Exchanging Gifts

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH AND THEORIES OF CONTEXT

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The project we describe in this paper developed from a Program Adjustment Grant granted by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities. The project, which ran from 1989 to 1991, focused on the induction of new instructors to a community college. Studying 'Induction Processes' for these instructors was particularly interesting because they had not been through any conventional 'teacher training' — hence we were able to observe their 'on the job' responses to the new educational workplace.

Each instructor was interviewed throughout the project and we spent a good deal of time collaboratively developing full life history profiles; Chris Fliesser, the major subject of this paper and on-site co-ordinator (who was also a teacher at the college) provided an initial orientation week and workshop sessions each fortnight; he also undertook classroom observations for each instructor.

In some of my recent work I have been exploring the need for a fair "trade" between educational researchers and the teachers they portray. In the particular line of educational research I have been studying, the teachers provide researchers with narratives and stories of action. They also provide with this gift of data, the material for articles and books with which researchers can pursue grants, merit pay, sabbaticals and tenure. But what do the teachers get in return? I have been exploring not so much the material benefits which might accrue in return but the professional development aspects. I have argued that if the teachers provide stories of action the researchers might reciprocate by initiating and jointly developing 'theories in context'.

The development of a modality of collaborative research where a fair 'trade' between the collaborators is a central aspiration seems long overdue. The provision of data and perspectives from the teacher's side often focuses on action and practice — this data initiated by the teachers have traditionally provided the entry point for collaborative work and dialogic exchange. The externally-located researcher, however, also has a praxis to share and one that can initiate collaboration. One such starting point, given academic praxis, may well be the initiation of an exchange about what we might call 'theories of context'. This merely places responsibility on the externally located research to develop initial data in this arena in reciprocity for teachers' initiation of other data.

It should be made clear that this does not mean externally located researchers theorize and teachers practice. It simply means there should be collaborative exchange along two initially distinct lines: data of practice and theories of context. Each party takes responsibility for initiating an exchange in the distinct areas. But rapidly the distinction will dissolve as the dialogic exchange between collaborator ranges back and forth over both terrains. This is after all how commonsensically we make our meanings: we act, reflect, act again, reflect further and ultimately further our understandings. In educational research the col-

laboration begins around the teacher's actions, it is time that externally located researchers took initiatives which stimulate collaboration. By sharing responsibility for the initiation of data, the possibility is enhanced for an exchange of gifts between equal collaborators.

TALKING ABOUT TEACHING

In the interviews and in the sessions Chris organized, the initial concerns of the new instructors were with how to "survive" in the classroom: "will they accept me as a teacher"; "I'm beginning to feel like a teacher"; "I'm beginning to develop an act which works". Survival then moved fairly rapidly for most into another layer of competence; how to polish up their act; how to adjust and improve their classroom performance.

For all instructors these were the preoccupations of the first few months: in short, their practical knowledge at this point was indeed personal, practical and centred on pedagogical content knowledge. Fairly soon however we began to discern a range of new concerns which moved beyond the classroom walls to more 'micro-political concerns'. Chris closely monitored this growing concern with institutional micropolitics. It was he who kept the closest watch on the teachers' changing priorities through regular classroom observation and workshop sessions:

> *I think that originally new teachers when they come in, they have a perception that they want to learn all these skills, technical skills of teaching. And I think that some of them still feel that way. But I think many of them are at the point now, where they really would like a deeper approach to things, and not just all the technical skills. They realize that they're surviving in the classrooms. Their survival is no longer an issue for them. What they are grappling with now, are political issues in the institution. And that's what they want to address. Just by the workshops they wanted me to organize for them, by their interest, by their questions.*

In the fortnightly workshops the group of teachers can be seen, as one reviews all of the transcripts of the meetings, spending more and more time talking about issues of micropolitical strategy. As Chris notes, less and less time is spent in talking about classroom performance and the technical skills of teaching — the practical and personal, in short, represent a threshold and indeed a continuing concern, but one that is fairly rapidly augmented by wider and more broadly contextual concerns. Classroom life is one concern then, but it is deeply embedded in the wider concerns about institutional life.

