Working Together more than Alone: Students' Evolving Perceptions of Self and Community within a Four-Year Educational Administration Doctoral Cohort

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Abstract

School administrators rarely have the opportunity to confer and share their challenges with colleagues. To address this problem in 2005 the Educational Administration Department (EAD) at Central University (a Midwestern PhD granting institution located in a thriving city of about 100,00 people) created a virtual/ local doctoral cohort for 14 school leaders living and working in two states. Three years into the course of study we conducted a year long inquiry that asked, "How did students' self-perceptions evolve within a cohort context, and how did these changes advance or retard professional learning community (PLC) growth?" Our interviews had a phenomenological focus but we used symbolic interactionism to analyze them and dramaturgy to present our findings. Themes of faculty and student relationships, work and/or personal problems and dealing with technology indicated that despite some significant hurdles students' identity evolutions moved the group toward becoming a PLC, a collaborative culture of thinkers.

Keywords

Learning Communities, Doctoral Cohorts, Phenomenology, Dramaturgy

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School administrators rarely have the opportunity to confer and share their challenges with colleagues. To address this problem in 2005 the Educational Administration Department (EAD) at Central University (a Midwestern PhD granting institution located in a thriving city of about 100,00 people) created a virtual/local doctoral cohort for 14 school leaders living and working in two states. Three years into the course of study we conducted a year long inquiry that asked, "How did students' self-perceptions evolve within a cohort context, and how did these changes advance or retard professional learning community (PLC) growth?" Our interviews had a phenomenological focus but we used symbolic interactionism to analyze them and dramaturgy to present our findings. Themes of faculty and student relationships, work and/or personal problems and dealing with technology indicated that despite some significant hurdles students' identity evolutions moved the group toward becoming a PLC, a collaborative culture of thinkers. Key Words: Learning Communities, Doctoral Cohorts, Phenomenology, Dramaturgy.

At first blush it would seem that educators are highly social beings. They choose to enter a field that academically and socially squires students into the adult world, capable of making informed decisions and participating in an active democracy. Ironically whether by design or default, many building administrators and central office leaders are isolated from one another. They practice their profession in small pockets—offices and freestanding central administrative centers (Björk & Kowalski, 2005; Drago-Severson & Pinto, 2006; Heider, 2005; Lamkin, 2006; O'Hair, Williams, Wilson, & Applegate, 2009). To ameliorate disconnection's negative effect, in 2005 the Educational Administration Department (EAD) at Central University, identified and recruited 14 school administrators who sought improved connections with colleagues and advanced degrees. The university was located near a large city but far enough in its own right to be a vibrant, artistic metropolis of about 150,000 residents. Pathways, a special unit embedded within the EAD, then gathered the students into a mixed local/distance doctoral cohort; infused the curriculum with learning community literature; encouraged technology use as a vehicle for ongoing personal and professional connections; and hoped the cohort would become a professional learning community (PLC; DuFour & Eaker, 2005; Fullan, 2001; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood 2005; Morrissey, 2000).

My co-author taught four of the research courses and I was one of the distance participants. As time went on we observed and discussed many of the changes that students underwent. In the third year we began a phenomenological inquiry into their lived experiences. Specifically we asked, "how did students' self-perceptions evolve within a cohort context, and how did these changes advance or retard (PLC) growth?" Although we conducted phenomenological interviews we soon found that excavating the participants' changing views of themselves over an extended period of time and subsequent place in the group required a symbolic interactionist analysis and dramaturgical presentation of findings.

Theoretical Lenses

Slices of PLC, transactional distance and social presence theory provide our investigative lenses and suggest the need for more research on local/distance degree cohorts. Because our work delves into the students' personal ruminations within a community setting we paid particular attention to affective aspects of individual metamorphoses (A. Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999; Schussler, 2003). DuFour (2004) explains that in any educational setting occasional or intermittent casual alliances are not enough to generate a culture wherein people share a "particular set of attitudes" (Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht, & Lindsley, 2005, p. 166). Rather, cultural ties come about when people interact "with each other and stay together long enough to form a set of habits and conventions,… [and] come to depend upon each other for the accomplishment of certain ends" (Kim, 2000; Wilson & Ryder 1996, p. 6).

Trust is the "super glue" that holds a professional collaborative body together (Riley & Stoll, 2004, p. 38). In our case it required professors who nudge students into becoming part of the group, share ideas, voice concern for others, expose vulnerabilities, display loyalty, respect diverse viewpoints, and communicate dialogically (Jude-York, Davis, & Wise, 2000; Kim, 2000; Riley & Stoll, 2004). Pathways intended for the virtual underpinnings of our cohort to facilitate trust building within and across the divide. Although not all of us participated from a distance everyone had to use technology to work together. Of course laptops were essential, enabling us to email and create PowerPoints. Lecture notes appeared for all to see on a smartboard and another screen displayed every distance student in her or his own window. For group work web cameras with Marratech and Skype software were standard equipment.

As suggested above using these tools to dialogue was key for our potential community enhancement (Jude-York et al., 2000). In conversation people often form mental arguments while feigning attention to others. Dialogue occurs when individuals simply share or compare experiences with a certain phenomenon. Ultimately people create an emotional or academic connection through mutual understanding, not necessarily consensus on any one idea. In our case a professor or student leader could promote dialogue by encouraging unstructured nonjudgmental conversations carried on in person or via the various available technologies (Bohme, Factor, & Garrett, 1992). The absence of dialogue is a "trustbuster" evidenced by withholding information, pushing hidden agendas, engaging in public criticism or giving vague responses (Jude-York et al., 2000, p. 15).

For our cohort failing or succeeding lay on the plane of transactional distance, a border crossing in cyberspace where students and instructors could meet (Giroux, 1994; Murphy & Rodriquez, 2008). To create a PLC within this clearing people must view themselves and one another as socially, emotionally and intellectually present (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Major hurdles to overcoming transactional distance are the absence of face-to-face interactions and visual cues necessary to develop a socially interactive environment.

