessica, a Latina youth worker in her mid-twenties started doing youth work as a peer leader in her mid-teens. The arc of her thinking about an incident involving a gang-related shooting demonstrates how reflection-on-practice can deepen youth work expertise. In this case, it is not so much that upon reflection she came to a new conclusion. Rather, Jessica began to consider the benefits of intentionally bringing more of herself into her practice.

Jessica's Dilemma

In the summer of 2010, the city experienced an increase in youth violence that affected our organization deeply. Members of the different sites were at war with each other, because their geographic locations in the city predestined them as lifelong enemies. One night two members were involved in a shooting; here is their story.

Ariel, sixteen-years old, had been a Club member for about two years. He really only came to play basketball. Ariel had been one of the trouble makers in the Club, talking back to staff and refusing to follow the rules. The staff had reached out to his parents and quickly realized that they would be of no help since they were gangbanging drug dealers with few positive aspirations. Samuel, a seventeen-year old attended another one of our sites. A member since age twelve, his participation in recent years had diminished as he got more interested in the street life than what the Club had to offer. His grades dropped and his drive for sports had fallen.

Fast forward to the past summer. Ariel, who claims to be a UGE gangster, was on his way home on the city bus when he noticed Samuel, a rival Y-Block gangster. They got off at the same bus stop and after a verbal altercation Samuel pulled out a gun and shot Ariel. Fortunately, the bullet hit his lower leg and he survived.

After Ariel recovered and committed to making changes in his life, he was allowed back into the Club. For a few weeks he did his homework and participated regularly. Unfortunately this was short lived. Ariel was imbedded into the negative lifestyle and his family supported his criminal behavior. Samuel was moved into a relative's home outside of the city. The staff believed that this was the best move for this young person. As for the Club, we took a multistep approach to address this incident. I spoke with the OGs (Original Gangsters), the schools, and other youth. I spoke to the entire Police Gang Unit to discuss the possibility of further retaliation that could happen near or at our organization. I arranged to have a police officer that had been working closely with the Club to have informal discussions with the staff and the youth about tensions between the rival gangs.

Now that this incident is over and we did what we could, I still wonder why what we do in the Club doesn't provide the youth with a bubble of protection outside our walls? So many times when I hear about a particular youth that we have worked with who gets into serious trouble, I shake my head and think, "they are just not those people when they are with us."

From Describing Events to Reflecting on Dilemmas in a Community of Practice

Jessica's dilemma is powerful. Yet, hearing this story left the class with a lot of questions. We wondered how she knew Ariel's family was involved in the thug life, assuming they didn't come out and tell her. We wondered how she was able to ask Original Gangsters about the likelihood of more retaliation. We pushed her to say more about her final statement, "they are just not those people when they are with us." These questions led Jessica to do more thinking and writing that she later shared with the class orally and in a written case study. She wrote about herself, her family, and her insights into these young men's lives. Below is an excerpt of that writing.

Jessica's Personal Reflection

My mom's from a big family and some of my relatives are into the thug life. My house was raided when I was five years old. My father was in jail for drug related charges for most of my early childhood. I'm sure those things come into how I think about the police and violence; I understand where the youth are coming from. My mom realized that she wanted a different life for her kids. She broke away. So, the family dynamics are interesting; those who are heavily involved and those who are not do not spend much time together. There might be a summer BBQ, but when we see each other we don't talk about what we are doing. That's how we can all be together. But I learned early on how to tell when someone is doing something they shouldn't. It's not something that I was told or taught as much as it is something I picked up.

They're Just Not Those People When They're With Us…

Samuel is a perfect example. He is a Hispanic male living in a poor neighborhood; I understand that he needs to defend himself. But, to be the kid who I found out he was after the shooting? No. I just couldn't believe it. All summer when he worked in our camp he spoke professionally and was well mannered. But the cops knew him and they didn't want anything to do with him. We vouched for him and convinced them Samuel had changed. And to his credit, Samuel presented himself that way, so the police gave him the chance. And it worked; he made it through the summer. But then, about a month and a half later, he's shooting a kid.

When expectations are set for young people, that's what they follow. If they are expected to be bad, then they're going to be bad. Here at the Club, we get to know the youth and what they like to do. There is a sense of comfort and safety here and we become like another family. But when something like this happens, I always have to ask myself, why doesn't we do stay with them when they leave our building? I know the answer. They go back into the real world and everyone is expecting them to be this other person, so they just fall into it. Although a lot of the staff have worked here a number of years, we are not their family. Their family will be with them forever. At some point, there is a line drawn between us and them.

Again, we can look at Samuel about how this plays out. His father has been in and out of prison. He is gang involved. So yes, Samuel can be a great kid here with us, but when he goes back home, there's certain

expectations that his family has of him. I think that given the opportunity Samuel would want a different life. But how does he explain that to his father without tarnishing their relationship? Ariel's situation was similar. There weren't many rules set for him and there were rumors that his father had given him a gun to protect himself. You have to look at the whole picture. I don't know at what point we become strong enough, as a youth development movement to break that kind of cycle for our participants.

Like Ricardo's story, Jessica's narrative provides novice youth workers access to her thinking process. Jessica's story also shows how experienced youth workers can benefit from participating in a classroom community of practice. Jessica handled her dilemma competently and compassionately. Yet, when she initially shared her dilemma in class, she was more descriptive than reflective. She told the class what she did and a little about why she did it, but we didn't understand her deeper motivations nor how she knew what to do in the situation. It appeared that she had not interrogated those aspects of her practice before. The students posed a series of questions to her that had her reflect more deeply on the dilemma and her own background. While she was still left with the question about how to have more significant impact with gang-involved young men, her opportunity to reflect more deeply with novice and experienced youth workers in the class prepared her to act more intentionally the next time she worked with this population.

Becoming a Youth Worker in a Classroom-Based Community of Practice

The three abilities I focus on in this paper—how to construct complex and ambiguous youth work problems in a way that they become actionable; how to integrate personal knowledge into practice; and how to reflect in- and on-practice—are three of many complex and somewhat intangible aspects of youth worker expertise. By working together on everyday and extraordinary youth work dilemmas in a classroom-based community of practice these aspects of youth work expertise were communicated. As the experienced youth workers responded to dilemmas, their thought processes became more transparent and tricks of the trade were revealed. The college students were relatively quiet through many of these discussions, feeling a combination of awe, intimidation, and inexperience. Their early participation was indeed 'peripheral.' Yet, as the college students developed relationships with the youth workers and worked through their own dilemmas, they began to develop language and abilities associated with effective youth work practice.

Students were able to acquire these abilities due to the design of our classroom-based community of practice. Having students and youth workers enrolled in the class, holding the class in "practice space" rather than on campus, and focusing teaching and learning on everyday and extraordinary youth work dilemmas helped students become youth workers who understand how to think about and respond to violence-related youth issues and not just about the topic of youth violence. More generally, their stories show how both novices and those with more experience can learn to 'be' a youth worker rather than learn about youth work in a classroom-based community of practice.

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