It is in these broader institutional arenas that the teachers see the major frustrations but also the major possibilities for change. The frustration and anger about 'the system' becomes a rising tide within the transcripts of the meeting. Take the following statement by a middle-aged teacher who describes his new job as a 'dream come true', 'I love my job I really do' but constantly institutional politics intercede.

> *People trying to build empires with hidden agendas and all the bullshit, you know, it shouldn't be getting in the way between me and the student. It ticks me right off. I've never been good at politics. I don't want to be good at politics. I just want to do the damn job. But it gets to the point where it's almost impossible to be able to do it properly. And not only me. There are a couple of other people (teachers) ... as well that just do what they want to do and that's it. It keeps them happy. Sometimes it's bloody sad. In fact to me that's depressing. Just say, you know, because that spark or enthusiasm, it just gets smaller and smaller and smaller. And in the end it's going to be extinguished. What do you do? Do you fight the system till you just end up on the floor or do you roll along with it?*

Chris was perhaps best placed to pull together the collective themes emerging over the two years. Throughout the period he has both chaired the fortnightly discussions, observed the classrooms and kept in close touch with all of the participating teachers. His own changing perception of organisational life and the processes of institutional organisation provided the basis of long discussions between us about the social context of the project and the workplace. It is important to note that this concern with context is war, in terms of the project, a response to the micropolitical concerns of the teachers. This provided a valuable entry point for the project teachers to discuss these issues and, in terms of this paper, it provided a particular rationale for Chris and I to really rehearse our understandings of context. A great deal of our time on this project focused on our tentative attempts to conceptualise the social context in which project action took place.

The focus of the conversations between the two of us was on work that has been conducted on organisational cultures and institutional micropolitics. I began by laying out some of this work and providing an initial summary of the way in which the study of the institutions and the manner in which institutional actors pursue their 'mission'

allows us to begin to conceptualise institutional power. But following rapidly, Chris began to develop a line of inquiry about the institutional context in which this project was located. In short, the initiation stage with regard to our exchange about 'theories of context' was short-lived and moved quickly to become a collaborative inquiry which focused on these issues of context as well as issues of practice. From now on our collaboration moved back and forth across the terrain of context and action.

The problem in the paper is, of course, to capture this free-moving collaborative inquiry. We could do this in great depth because, with a self-consciousness which would do credit to Sartre and de Beauvoir, we have recorded our conversations and kept journals. But as a way of providing some of the flavour of the grounded conversations which is the essence of collaborative inquiry, we provide a number of transcript extracts.

We have chosen to concentrate more on Chris as he explores a theory of context with regard to his own institution and to the project of which he was on-site coordinator. This has the downside of making the exchange look one-sided but as Ardra Cole, the other team member commented, 'one of the fascinations' of this project was 'watching Chris run with the ball' as he explored new ideas and perspectives. But of course his explorings fed back into the emerging conversation and led to considerable reconceptualisation on my part (which I have characteristically written up as yet another paper). Any engaged collaboration normally leads to considerable reflection and reinterpretation by both parties and never more so than in this case. But for the moment we have chosen to present Chris 'running with the (theoretical) ball'.

> *I believe that much of becoming a teacher is through discovery, self discovery and reflection. And my approach in that has been very much in a self discovery mode. They've really enjoyed teaching, which is where they actually practise. Now they've gotten a lot out of that. Maybe to gain confidence, the technical aspect of it. But I think where they have got a lot out of it as well, is from the discussions that we've had. Some of them have been mainly philosophical, political. Because they realize that even the institution that they're dealing with is politically driven.*

This leads on to a view of work which focuses on self-exploration and reflection; not just on practice but on a more broadly-conceived notion of institutional process.

Chris: I believe that it (teaching) shouldn't be just a job.

Ivor: What does that mean?

Chris: It means that, when a person gets up in the morning, he or she doesn't get up and say, well it's eight o'clock in the morning and I have to go to work because it's eight o'clock in the morning and I have to be there at eight thirty. It's more along the notion of, I'm gonna do something today that I really enjoy doing and it happens to be eight o'clock in the morning and I happen to want to go into work and I like doing this stuff. And that it's not, never the same. That it's ... actually part of, of a person's being. That it's not something that you do because you get paid for doing it. You just happen to get paid for it, isn't that nice. And I know that that may be a luxurious view of work ... the notion being that a person doesn't have to work to make money.

