Introduction: Still the Same But Different

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Over the last two years I have worked with our second cohort of Eureka! Scholars. I was part of the initial cohort of Eureka! Scholars, which was one of the most fulfilling activities of my professional career. When Rosemary Evans, principal of the University of Toronto Schools, invited me to coordinate the second group, I immediately accepted. This second cohort built on the work of the first cohort because we had solid examples of teacher research and I had a much better understanding of the process for educators to study their practice.

This second cohort embraced the challenges of teacher research; their commitment to deepen their understanding of teaching and to improve the learning environment for their students was inspiring. The second cohort was slightly different from the first in that we included an elementary school teacher from the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study. This crossover between institutions was important because it expanded our group, mixed elementary and secondary school teachers, and included a different perspective. Our group of Scholars “gelled” instantly – from the first meeting there was a wonderful dynamic among all participants. We became a research community characterized by support for each other while providing intellectual critique.

It was interesting that all of the participants came to the group with a fairly solid goal for their research. I feel that part of the reason for their clear focus was that the first group of Eureka! Scholars had presented their work to the UTS community. Through informal conversations with UTS colleagues, formal presentations at faculty meetings, and professional development sessions, they showed that teachers can conduct rigorous research that improves teaching. They demonstrated that their research is of interest to others – beyond their own classroom.

We used a format similar to our first group of Eureka! Scholars:

• Each meeting had an official agenda with a specific focus.
• All meetings began with us going around the group with each person providing an update of his or her work.
• We systematically worked through the research process.

Teacher learning has attracted a great deal of attention. What do beginning teachers need to know? How do teachers learn once they are on the job? How can they continue to learn over their
careers? So many initiatives have come and gone – from highly structured professional development sessions to mandated learning communities. All have a place, but we need to consider the learning processes that are important to individual teachers. One of the flaws of mandated professional development is that it overlooks what is a “burning” issue for the individual teacher. What is the individual educator's struggle? Why is this important? What keeps a teacher awake at night? Addressing highly individualized questions cannot be done in a generic professional development session because these issues are personal and context-dependent, and it often takes a team of folks to address them. Teacher learning cannot be reduced to a quick fix or a single workshop because learning takes time and requires discussion, trial and error, data gathering, and sustained thought. There are no simple answers to the questions of education, especially as the learning environment shifts and expands as digital technology is incorporated into education. However, teachers need to “own” their own explorations of these questions, make sense of them, and find solutions that work for them and their students.

Constructivism as a learning process has been proposed repeatedly over decades. Although it is a widely embraced concept, it is difficult to put it into practice. Richardson (2003) explains why it has remained so nebulous:

Constructivist teaching as a theory or practice, however, has only received attention for approximately one decade. Current interest and writing in constructivist teaching leaves many issues unresolved. These issues relate, in part, to the difficulty in translating a theory of learning into a theory or practice of teaching, a conversion that has always been difficult and less than satisfactory. (p. 1623)

To help understand what this philosophy looks like in practice, Ahsan and Smith (2016) identify some of its elements:

- Social interaction and dialogue
- Environment deeply rooted in culture
- More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) helping students
- Scaffolding
- Progressing through the zone of proximal development (ZPD)
- Constructive and timely feedback
- Collaboration among students (p. 134)

I have been in education for many years and have long embraced the philosophy of constructivism but struggled with the practice. I feel that through the two Eureka! cohorts we have achieved a measure of constructivist teaching and learning. Our Eureka! Scholars actualized this philosophy of education because at our monthly meetings participants not only shared their work but also provided feedback. Our community had all of the elements of constructivism identified above. Discussion was rich because all of the teachers had the same inquiry stance, which was important because no one was looking for quick-fix solutions. They understood that the teaching/learning process is complex and that students are individuals. One of the key elements of constructivist teaching is building a safe community. According to Peterson (1992), “When community exists, learning is strengthened – everyone is smarter, more ambitious, and productive” (p. 2). This was certainly true of our group. One of the key elements of our discussions was understanding how a strategy that
works for one student may not work for others. The dialogue around the need to tailor education to individuals was one of the most interesting parts of the process for me because the educators appreciated the need to have a vast repertoire of teaching strategies while their inquiry stance encouraged them to think broadly and deeply. Rather than talk about the class of students as a homogenous group, they recognized that each class of pupils is composed of individuals. It is so rare to have a discussion that looks so carefully at the nuances of teaching.

In order to provide a scaffold for the research process, we followed these steps:

• Finding a doable research topic
• Locating literature on your given topic
• Designing an instrument to explore the topic
• Gathering data
• Analyzing the data
• Writing the chapters
• Discussing ways to disseminate our research

Our first group of Eureka! Scholars published their findings in a report entitled *Eureka! Fellowship Program for Teacher Researchers*. This publication provided a solid foundation for our new group because it was written in accessible language and provided examples of data that could be gathered by classroom teachers. The call for teachers to be studying their practice is echoed through all panels of education. Whether locally from the Ontario Ministry of Education or internationally from the American Education Research Association of America, many have struggled with the puzzle of teacher research groups. One of the challenges is having examples of how teachers can do research in addition to their many other duties and showing that teacher-based research is valued by the wider educational community. Our Eureka! Scholars are an example of teachers studying their practice in a rigorous way that adheres to the standards of conventional research yet meets their individual needs.

Our second group of Eureka! Scholars explored a range of questions that ranged from looking at a specific teaching strategy (e.g., Kahoot!) to understanding pupils’ perception of a discipline (e.g., visual arts) to professional development for teachers (e.g., induction for teachers new to UTS). By examining teaching (e.g., from the students’ perception of strategies that teachers use) and learning in general (e.g., the role of executive functioning), we have touched on many topics that are part of the teaching/learning process. Through our learning community we learned a great deal about curriculum, learners, research methods, and the broader educational context. I believe our work will be of interest to other educators and that we have made a significant contribution to the growing literature on education. It was my true pleasure to work with such an outstanding group of educators. In many ways they were the same as the first cohort – smart, committed, funny, wise – yet were slightly different. They enriched my personal and professional life in so many ways. Their friendship and professional collaboration were gifts that I cherish.

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REFERENCES