Faculty members can also contribute adversely when they merely enter the studio/classroom and teach as usual because one of their major responsibilities in distance or local education is to monitor and promote quality interactions (Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002; Wilcox, 2000). Unfortunately, many distance-learning originators assume that instructors need no technological preparation or practice (Motamedi, 2001; November, 2001). This mistake is then modeled for students and can lead to mistrust of others (Dreyfus, 2001).

A successful cohort must include faculty and student virtually connected, get-acquainted exercises in classrooms and informal settings (Brown, 2001; Rovai, 2002). Throughout the program flexible online gathering places should continue to exist where professors encourage students to meet regularly for any social or work-related reason (Kim, 2000). Both in these informal and formal situations all students must have an equal chance to express themselves so "group think" does not stifle individual voices (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000; Lally & Barrett, 1999). Small group activities are excellent vehicles for cross-pollination of ideas and mutual scaffolding of academic knowledge and understanding because they encourage the most diffident students to express themselves (Kim, 2000; Senge, 2006). Adults also tend to prefer these venues. The instructor's challenge is to relinquish enough control to enlist potential student leaders and merely guide the learning process (Kaupins, 2002; Kim, 2000; Lally & Barrett, 1999; Rovai, 2002).

A cohort's potential to become a democratic learning community is much debated in the literature. Concerned about graduate cohorts' logarithmic growth, especially since the 1980s (Maher, 2005), some scholars believe that cohorts overtly or subliminally force group conformity. This, in turn, prevents individual self-reflection outside of class that can empower students to critique communal thought or higher education in general (Brookfield, 2003). Conversely Witte & James' (1998) research on a dissertation cohort suggests that the resolution of internal conflict encourages conceptual thinking and empowers students to challenge professorial authority that may not exist within traditionally taught programs. Dorn & Papalewis (1997) agreed in their survey of 108 doctoral students from eight universities. They noted that collegiality leads to conceptual thinking and student persistence. Maher's (2005) findings are similar, concluding that cohort members become task-and/or even family-oriented. They get the job done and bond in the process.

Moving on into cyberspace Green (2006) states that online cohorts can become ones "of mutual improvisation, experimentation, questioning, and modification in an intellectual collective of novices and experts" (p. 180). When investigating a distance delivered EdD program through the Open University in the United Kingdom, Butcher and Sieminski (2006) too find evidence of constructivist learning conditions, by-products of attention to affective student needs to overcome transactional distance and experience

genuine social presence (Tu, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Despite the above studies and many of the ones they cite Maher (2005) believes that there is much left to know concerning the details of cohort students' intellectual and personal growth, often leading to PLCs.

Our investigation addressed that need. Through interviews, continuing conversations with participants and our own observations over a four-year time period we moved beyond an all too common practice of creating a narrative from data gathered and frozen in a specific time and place. Presenting our findings as a dramaturgy created a storyline that draws the reader into important sequential turning points for individual students and the group.

Methodology

To capture cohort members' *lived experiences* we first launched a phenomenological investigation, envisioning hermeneutic circles that spun the details of participants' everyday existences and subsequent identity transformations (Heidegger, 1962). Although phenomenology remained a launching pad for our research design and data collection the study evolved into a symbolic interactionist, dramaturgical piece, in which we focused on participants' interactions more than the essence of their lived experiences. Each time students attended class they brought continually altered selves, revisited and revised as they acted with each other and various professors. In traditional hermeneutics the researcher perches her/himself apart from the process. We followed the Alethic hermeneutical approach, which invites scholars into the participants' life world of space, body and time, holding conversations and making insider observations (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Dowling, 2007; Gadamer, 1989; Spence, 2001; van Manen, 1990).

Researchers and Participants

Although we participated in the study through researcher reflexivity we made ourselves constantly aware of the distinct vantage points from which we worked and lived (van Manen, 1990). Before interviewing any of the participants we shared and documented our own points of view concerning who we were before becoming part of the cohort, how we gradually changed and what we became (van Manen, 1990).

As a student I attended almost every session via synchronous videoconferencing, many times appearing to local students on a huge projected image. Next, as a graduate assistant working through Pathways, I wore multiple hats in the course delivery process. My primary responsibility was verifying that all sites could connect and stay that way throughout class. I was also responsible for recording and archiving class sessions either via the Codian IPVCR or the TANDBERG (my current employer) Content Server for later retrieval by students unable to attend a day of class or to grasp course content. The graduate assistant role sometimes included assisting instructors with the logistics of course delivery or organizing small group activities. On occasion, I remotely operated the instructional equipment in the classroom and facilitated communications between the instructor(s) and cohort members. In short, I was not a director but was the producer, cameraman, lighting expert and prop man.

My co-author was also a part of our group. At first we clung to her, afraid we would forget the new philosophical language and fail to conceptualize our own research. The disequilibrium was at times unbearable. We learned about post-positivistic quantitative and qualitative research but also scores of interpretivistic qualitative methodologies such as those used in this study. Sympathetic to our strife, she met with us individually, slowly nudging away from her tutelage and encouraging us to think for ourselves. Helping us she learned how to manage her sometimes-random way of thinking and explain concepts from a linear perspective.

All of us made it through save one who left during the first semester for personal reasons. That said, the surviving group was mildly diverse, representing two states. We numbered seven Euro-American men and four women and three Native-American women. Our socioeconomic statuses were varied and included upper-middle, middle and working classes. Additionally the range of school positions differed from superintendent to vice-principal. The curriculum spanned summer, fall, and spring for a little over four years and courses were usually offered in a compressed weekend format. For the most part class offerings kept everyone together. In cases where Pathways leaders provided electives, multiple mixed cohort members participated. At this writing five years have passed. Ten students have graduated, and three are preparing to defend their dissertations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before approaching students for interviews, we obtained IRB approval from the University of Oklahoma after which time we asked each person to participate and promised to create composite characters in our dramaturgy to help mask his/her identity. They all eagerly agreed and most were not concerned that their quite candid thoughts might distinguish them from the group. By the third and into the fourth years, enough time had elapsed that they had engaged in a reflective process that made for insightful interviews and lively follow-up conversations.