To reflect on practice in this way then leads Chris to develop his own 'theory' of institutional life which draws on his experience with this group of teachers.

Chris: Well my opinion is that it is part of a research action and that's what keeps people vibrant and alive and very change oriented. That's the other thing. I think that somebody that goes into teaching and excels in teaching has to be someone that's willing to, to change, and accept change that as a constant. Change at times is chaotic. I guess that's the other thing they might have to accept. That there's a certain amount of chaos. And that their classrooms then become ... more kind of living laboratories where they're constantly trying things out and experimenting. And the space that they buy themselves, within their institution, is really to allow them to do that. That's what it boils down ... that's where teachers must become politically active. You know, and where the whole notion, I think, of the teacher's voice comes out. It has to be driven from this laboratory that essentially they're protecting from a much larger structure which is interested more in managing teaching like a factory. That, I mean, that's the model that's constantly being fought, you know, teaching as factory work versus let's say, teaching as a research laboratory. That's completely at two different ends of the spectrum. And that's what creates...

Ivor: What does a factory model look like?

Chris: I abhor the factory model. I think that in a factory you have people that are doing things and people that are doing things against other people. So, I mean, that the old model of, that they're enslaving people, taking profit because of ... people exploiting other people. Not that all

factories are that way. But I think if you take the model to the extreme that's ultimately what happens. And, that I don't think the model is a good one to apply to academic institutions. I think it's a very poor one. And it doesn't fit. The classroom as laboratory is the type of model that would encourage students to become life long learners, to experiment, to accept change and all those things that I was mentioning earlier, that teachers have to be. Another big issue I think, is the relationship of, of the teacher with students. In a laboratory like that, a relationship can flower and can develop. Whereas if you look at, if you apply that other model to it, that will never develop. And then all of a sudden what you're doing, if you apply the factory model in the classroom as well is you're just helping that factory type of system to continue to exist.

Ivor: How do you come to that view? Okay, we've had some conversations. But I don't think we've talked much about that. How do you come to that view of the two polarized worlds and the, essentially the question of how you politically defend one against another? What's been going on in your head over the last two years that, that leaves you to see it that way?

Chris: Yes. I think a lot of it has to do with being involved in the research project. Being afforded the opportunity to read, reflect, speak with people that have a different view of the world and to be out of the classroom a little bit myself. That's the other thing, it's part of my job, it's very flexible. And that's allowed me some time to reflect on my life. And it's also where I'm at as a person. I'm gonna be forty years old in two months and I think at that age, at that time in your life you maybe looked backwards and forwards and see where things are going. And I think if I look back at my life in the early thirties I was struggling so hard to be accepted ... to be successful. And success I saw mainly as being someone who was basically a good teacher but who also could have the potential to be, you know, an administrator ... to do those sorts of things which are seen as successful.

Ivor: Conventionally?

Chris: Conventionally successful. But as I became more successful and things opened up for me, I think I, over the last couple of years I look, well if I do go in this direction of administration, is that really what I want to do? You know, I've looked in the eyes of my colleagues and administrators ... and I see exactly what they do on a day to day basis and I say, I don't want to do that. As a matter of fact, I probably, I'm at the other end of it. I disagree with many things that they are doing, things they must do because of their position. And that's I think, the realization that I've come to. What happens is that they believe quite strongly that their model of the world is the right one. Which I've come to realize that it is not.

Ivor: What is the model?

Chris: I think their model very much has to do with the notion of power. The notion of the institution is probably the most important thing and to make a bigger institution. To, you know, bring more money in. So it's basically building up, a power base which is based on accumulation of wealth (laughs). Whether it be in their own lives or, or the institutions that they manage. And, so the larger the institution they manage, therefore the more powerful they are, therefore the more successful they are in the eyes of society. And I don't agree with that. Well, even in my own life, I don't agree with, I don't aspire to have newer cars or bigger houses, that's not my reason for being. And, so therefore that model doesn't fit. And I really didn't see that it didn't fit, that clearly until the last couple of years. And so now that I've seen that it doesn't fit and plus my view of the world has become more clear to me, I ... I'll take the side of the teacher in the classroom any day.

