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Co-Researching the Researchers: Dicep's Ongoing Self-Reflection

by *Monica McGlynn-Stewart*

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The self-appointed chronicler of DICEP strikes again! In 1997 I prepared, distributed and analyzed an anonymously completed survey of our collaborative action research group (McGlynn-Stewart, 1998). I felt that there were a lot of issues that needed to be discussed regarding how we functioned as a group, and I wanted to provide a forum for that to happen. In 1999, I facilitated an interactive email conversation among our members for an update on how we were doing with respect to the issues that arose in the earlier survey (McGlynn-Stewart, 2001).

This time I had two reasons for asking the group to engage in self-reflection. During the 2000-2001 school year, we began a new phase of our research, funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation. We obtained the grant as teacher- researchers, with no university-based member on board. I wanted to see how the group felt this changed the nature of our group, and what the advantages and disadvantages were.

The second reason was that I wanted us to investigate our practice in a way that was consistent with what we were asking our students to do. Our current focus is on co-researching with our students. We want our students to be involved in setting the direction for the research on their learning, in investigating their learning as it is happening, and in analyzing the results of the research. In keeping with this focus, we collaboratively designed interview questions for our group members. I interviewed the members individually, and another member interviewed me. I then facilitated a group interview, and finally we met to collaboratively analyze the transcripts of the interviews.

A strong theme of both the 1997 survey and the 1999 email conversation was that the main attraction and strength of DICEP was the supportive and constructive atmosphere it provided for teaching and learning. The 2001-2002 interview was no exception. We all agreed that there was a sense of loss with the departure of Gordon Wells, the founder of DICEP, but we were all very positive about our current functioning.

Some of the questions we asked ourselves included:

- What makes this phase of DICEP unique?
- What is the best part of DICEP for you?
- What could we improve?
- Where should we go next?

Within the framework of these simple questions, we discussed a host of issues such as leadership, communication, the relationship between theory and practice, professional development, and our treatment of new members.

We had two new members during this phase, and through the interview process we discovered that they had had very different initial experiences with DICEP. One member joined just as we were finalizing our current grant proposal. This is how she describes her initial experiences,

I did always feel welcome and I found you incredibly welcoming, incredibly generous. You gave me enough [information about the group] for the minute, and when I needed more you gave it to me. And I always felt that if I wanted to ask for more, I'd get it.

The other new person also felt that we were friendly, but she wasn't given the information that she needed to fully contribute. She describes her feelings,

I love everybody instantly, like I got the best, best, best feelings. But I was nervous being an outsider, being a university professor because I didn't want people to think that I thought something different. And I wasn't part of the original grant, the Spencer grant that you have now. And I remember thinking well, I want to ask to see the Spencer grant, but then I thought that might be too presumptuous. I was always trying to piece together who was who and so I still couldn't ask any of these questions because then I felt, well, I'm going to sound too pushy.

During the course of the interview, and the later group interview and group analysis, we discovered why these two new members had had such different experiences with DICEP. With the first member, we assumed that she knew very little about us, so we made an effort to give her as much information about the grant and about us as we could. With the second member, we assumed that because she was a colleague of our former member, Gordon Wells, that she already knew about our work and us. The first member assumed that her questions would be perfectly acceptable, while the second member was worried that we might think her questions were "pushy". The interview process gave us the opportunity to examine our assumptions and we hope to learn from this experience by ensuring that each new member has his or her needs met.. As one member said,

I was struck with the fact that we don't have a protocol in place for welcoming newcomers. I think [the second new member]'s comments will help us to be more aware of what we need to do, beyond being kind, welcoming and inclusive, when someone new comes into the group.