We conducted one to two and one-half hour-taped interviews at a location that was convenient for the participants. Our semi-structured questions addressed the existing theoretical lenses and cohort literature but we also probed to find out how the participants perceived themselves before, during and after the cohort adventure, paying particular attention to the intricacies of identity reformations. In this way we could keep our promise to enrich the scholarship with intricate portrayals of change. At times the interviews became dialogical, allowing us to compare our horizons with theirs as we conversed about numerous situations of which we had both been a part (Gadamer, 1989).

The next step was transcription during which time we made independent reflective notes and then compared our results (Gadamer, 1989). We also listened to the recordings several times to detect vocal tone, delivery and emphasis. After receiving participant verification we individually and collectively combed the narratives for symbolic interactions between and among students, professors, and any other people involved in the course of study (Osborne, 1994). Consistent with our hermeneutic intentions we used Mead's (1967) work to pinpoint the dynamic, organically co-constituted participant life worlds (Blumer 1969; Odin, 1996; Osborne, 1994). Mead's (1922, 1967) "I" and "me" concepts were key. Engaging in continuous reflection, a person brings her "I," a symbolized object of herself, into every nonverbal and/or verbal

interaction. She then translates another's "me," a reflection of herself that she perceives in a sign, symbol or another person's words and alters her "I" accordingly. As Cooley (1922) so eloquently wrote, "Each to each, a looking-glass reflects the other that doth pass" (p. 184).

Results

Themes of faculty and student relationships, work and/or personal problems and dealing with technology emerged. Referring to the first, early on several students referred to noteworthy "trust busters" (Jude-York et al., 2000, p.15) evidenced in language such as "us" versus "them:" onsite versus distance; men versus women; technologists versus non-technologists; dedicated or "called" leaders versus those who were just getting by; and individual versus group thinkers. The local verses virtual divides were particularly problematic. In initial classes one distance student raised his hand frequently and was never acknowledged by professors or students. Responding to an empty reflection of himself (Mead, 1922, 1967) he decided to do homework during classes and not to participate. The first time one local student beamed in and identified with other distance students' frustrations she vowed to become a connection across transactional distance. "I soon realized how alone one can feel when few people are skyping and instructors don't even turn around to look at us," she explained.

Relationships with faculty members were also bitter sweet. In the second year the first two cohort instructors with whom students had developed strong ties left Pathways and no reason was given (Jude-York et al., 2000). Certain members made inquiries but never found out why. They and other students had to fight the feeling that *they* had been abandoned. Also during the second year the entire Pathways unit moved to a classroom in a newly constructed building. Although it was a much more pleasing environment it uprooted the local students from what had become a familiar meeting place. Addressing the issue, "One Pathways instructor minimized the discomfort by asking groups of us to help design the new facility," one student remarked. Another explained, "This really did help make us feel like we mattered to someone" (Kim, 2000; Riley & Stoll, 2004; Schussler, 2003; Wilson & Ryder, 1996).

Ironically, constituting the second theme students' personal and/or professional problems helped form community from pain. Some student's encountered family strife due to the long hours spent in cohort classes and assignments they had to complete at home or in libraries. Others consoled the ones who were struggling, providing family-like support that lead to trust-related community cohesion (Kim, 2000; Riley & Stoll, 2004; Schussler, 2003). "You can make it," one local student told another who was going through a divorce. "My kids are gone and I can stay with yours almost any time," he said. The distraught student saw an accepting "me" that she no longer saw at home.

A few cohort members changed jobs and had pangs of anxiety from time to time. For instance a new principal had problems encouraging his teachers to work together and three other cohort students (one of whom joined at a distance) met with him on breaks, listening and telling him what they had done to rectify bad situations at their schools (DuFour, 2004; A. Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999; Kim, 2000; Riley & Stoll, 2004). Two other participants were promoted during the cohort years and several of their fellow students

announced this to the group and later held celebrations in their honor. These events included the virtual students as well (Kim, 2000).

At first technology use (theme three) separated the local and distance groups. There was little initial training on how to use various synchronous and asynchronous technologies, including multiple modalities of videoconferencing. The virtually placed students had no choice but to adapt. For them H.323 Internet protocol-based room systems were present in at least five sites on a regular basis. One student explained, "We had to learn the technology to survive both emotionally and academically." Many others eventually availed themselves of local, remote and home-based computer videoconferencing, chat and shared whiteboards through Marratech. Occasionally some began to use tools such as Skype, Second Life and traditional phone connectivity. Not all of the professors encouraged these communications (Rheingold, 2000). My second author admits culpability in this area. She had never taught in this type of format and until we collected data was unaware of students' learning curve and of the personal strife going on between some students within the technologically hidden curriculum. Other instructors were oblivious as well but did use WebCT and Desire2Learn for content delivery. With help from each other most of us forged across transactional distance to become socially present with others, working with local and distant students on group or class assignments and tutoring the less technologically savvy members.

