

Transforming professional learning using self-study in an EFL context

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Summary

As English as Foreign Language (EFL) instructors, my colleague and I chose to examine our written corrective feedback (WCF) practices on student writings that we strongly felt needed attention in EFL environment, i.e., our own teaching context. The self-study method, drawing on multiple sources of data and a critical friend who helps frame and reframe discussion (Laboskey, 2004), was used as a systematic inquiry into our WCF practices. Following Samaras and Roberts' (2011) guidelines for instructors newly engaging in self-study and based on the concept of faculty learning community in practice (Samaras, Freese, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008), we engaged in the following practices: (1) reflective writings based on prompts, (2) review of WCF literature, (3) discussions based on prompts, and (4) electronic correspondence (e.g., email, Viber, Skype). We negotiated the tensions among ourselves and our context thereby addressing public credibility. Dynamic interplay between reflection and sharing through digital technology provided the basis for quality in the self-study research and supported knowledge-building process. For data analysis, open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was applied to the data sources by each of us independently. Codes were adjusted after reviewing each other's analysis. The analytic themes developed from the transcribed Skype discussions, journal reflections, and email contents, involved each of us in rethinking, refining, and confirming (Makaiau & Freese, 2013). The themes that emerged from analyzing the data indicated how the self-study resulted in nuanced learning outcomes.

The learning outcomes were considered in the light of three research questions. The first research question required us to examine our own beliefs about effective WCF. We recognized that our beliefs are immensely influenced by our environment. This pressurizes us and suppresses our beliefs and make us unaware of our contradictions and compels us to overlook opportunities for growth. The second research question necessitated identification of our WCF practices. We realized three things: teachers must be free to make autonomous choices and develop their own approach to language teaching; there is no single effective way, but strategies are driven by the context; and that internal or psychological factors that are within the control of the learner interact with the external or contextual factors. The third research question involved us in considering how best to address the issue of developing our own techniques of effective WCF for EFL students. We realized that we needed to boost our professional growth to understand the dynamics of a teaching and learning situation. More precisely, we realized several things: instructional strategies can be best developed by viewing a teaching and learning situation from a distance; self-disclosure can occur through self-reflection; reflective practices are less difficult in collaboration; opportunities for meaningful professional growth has to be self-initiated; and conception of a context-sensitive instructional approach is likely to lead to

best practices. This self-study encouraged critical friendship that prompted the stepping back and enabled honest self-examination of our practices, self-realization, and recalibration of our beliefs about an instructional approach.

This self-study demonstrates how a non-threatening environment fostered collaborative inquiry and supported a “climate of inquiry” (Driscoll & Wood, 2011) and retained trust and openness for learning among those who do it. For those of us in higher education, it is a professional obligation and not a voluntary option that we seek support and opportunities for growth. Our experiences gained through the self-study has the “...the potential to create an informed, entuned, opened self, interacting with others in ways that encourage and sustain learning for self and others” and also “long ranging and widespread, affecting...also the environment in which the researcher teaches” (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004, p.70-71). It was illustrated through our learning outcomes that to promote a culture of inquiry and learning among educators, there is an ongoing need to be able to see a teaching and learning context from different perspectives.

References

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