Chris describes his view of the micropolitics of institutions in the following conversation. It is, I think, worth quoting in full as it shows the evolution of his views and the manner in which these changing perspectives feed back in to his action and to the conduct to the project:

Chris: It was more, I think, a gradual progression. And I don't think that the views that I originally held, I held on to them that strongly. Like I kinda believed them because I felt myself that I was, in my early thirties, that I was underemployed, basically unsuccessful and asked myself how can I be successful? So what you do at the outset is you learn the system. Which I think I did fairly well, although not in the bigger picture, but at least I figured out what I had to do in order to be successful. But I, it didn't really fit that well. I'm still a kid of the sixties who was more part of that, you know, demonstrations and this isn't right and, so forth, that was more part of me, I think, than this other part. So when I started switching back the other way, saying, hey, well I could be successful in this I now don't buy it. I will go my own route and do it in my own way.

Ivor: So the absence of scariness comes from being able to do what? How have you managed to suspend those fears about institutional control for yourself?

Chris: Well. I think that it seems to fit. Like it seems to fit with who I am, where I'm at in my life right now and it doesn't feel that uncomfortable. One way that I've been able to suspend it is, I

think is that I have been successful doing my own thing in my own way in other areas. Essentially. Like, I mean, even in, in my institution, it's ironic. But, I have a fairly free hand in what I do.They're happy I bring in research funds and income through outside contacts. Because money drives it (the institution). And once you begin to realize that, then you really can attain goals, which are now much more aligned or I'd say completely aligned with the classroom teacher versus some administrative agendas.

Ivor: So where does that leave your view of the administration and your view of the institution. And I can see you now have a sense that you can get around it...

Chris: Yeah.

Ivor: ...and fight it but, how do you view it?

Chris: Well, I...

Ivor: How do you view institutions?

Chris: Yeah. Well, I've thought about this long and hard a number of times as well. What is it that I like about the institution that I work in? Because there are a lot of things that I like about it. And what I like about it are the people. There are wonderful people that work at the institution and on a regular basis I meet new people that work there and I say, this is a great place, you know, these people are great people. So it's the people that I thoroughly enjoy. What I see in the institution is that it's a structure. And it's actually a structure that inhibits communication. That puts up many barriers. And those barriers are put up either, I'm still not sure whether they're put up on purpose, or whether they're actually, just that's the way institutions are and they just happen to be put up. And so I'm starting to realize that it's institutions that I dislike. The structure of institutions. And they seem to do things to people. And I guess the main notion might be, well I, if ... this might be too simplistic ... but if you gave somebody a Porsche automobile that can go two hundred kilometres an hour, some people would get in there and they would just ... two hundred kilometres an hour and they'd drive it. You know, others might not. I think that's the same way with an institution. I think some people get into positions of power in institutions and they say, geez this fits, you know and I'm gonna drive it the way that I want to drive it. So it's a power issue. And then all of a sudden, they're so far removed from the poor schlep in the classroom, which is really what the institution is all about, that things are constantly swaying at the top, but it really has little impact on what happens in the classroom.

Ivor: So how do you respond to institutional agendas from the top, given this view that you've got?

Chris: Well I think now, if for example I see directives coming from the top, or information, I tend now to view it much more sceptically, critically. At one time I used to say, oh, they think that, that must be a good idea. Well, not quite to that extreme, but that was the notion. And, now I tend to look at it somewhat more politically and say well, geez I wonder where this came from. And I wonder why, why they're doing this and I wonder what implications this will have on ... and I wonder what this will mean for this sort of funding. And, so I see the bigger picture of the college. I have a very good understanding, a very deep understanding of our institution and how it works. I can see, so to speak, the writing on the wall. And if I see things that are happening, I will actually, if I disagree with them, I will try to change their effect. I know that I probably can't change the minds of the person who's given them and I've tried that as well but ... at times. But politically that doesn't work very well, so you have to go to other levels. And I've done that. I've actually worked at other levels to try to, to show people in the classroom, this is coming down the pipe and here's what you have to do in order to thwart it.