Presentation Format

Dramaturgical presentation is a natural extension of a symbolic interactionist analysis. As noted early on it tells a story that is much more revealing than truncated lists of themes with examples from only a few interviews. Several scholars use dramaturgy to display their results. We found them engaging, as they encouraged us to share the stage with school board members or aging adults, for examples see Alexander, 2005; Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995; Leichtentritt and Rettig, 2001; Meyer, 2009; Mienczakowski, 1997; Saldaña 2003. No doubt some scenarios will always represent what Goffman (1959) calls "impression management" (p. 28), how people manipulate each other to think well of them. We did find much of that in the cohort members' first two years. However as student interviews progressed many admitted to having acted like "the good engaged student" but soon authentically began to assert themselves and advocate for an inviting, connected class environment. Unfortunately one feigned interest but later withdrew all together. Countless symbolic interactions explained how students' and professors' relationships ebbed and flowed, therefore answering the first part of our question that delved into the specifics of students' ever-changing self-perceptions. This led us to conclude that to some extent the group became a learning community evidenced in genuine encounters wherein dialogue, group work and formal/informal settings students welcomed other peoples' reactions to them ("me's") and changed accordingly (Bohm et al., 1992; Brissett & Edgley, 1990)

Dramaturgical development. A four-act play frames and then displays our findings. The cohort experience was our "actable idea," and the "script" derived from participant interviews. The themes guided "instance[s] of elementary collective behavior" as the actors moved the "plot" or story away from but then toward PLC standing (Hare &

Blumberg, 1988, pp. 3-4). L. Local, B. Blended and D. Distance were the main characters. Other minor thespians were O. Onsite, M. Mixed, R. Remote, Drs. N., W., H., Q. and M. and the playwright. The drama took place on one mixed stage with multiple vantage points—off stage, back stage, in the wings on stage left and right, and downstage toward the orchestra pit (Elliott, 2005). All of these vantage points in person or cyberspace illustrated multiple venues for connectivity and interaction among and between the players (Filmer, 2008). Four frames or acts told the cohort story from individual students' perspectives.

   Frame/act one, settling in—getting to know you. Although a person's "I" never stays the same, to understand future symbolic interactions our main characters, L. Local, D. Distance and B. Blended, first introduced themselves through soliloquies (Mead, 1922).

   Frame/act two, Negotiating and renegotiating roles—cohorts within cohorts. This act depicted the first one-to-two years. Herein lay evidence of trouble in paradise, as potential faculty and student relationships were strained, work and/or personal problems abounded, and technology use was sparse.

   Frame/act three, working it through—living with change. Here the performers remembered and discussed social and academic exchanges that had occurred during the first two-to three years and how most of them were comfortably settling into a shared environment. However, remnants of discord related to personal, professional and technologically driven problems were still evident.

   Frame/act four, applying the lessons learned—saying goodbye. To close the drama, students assessed their personal/professional evolutions and then waved each other into the future. L Local, D. Distance and B. Blended's narratives echoed perceptions of more conversations with other members throughout the years.

The Dramaturgy

   Frame/act one—settling in—getting to know you. As the lights come up on our stage, there is a room with 16 people. This looks like an informal classroom setting with each person seated at tables arranged in a circle-like fashion to invite equitable "I"/"me" interactions that the founders hoped would model a PLC. The seats are clearly arranged so that there is no "head" of the class. There is a large darkened screen at one end of the room and a projector mounted on the ceiling above two professors, Drs. N. and W. Two cameras are randomly placed and an instructor area with a podium containing a multitude of electronics is located off to one side.
   Without prior knowledge of the people in the room, the unfamiliar observer would not be able to discern between teachers and students. The sounds heard are a cacophony of computers booting up and people prattling. It seems as if everyone at least recognizes someone, but no one seems to know everyone.
   First, L. Local stands and moves toward stage right as all the other characters freeze into position. Lights on the classroom dim, and only silhouettes are now visible as

the stage right spotlight illuminates an area for L. Local to enter. She is in her late 50s, has slightly graying hair and a firm presence. Her demeanor is very pleasant but purposeful. L. Local is dressed in business casual clothing including tailored pants, a silk blouse and an informal blazer. She is a tenured public school administrator and wears the part. While confident in her own public school professional environment, comparing herself to the group, she has become somewhat self-conscious about her age. She realizes that she has exposed her "I" (accomplished school administrator) to a new "me" (student) and is unsure what the climate requires for an impressive social presentation (Goffman, 1959).

She begins, "I have always wanted to pursue a doctorate in educational administration but was beginning to wonder if I might be too late in my career. Even now as I look around I wonder if I'm too old to do this. Most of the other faces here are at least a decade younger than I. (She smiles.) I am driven as a life-long learner but knew that I would need company along my journey so I hope that you all will befriend me. When I heard about this cohort from Pathways' program leaders I jumped at the chance. There is no telling what the next phase of my life holds."

L. Local freezes and the spotlight dims on her position. Simultaneously another figure rises and moves toward stage left. A spotlight now illuminates a space soon to be occupied by D. Distance. He is a male in his late 30s or early 40s. Unlike L. Local, his swagger suggests his need to project himself ("I") as a rural but updated "man's man." His attire is illustrative. He is dressed in jeans, a polo shirt and boots (Goffman, 1959; Mead 1922).

He opens, "A PhD with an emphasis in technology integration is perfect for me. In my neck of the woods without technology, I would be lost. And it frustrates me when others refuse to use it. When I heard about this opportunity at the Pathways winter conference, I jumped at it. I consider myself an opportunist, and this program was too tempting to pass up. I'm pumped because tonight we're getting web cams and installing the collaborative Marratech and Skype software on our computers. It looks like everyone in our cohort will be able to communicate with each other via interactive video and audio regardless of where we are."

D. Distance freezes and the spotlight dims on his position. Once again a figure arises from the group. It is B. Blended. She moves toward the audience downstage center. As the spotlight highlights her location, she moves in with pretended determination. B. Blended is in her mid-to-late 30s. She sports a big smile and puts forth a positive spirit. Her dress is neither casual nor formal. As L. Local and D. Distance spoke B. Blended had become tentative because her administrative experience was, in her mind, limited. Little does she know that this uncertainty will give her the empathy to interact personally with students from both groups and plant the seeds for PLC growth.

B. Blended speaks, "After only a few of years in administration, I'm going to get to pursue a doctoral degree. To be honest, I know that I don't have as much know-how as everyone else. They all seem so confident, and I'm a little intimidated. I really want to do this right so I'm going to feel the fear and do it anyway because I need to move out of my vice-principal's office and learn from the professors and all of these other administrators."

