Chapter 2
Disrupting Relationships: A Catalyst for Growth

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ABSTRACT
Can the disruption of teachers’ relationships with themselves, as both teachers and learners, be a source for professional growth? In this chapter the authors explore teachers’ professional development experiences as a source for disrupting relationships with the “self-as-teacher” and “self-as-learner” and the way this process can facilitate innovative changes in their teaching practices. While some may view “disrupting relationships” as a negative move, the chapter will frame a view of such relational ruptures with subsequent repair as potentially growth fostering. In contrast to a view that sees disrupting relationships as a negative move, this work provides a view of reconciliation and repair as one that propels the individual forward – a move that is steeped in learning about self and about other. Developmentally, the authors understand the sense of disconnection, or rupture, as an essential “evolutionary” step as individuals continue to move beyond their mental and emotional boundaries increasing growth and learning (Kegan, 1982, 1994). In seeking to understand the teachers’ experiences, this work provides an intimate and descriptive picture of the negotiations participants made during and after an extended professional development seminar vis-à-vis their learning and teaching practice. In doing so, the authors make visible the complicated processes involved as teachers question conventional practices and invite innovation into their classrooms.

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Disrupting Relationships

THE SUMMER TEACHERS INSTITUTE

This chapter focuses on the experiences of veteran teachers who participated in an intense week-long professional development Summer Teachers Institute (the Institute), focusing on the study of Jewish history, culture and civilization. The goal of the Institute was to help teachers who are responsible for teaching about Judaism (in public and private non-sectarian and Jewish schools) deepen their subject matter knowledge through first-hand experiences. At the center of this experience was a close examination of collaborative text study, how it could be incorporated into teachers’ practice and students’ learning, and the study. One of the curricular assumptions was that text study itself was an important form of professional development because of the dispositions it requires of the learner. In particular, we asked the participants to engage in Hevruta study, a form of collaborative text study drawing from ancient Jewish traditions involving pairs of learners who remain partners throughout the Institute. This form of study asks participants to engage in practices that sharpen their capacity for active listening, attentive questioning, voicing, and challenging (Holzer, 2002, 2006; Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009). Additionally, participants investigated archival documents drawn from the American Jewish Archives, artifacts, portraits, and film through a historiographic approach, asking participants to “read” the texts for meaning, association, historical context, and interpretation (Raider, in progress). This immersion experience embodies Boler’s (1999) charge to “challenge rigid patterns of thinking” by placing participants in a learning context in which they begin to “self-reflectively evaluate the complex relations of power and emotion” (p. 157). Throughout the Institute the teachers were prompted to consider their thought patterns through written reflections, their consideration of prior knowledge, their processes for making meaning, and the ways they were engaging with the texts, with Institute facilitators, and with their peers. Additionally, this process of self-reflection opened spaces for them to understand themselves (cognitively and emotionally) and provided an opportunity for growth—learning we see as transformational (Mezirow, 2000).

The teacher participants have described the “fluid” experience of shifting roles (from teacher to learner and back again) that they experienced during the Institute, noting how the week differed dramatically from the typical professional development experience. As one participant reflected, “everybody had the opportunity to be the guy in charge” during their learning and that gave her a sense that she could “take up space” (Hadas-sah, personal communication, August 2007). In short, the Institute provides a “counter-story” of teaching-learning relationships in professional development (Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009) and challenged them to integrate this experience into their teaching lives as they returned to their own classrooms and students.

THEORETICAL LENSES FOR THIS WORK

We find that identifying how people “unlearn” conventional practices - a complex developmental process - is best approached through three theoretical lenses. First we turn to David Hawkins’ (2002/1974) model of the “I, Thou, It” triangle, which captures the essential relationships of classroom life. Second we examine relational theories (e.g. Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 2004; Miller, 1976; Miller & Štiver, 1997) to help us understand how these essential learning relationships support and impede learning. Third, we add understandings gleaned from human developmental theory, particularly focusing on adult developmental theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Each of these lenses helps us take into consideration the emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal facets of this developmental move.
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