Ivor: Is it really that though? Does it come down to that or and is there a way in which you can shift the institution? Is that an aspiration?

Chris: Yes, I once did have the aspiration to change the institution. I guess I'm viewing institutions more like, like jello that you can shake them and when the shaking's going on there might be some really interesting and exciting things happen but somehow they stop again. And they don't necessarily always stop at the same point but they stop pretty close to where they started from. So, I think I realize that institutional change is very slow and sometimes it's so slow that the change is imperceptible ... that you can't even see it. So, maybe the more important part is, is to work with an institution the way it exists and try to work within the structure. And then if it has to be changed well then maybe we'll, we'll do our best. But the energy isn't necessarily on institutional change, it's more on working within ... working with people in the institution to help them to understand how it works and how they can get their political agendas forth. So it's become a different thrust. In other words, I'm not going to expend my energies on an institution which I think, by and large, isn't going to change that dramatically anyway.

Ivor: So institutional change, per se, is low on your agenda then.

Chris: Yes. Compared to what it used to be. It used to be quite high.

Ivor: Yeah. But what is change in your mind now? What is desirable action and reform for you if you throw institutional change out the window?

What does it look like?

Chris: Uh...

Ivor: It's a key question actually.

Chris: Yeah. I think change is much more of a grass roots movement within the confines of the classroom/laboratory than in the ivory towers, is probably the way I would explain that...

Ivor: The ivory towers being here or...?

Chris: Being at my own institution. I think that, I haven't given up on change, making changes within the institutions, but I think that they're more subtle changes than the larger dramatic ones that I had originally aspired to. So the level to deal with change is really within the classroom on a one to one basis. We can only impact a few people at a given point in time. And so I've ... it sounds like I've given up, but it's not really. I still very much believe that things can be changed. But I think that is more due to a changing role of teachers in what they can and can not do.

Towards the end of the conversations I asked Chris to summarise some of his own changing perspectives. He writes in the first person:

Chris believes that there are two opposing views of teaching as work: teaching as factory work versus teaching as research laboratory work. The first view diminishes the teacher's role to that of a technician. The second view enhances the teacher's role to that of a professional who is interested in developing students. Part of his role as educator is to politically defend one view of teaching against the other. He has opted to defend the second view: teaching as research laboratory work.

Chris has come to realize that in the factory model view of teaching, success for some few is usually done on the backs of many others. Success in this view means that the more wealth you acquire the more successful you are: therefore bigger is better. An integral part of becoming bigger is acquiring power: attaining power so that you can exploit and control others, thereby, becoming wealthier. Institutions then, in Chris's eyes, are instruments used by those who seek power. Most of these power seekers accept the model of conventional success — the more wealthy we are the more successful we are.

As Chris's views of teaching, institutions, power and control have evolved over the years he has come to the realization that a major part of his role as an educator is to politically defend one view of the world against the other. In order to help others defend the view of the world as teaching as a research laboratory, Chris has espoused two strategies. The first is to work with new teachers to help them to develop a model of teaching which rejects the factory model and accepts the research laboratory view or at the very least does not accept the factory model as given. The second is to help teachers learn how to become more politically active and aware so that they will be successful in defending their political agendas within their institutions.

Chris's evolution shows us the importance of micropolitical and contextual realities in his life as an educator. In order to better serve his students he has moved outside of his classroom, even outside of his institution. He has become politically active so that he could defend his view of teaching which he believes will serve teachers and students best.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have provided some selected 'passages' in an ongoing collaborative inquiry. The passages have concentrated mostly on an episode in Chris Fliesser's inquiry, but we could just have easily concentrated on Ardra Cole's or my own reflections (we have done so elsewhere). The episode is chosen mainly to give the 'feel' of a collaborative inquiry into the social context of a project and an institution. We believe the pursuit of this contextual information radically reformulates our induction project. Without the pursuit of micropolitical and institutional knowledge the focus would have remained solely on practical and pedagogical knowledge. This would have drastically constrained the lines of our collaborative inquiry. It would have marginalised the development of 'theories of context' which can do so much to enhance a fully developed 'professional knowledge' base for all those involved in collaborative research.

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