B. Blended then freezes, and her spotlight dims to 50%. Simultaneously, the lights on L. Local, D Distance and B. Blended rise to 50%.

A voice from offstage, a narrator of sorts, then states, "this frozen image of three characters L. Local on the "right," R. Remote on the "left," and B. Blended in the "middle" foreshadows future symbolic interactions of division and unity that point to the complex issues of community building" (Mead, 1922).

The spotlight then fades on all three actors. The stage lights rise to 50%, once again illuminating the informal classroom as L Local, R. Remote and B. Blended make their way back to the others. Two spotlights now shine on Drs. N. and W. who are seated in swivel chairs behind one of the desks placed in the circle. Dr. N. does not rise but casually leans back as if to gather everyone's attention.

He states, "My name is Dr. N." and, pointing to his co-instructor, says, "this is Dr. W. Tonight we will cover the degree requirements and course schedules and get your computers ready for class. Dr. W. and I will be teaching your courses several times throughout the cohort's tenure. As you know, you are an experiment of sorts and we are all looking forward to your and our success. This is for you, Dr. W. and me a grand adventure. Dr. W. is now going to lead us through some get-aquatinted exercises (Brown, 2001 Rovai, 2002). Take it away Dr. W."

The spotlights fade and the stage lights brighten to 100% as Dr. W. begins to chat with and direct students toward different locations of "intentional" groupings within the class. She notices that some are comfortable and others are not, but they all willingly or reluctantly participate.

"We have our work cut out for us," Dr. W. thinks (DuFour, 2004; A. Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999; Schussler, 2003).

But as time progresses a disparate collection of voices gradually swells which to her is a good sign. The participants' confidence is increasing as they temporarily abandon their hierarchical administrative roles and just chat: "How many students are at your school? I was just tired of doing it all as a middle school teacher so I got into administration. Do you think teaching is too much of a feel good profession? My master's classes were very independent. I never felt like part of a group. Are you teaching classes and serving as high school principal? I have this one teacher who. …" Voices and stage lights fade to nothing and all are silent.

Frame/act two—negotiating and renegotiating roles—cohorts within cohorts. As the lights come up, we are once again in the informal classroom setting. The table positioning still resembles that of a democratic circle but that is probably the only earmark thus far of a PLC unless conflict is seen as an opportunity for growth (Riley & Stoll, 2004; Schussler, 2003). In this scene the projection screen is anything but darkened. Almost like the old game show Hollywood Squares the distance students appear in multiple larger-than-life images projected on the screen's surface. They are divided into six areas. Four have only one person in them; the fifth contains two individuals. The sixth area on the screen portrays a small image of a local classroom. While all the sites can be seen, the remote cohort member who last spoke occupies the largest image. This means that the site that speaks the most often gets the majority of real estate on the screen and probably the most attention.

Dr. H., the instructor, is lecturing with his back to the projected image and the camera that is showing the local classroom to the remote sites. He seems oblivious to the distance students' presence (November, 2001; Wilcox 2000).

It is obvious that a couple of courses have come and gone since we first met our characters. They have settled into what appears to be separate factions. The remote members have come to depend on one another. They email secretly back and forth while the local participants appear to have formed cliques of people who sit together. Any early excitement has waned. The majority are multitasking and taking notes. Noticeably most of them in the local room are writing with pen and paper. Their laptop computers are either closed or completely put away. Yet the distant cohort members are glued to theirs. R. Remote, one of the faces on the distance screen is holding up and waving a pink piece of paper in an apparent effort, a symbol (Mead 1922), to gain the instructor's attention. B. Blended, tonight a local participant, sees the waving communicative effort and after five minutes cannot ignore the slight. "Dr. H.," she says, "It looks like R. Remote has a question."

Dr. H. looks around the room for R. Remote but then realizes he is on the screen behind him. "Sorry, R., I didn't see you. Did you have a question?" R. Remote responds, "Yes, but I think L. Local answered it already. Never mind." The action once again freezes and the lights dim on the group as only silhouettes are seen. D. Distance slides out of his frame and walks onto stage left into his spotlight and begins, "What happened? It's like all the people in the room except B. Blended, don't want us there anymore. Several of the Pathways instructors we started out with have moved on to other jobs. They were some of the only professors who understood how important it was for us to use the online discussion threads as well as Skype and Marratech. If these people were so committed to the PLC concept and us why did they leave? No one has told us (Jude-York et al., 2000).

Some of the other instructors are just lecturing. When they do, it makes it easy for me to disengage from what is going on. Here's the plan I've devised: I am attentive and answer some questions in the first hour or so of each class. Then I tune out and use my computer to accomplish something more meaningful during the rest of the time although I have to admit on occasion I check the commodity market report.

Sometimes we distance people chat on line. Although our conversations are not always on topic it keeps me from feeling completely alone (able to see a welcoming 'me' (Mead 1922). R. Remote and I were discussing his son the other day and the struggles he's having with drugs. Then B. Blended (participating at a distance) popped off with a comment how this class might go down better with some drugs. I told them that based on some of the crazy assignments Dr. Q. gives, I sometimes wonder if she is on drugs. I know it's not on topic, but it gives us a common watering hole—not to mention a good occasional laugh. But we also work with the locals on projects. B. Blended helps initiate those things. She really understands.

The spotlight dims on R. Remote as he turns to face stage right. L. Local steps away from her classroom seat and onto stage right towards her spotlight. I'm so glad I'm here. I tried beaming in once and hated it. The equipment made it hard to understand what was going on. I chose to be on campus, so I could be physically connected to the cohort. I finally just turned off my computer here in class because all the chat in Marratech and Skype was so distracting. There are lots of times when the conversations are off topic, and that is so unprofessional. It usually starts in the right direction but quickly veers off course. Night before last D. Distance, R. Remote and B. Blended were chattering about their families and then their kids. Before I knew it all of the cyberspace people were gossiping about taking drugs. Even worse, one of them suggested that Dr. Q.

might be on drugs. I think they said that because Dr. Q. is a woman and doesn't act like the typical staid college professor. It's just crazy and disrespectful. I guess that I am "old school" like that. A teacher is a teacher. You respect her, you listen and you learn.