Two strong themes that emerged from the interviews are interrelated-- our style of leadership and our collaborative, supportive interaction style. After our first survey in 1997 when issues of shared leadership arose, we started to rotate the positions of chair and secretary. During the 1999 conversation, members reported that this increased the level of democracy in the group, but that there still was not complete equality of power. By 2001-2002, we seem to have evolved into a truly egalitarian and collaborative group. Here is what some of our members say,

- I just love the way we take turns so naturally in leadership, the way we support each other. No one is trying to prove anything just people who sincerely are good teachers, they're questioners, thinkers, and they want to be better.
- The way we work together is joint leadership, shared leadership, with specific targets and goals, and it's self-directed, not because someone is having us do it.
- Well, I think the main difference [from earlier phases] is that the group truly is run as a democracy now, and there doesn't appear to be anybody who is a leader of the group, we're all sharing that responsibility equally.

A large part of our monthly meetings involves members bringing in work-in-progress to get feedback from the group. This feedback forms a large part of the support that members feel in DICEP. This members' view appears to be shared by all:

People will give their full attention to what you bring, that is the part that makes the group feel so good and so respectful. And the times when I've come and I've thought "I don't know where I'm going with this" and everybody is so interested and they give me the best ideas. I always come away feeling like what I had was valuable and now I know where to go or I have some new questions. You know, just the contribution of the group always refuels what I come with and I never feel worried about what people are going to think. I just want to know what people think.

During our discussions of the differences between this phase of our group and earlier phases, two changes were most salient. Both of them had to do with the founder of the group, Gordon Wells, moving to California. The first change was that we wrote a grant proposal on our own for the first time, and it was accepted. Secondly, we have been responsible for ongoing communications with our funder, as well as all other aspects of administration. While this has resulted in more work, we agree that the hassles are worth it, and that it has increased our sense of ownership in the group. We agree that we have made gains since being on our own, but we also miss Gordon and his knowledge and expertise.

Another theme that arose is also connected to Gordon's departure. Gordon was our supplier of current literature that is relevant to our projects. Because he taught courses on action research and socio-cultural theory, he was always up to date on the newest articles. The interview process revealed that we have all felt that we have not done enough reading of current research and particularly of theory during this phase. We are hoping to incorporate more reading and discussion of relevant articles into our monthly meetings.

I think all members of DICEP would agree that we are pursuing our own professional development as learners and teachers, while at the same time seeking to provide meaningful and effective learning experiences for our students. Here's how one member describes the professional development she derives from DICEP:

I think that the professional development opportunities that it gives me is the best part of DICEP, the fact that it gives me somebody else to talk to about things that I get excited about in my work. It also makes me do the things I would be doing anyway, but more systematically. I think it keeps me current. I get a chance to talk to people who are on the same wavelength; there's a common viewpoint there. So I feel quite happy if somebody wants feedback, giving them

feedback, and I feel quite happy bringing my stuff in and saying, "there's this, but I want some help with this". I feel completely comfortable with that. I get energy for my work through going to a DICEP meeting. DICEP also gives me a chance to attend conferences and to present at conferences. I think it gives me a chance to take leadership in my profession in a way that the school board doesn't prioritize.

Two members describe the effect that their involvement with DICEP has had on their students:

- My [special education] students have benefited, absolutely. And I have some students with whom I have worked for three years and because of working and thinking [with DICEP], it's allowed me to come up with yet again a slightly different perspective for how to attack the same goal "how do I get these kids engaged, how do I get them to learn? And I think now, I do have some kids engaged. And I think that's movement. I think what I'm doing is giving more power to the kids.
- I think the kids get a real kick about being included in the research. And I also think that the emphasis that we have on talk, two-way discussion, and interpersonal relationships and the importance we put on talking things through as opposed to doing everything in writing, has helped my kids tremendously in becoming thinkers for themselves.

The interview process allowed us to reflect on our current phase of development as a collaborative action research group. In conjunction with the earlier survey and email conversation, we now have a written history of our development, over a five year period, as seen through self-reflection. We have had a chance to learn new things about each other, and to confirm the value that we place on our learning and teaching relationships. As a result of the reflection exercises, we have made new plans for the future. We hope that our discoveries may also prove useful to other action research groups. As one member said after reading the transcripts of our interviews, " If you were writing an article with advice to people starting and maintaining a teacher research group, I would suggest that they do some surveying as you have on a regular basis. I think it's really valuable".

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