Even so I really wish that the instructors would monitor what is going on in those chat rooms. Thank goodness all of us here have each other. We have come to see how much in common we have. I socialize with O. Onsite. We go out to dinner and even though I felt a bit estranged from her in the beginning our mutual distain of the distance group has bonded us somehow. That's tragic but it's the truth. The local group has had other group functions where we mourned Katie's (only member who quit after a few classes) dropping out and were later relieved to find out it wasn't a rejection of us (a potentially negative "me").

L. Local freezes. It is clear that countless symbolic interactions have occurred. The "me's" that the distance and local students had seen in the other were to a great extent negative and professors had been not much help. Rather than absorb that image most students had retrenched into a stalwart position, nowhere close to community connectedness. This is paradoxical because, as L. Local recounted, it was in isolation that each site's students began linking with each other, finding parts of themselves in the whole (Mead, 1922).

The lights stay up on L. Local but D. Distance's spotlight now brightens as he says, lunch and dinner, that's the only time I get to, see my family. From my rural location in another state, it would take several hours beyond class time to travel onsite for the privilege of sharing a meal. Out here, we have to assert ourselves in order to be heard. Communicating like this is definitely a learned process. If R. Remote hadn't come up with that pink piece of paper to indicate he had something to say, I might never have seen what Dr. H. looked like. It made him turn around and face our camera. (He smiles). In our last course, Dr. M. sat in a chair with her back to us the entire time. I really felt like a fly on the wall. Then, when I had to visit campus for some paperwork this summer a lady came up and talked to me as if I knew her. She mentioned how great it was to see me again but I couldn't figure out who she was until she turned to walk away and I saw the back of her head! She still had that funny part in her hair on which she slept the night before (Dreyfus, 2001; November, 2001; Wilcox, 2000). At least some instructors since we had Dr. H. quit automatically putting us in local and distant groups but mostly B. Blended initiated that, volunteering to work with the virtually situated people through Marratech when she attended locally. Thanks to her I'm still willing to give this thing a chance. And I think that some of the local people have accepted her because when she is onsite they talk with her at breaks. She has explained that our little distance bantering is something we need so as not to feel alone. D. Distance takes a deep hopeful breath as the stage fades to black.

Frame/act three—working it through—living with change. As the lights come up on Act Three, the stage has noticeably changed. The facility in which the cohort now meets is enlarged and elegant. The scent of fresh carpet fills the air. There is now almost twice as much space in the classroom as there was before. The ceiling, the lights and even some of the technology let the observer know that this place is contemporary. In an earlier class one instructor gave an assignment that asked students to help design office space and other rooms in the new building. This inspired positive "I" to "me" alterations

as they continually interacted with their groups, feeling validated by the others who regarded them as creative, experienced administrative professionals (Mead, 1922).

However, the tables, chairs, projection screen and cameras are still arranged as before. The distance people are still in several quadrants of the screen but there appear to be fewer people "out there" than in other classes. D. Distance, R. Remote, B. Blended and one former local are now the only off-site students. Indicating what will always detract from full PLC formation in a mixed setting, some of their former members have sacrificed time and money to drive to class, staying on the Midwestern University campus hotel for the weekend.

All the cohort members quickly note there are nine on-site students that no one recognizes. Unknowingly withholding information, no one told the cohort students that the College of Education and EAD faculty insisted that Pathways allow other students to enroll in research courses, even Master's candidates (Jude-York et al., 2000). The new classroom dynamic creates personal discomfort that also draws both distant and local cohort members closer, indicating the flipside of personal strife.

Evidencing theme two, D. Distance and B. Blended have experienced tremendous stress due to career changes and work tensions. Some colleagues have been supportive, listening to each other's war stories. In fact, there are friendly exchanges among distant and local cohort members where students are genuinely asking each other questions and authentically listen to the responses (Bohm et al., 1992). Since last meeting, a few have married and divorced. Many are congratulating the hopeful and consoling the forlorn.

Directing attention back to the desks placed under the large screen Drs. N. and W. sit below and behind it in two swivel chairs, their familiar places. Turned toward each other they are speaking in muffled voices preparing for another weekend of intense instruction and intimate interchanges within what, for many, has become a family. Like most, it has its functional and dysfunctional aspects.

Soon, Dr. W. clears her throat and announces, "Ok guys, let's get down to business." She has taught enough cohort classes to realize that when seated she must continually swivel her chair to make contact with the distance students and, when standing or walking around the room, she must always make sure the remote participants can see her. She steps up and begins to stroll while continuing to talk.

In the introduction to qualitative research we talked about the birth of positivism, 17th Century Cartesian dualism phenomenology accommodated this thinking by pulling both objectivity and subjectivity into the scholar's mind, calling them pure consciousness and subjectivity (Dowling, 2007). Then Heidegger (1962), one of Husserl's compatriots and a forerunner of existential, hermeneutic, and (some maintain) social phenomenology, muddied the waters (Dowling, 2007). He revisited the idea of dasein, being in the world, a more holistic view of human existence. Over time the ball keeps rolling ever toward inviting the researcher into a hermeneutic process. Two of them, you will remember are van Manen (1990) and Gadamer (1989).

Then Dr. N. chimes in, "If this isn't difficult enough to sort through, beginning in the 1920s we also discussed the Frankfurt school and Neo Marxists who believed that phenomenology missed the ideological aspects of research that have come to undergird critical inquiry."

D. Distance had abandoned R. Remote's practice of holding up a pink piece of paper to be recognized. Instead, he had just become QUITE assertive.

He presses the microphone button at his remote site like a game show contestant and blurts out, "My dissertation will be post-positivistic and quantitative so I don't need to address objectivist or interpretive phenomenological hermeneutics let alone critical social science. I just need to make sure that I do everything possible to separate myself from the object to be studied and the other variables I select to measure it, right?" *(*Weisenberg *&* Willment, 2001).

Dr. W. puts her arms straight over her head just like a football referee indicating a touchdown and says, "YES!" She has truly come to love the students.

The more reserved of the two, Dr. N. just smiles like a Cheshire ca, relishing in his students' insights. He is also quite pleased that D. Distance has modeled an aggressive way to overcome technology's alienating potential and modeled it for the other geographically isolated students (Weisenberg & Willment, 2001). But this discourse immediately invokes a look of bewilderment on the new people's faces. They have just been thrown into a world with a private lexicon.

After a moment, the lights dim on the stage slightly as B. Blended steps from behind her projected image. She motions to D. Distance who walks away from his square and joins her as they walk toward the classroom just long enough to encourage L. Local to join them down stage. After a brief embrace, all three continue to move toward the audience. The lights on the classroom now fade to near black so that only the student and instructor silhouettes are visible. As the threesome approaches a front stage lighted area members find an oversized sofa available for their comfortable repose. They plop down upon it. Instead of talking to the audience they now speak to each other (Baldwin et al., 2005; Riley & Stoll, 2004; Schussler, 2003; Wilson & Ryder, 1996). Although in actuality they would have to converse via technology, to symbolize a coming together they chatter as if they were all in one big room.

After a moment, B. Blended begins, "Did you see those new people?" D. Distance answers, "Yeah, that one girl turned completely white when Dr. W. started talking. I heard her say, 'what in the world is Dr. W. talking about?' That new guy next to her said, 'I have no idea.' Man do I remember those days." (They all laugh.)

L. Local adds, "I remember feeling that way and sometimes I still do. In one of those early classes when we were forced into groups with people we didn't know and told to prepare an article for submission to that UCEA (University Council for Educational Administration) conference, I was lost. Even though I'm not as confused as some of those outsiders I wish all our professors had emphasized the importance of the various research philosophies and methodologies from the beginning. I'm still uncertain about some of the research and writing processes I'm using in my research papers."

B. Blended agrees. "Me too. I think there are several of us struggling with the writing process. But those new people sure have a lot to learn. Who are they anyway?"

D. Distance follows up, "I finally asked Dr. N. and he told me that we would have some other people in this class because they needed to take it to graduate. But to be honest I'm a little protective of our group."

L. Local echoes, "Yeah, I know. We've become more like kinfolk than I ever imagined. I know a couple of people won't ever feel this way but for me it's almost like a therapy session every time we get together."

They have established enough trust and respect to allow their "I's" to welcome the "me's" they have seen in each other's eyes, words and gestures. They are valued as

fellow academics, counselors and in some cases, friends (Mead, 1922, 1967; Riley & Stoll, 2004). The stage fades to black as they nod in agreement.

Frame/act four—applying the lessons learned—saying goodbye. This is our final scene, and things are dramatically sparser than they were in any of the other three acts. Instead of a classroom with tables, cameras, a projector and many people, there are simply three stools, one on stage right and left and one downstage. The stage lights come up to about 25%. The spotlight shines on the center downstage stool where, surprisingly, D. Distance is seated. He has actually dressed up a bit for the occasion, symbolizing that he no longer doggedly holds to his rural superintendent image but is open enough to tell the group that he wants them to accept him as a student and colleague.

He begins, "I know you didn't expect me to get much out of this. After all I was the guy who checked the price of cattle on the commodity market *(laughter).* In the beginning, I enrolled in this program just to get a degree and pretend like I wasn't as lonely as I was. But the interactions with other members have changed me. "I" really do care about they think of "me" (Mead, 1922, 1967). I am a dedicated school administrator and due to many group assignments where you have asked my opinions I have quit "multitasking" as much and learned to stay engaged."

D. Distance freezes and his spotlight dims. The next one comes up stage right where B. Blended is seated. She looks toward the audience and summarizes, "I have experienced a revival. When I started, I felt really behind everyone else, but after having learned so many collaborative techniques such as jig sawing (delegating a part of one concept to each person in a school. After some study they come together and work with each other to conceptualize the whole issue) and book studying I feel empowered to rejuvenate my school. You know I just became a principal and from the cohort itself has made me believe in the PLC concept."

B. Blended freezes and the lights dim. Finally, the spotlight comes up on stage left and L. Local. Unlike the first scene, she is now in blue jeans and a collared shirt, indicating a more relaxed, accepting view of herself having gained her colleagues' respect in significant, numerous symbolic interactions (Mead, 1922, 1967).

L. Local explains, "We turned lots of conflict into constructive change. And, in turn, that changed me. I remember when M. Mixed and O. Onsite hotly debated gender equality among school administrators. We made this a positive experience when Dr. Q. encouraged us to lower our voices and take a breath and our disagreement became an important class dialogue (Bohm et al., 1992). I don't think we will ever completely agree but I learned that some men and women expect female administrators to behave more conservatively than men. That in itself has helped me learn that a little "impression management" (Goffman, 1959) can help me table the gender issues when working with teachers and parents to illustrate that constructivist learning is more meaningful than memorization.

I also recall when local and distant students asked Dr. M. to extend the due dates for that one assignment. We made her understand that we could do a much better job on it given more time. This simple protest encouraged me to understand the teachers and students in my school a bit better (Brookfield, 2003). I try never to forget what Carl Glickman (2003) writes, that education should prepare students to speak for themselves and for those who are unable to speak for themselves. Even though I love administration I

am thinking about becoming a college professor. I want to teach this stuff to more administrators like me."

Lights dim on L. Local and all three actors stand and pick up their individual stools. D. Distance steps up to the edge of the higher stage. L. Local and B. Blended approach him. They situate their stools in a line and wriggle onto them. They are seated within an arm's reach from each other. They then turn to each other and discuss that they might have liked to see more coursework on alternative theories to school success other than PLC inspired works. They review some of the conflicts that have occurred over the years but also bring up specific cases where students reached out to each other. They also recall when D. Distance taught L. Local more about the technology so communication could be chat and L. Local kept him apprised of some on-site activities he might want to attend. There seems to be agreement and relief that after strong PLC-oriented generals questions, their doctoral committees were encouraging them to conduct dissertations on the topics of their choice, using a variety of methodologies. D. Distance was conducting a traditional quasi-experimental design, B. Blended an imbedded case study, and L. Local a narrative inquiry. One thing they all agreed on is that without B. Blended they most likely would never have formed any semblance of a PLC. She offered the affirming "me" that both site members needed to perceive in each other. She had encouraged L. Local to see that chitchatting with colleagues when L. Local thought he should be paying attention was his way to survive the transactional distance by making personal connections with his fellow "outsiders." She had also convinced R. Remote that L. Local was not really rejecting his "I" but was merely distracted by dissonant noise and closed her computer from time to time (Mead, 1922, 1967).

After much more conversation among the trio, D. Distance is the last to speak to the audience. L. Local and B. Blended turn to look at him: "You know, even though our cohort had no specific leader most of us agree that our experience was special. You guys are living proof. We came into this group from different educational backgrounds. We were former teachers in science, math, English, elementary, vocational technology, music and art but we all had a passion for school improvement and sought desperately for connections to other professionals. Our community of learners became more and more focused on professional discourse. Even though I know a couple of people do not feel connected to our little band of scholars, I really like them too. Speaking for myself, there will be something missing in my life when this is over. I wonder if I will ever find another cadre of professionals to take all of the cohort members' places. Only time will tell."

D. Distance sits silently for a moment as if he is soaking up the last of the experience and re-living it in his mind. L. Local and B. Blended lower their heads a bit also indicating contemplation. As the stage spotlight begins to fade, L. Local, B. Blended, and R. Remote quietly stand, pick up their stools and head off into the darkened stage.

On Becoming and Its Implications

Our play described cohort members as they viewed themselves before, during and after their courses of study, general examinations and on into dissertation work. Through the lenses of PLC, social presence and transactional distance theory, the participants' and our recollections of our evolving senses of self illustrated roadblocks and benchmarks for

learning community development in a mixed setting (Brown, 2001; Davies & Quick, 2001; Kim, 2000; Lewis, 2005; Lock, 2003; Lovik-Powers, 2003; Petrides, 2002; Rovai, 2002; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Schott, Chernish, Dooley, & Linder, 2003; Schwier, 2001, Scribner & Donaldson, 2001, Weisenberg & Willment, 2001).

Although Pathways created some get-acquainted events for the students, some believed that instructors were oblivious to the initial rifts among and between distance/local people from the onset (Kosak et al., 2004; McLaughlin, 1999). Other unintentional professorial omissions only exacerbated this hidden curricular strife. For example Dr. M. never showed her face to the distance camera. In one class when R. Remote held up a piece of paper to be recognized, B. Blended had to bring this fact to the instructor's attention even though by that time the question had been answered. Much of the tension evidenced a lack of social presence across transactional distances (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Jelfs & Whitelock, 2000; Jolivette-Jones, 2007). Using Goffman (1959) as a springboard, Rettie (2005) explained that, particularly in virtual social situations, visual presence is not enough to overcome transactional distance. So even if professors first saw R. Remote's piece of paper and allowed him to ask a question that did not necessarily mean that he or any other students felt continuously "present" or engaged.

Once roving students initiated group ventures with local and distance students and professors assigned projects such as designing aspects of the new Pathways' building and classrooms, cohort members began to feel a sense of community. The students came to respect and rely on each other. When one of L. Local's compatriots, a principal, had school-based challenges or a D. Distance member experienced a demanding job change, most students responded empathetically. It may be that educators attended to others' personal needs because they could not view themselves as calloused (Goffman, 1959) but they may have reacted out of altruism. In any case we believe their actions were genuinely affirmative and well received. All of the class celebrated each other's successes and supported each other through personal crises. A collaborate community was also evident when students convinced Dr. M. to respond to complaints about short due dates for assignments and adjust them accordingly (Brookfield, 2003; Colin & Heaney, 2001; Goldring & Schuermann, 2009; Maher, 2005; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). This connective moment again reshaped many students' "I's" in terms of a collective "me."

There are obvious limitations to our study as it is focused on just one of the many cohorts now in place throughout the country. Moreover we did not address the faculty debate over the feasibility and/or academic quality of such programs (e.g. Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Colin & Heaney, 2001; Witte & James, 1998). The first act of our play does confirm to some extent the concerns that cohorts tend to stifle honest expressions that may criticize course content and/or delivery (Brookfield, 2003). However whether out of sheer frustration or encouragement from a few students we confirmed that close contact in a compressed format can encourage virtual and local participants to form intellectual and personal bonds with fellow learners the (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Green, 2006; Tu, 2002b; Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Witte & James, 1998). Our greatest contribution is that the play covered four years, giving the reader a long term glimpse into the process of personal, academic and professional student self perceptions. Throughout the years participants gained an empowered concept of themselves through

interactions with each other (Maher, 2005). Our major practical contribution is to wake up faculty members, the sleeping giants whom other authors mention (Celsi & Wolfinbarger, 2002; Cyrs, 1997; Kosak et al., 2004). Even those who favor cohort programs might inadvertently discourage them by neglecting students needs to observe positive reconstructions of themselves through the authority figures' eyes. Had many of the instructors taken the time to know each student they would have been aware of the initial discord and proactively brought various students together in classrooms and through cyberspace quickly to dialogue about the tensions (Green, 2006; Tu, 2002b; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Fortunately we were able to work through strife and reconstruct our "I's" in terms of each other's positive reflections of "me" persevering more together than alone (Mead, 1922, 1967; Miller & Irby, 1999).

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