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## How Are Learning Communities Like *Stone Soup*?

*Exploring a Praxis*

### CASE IN POINT

For many years I have told my own version of *Stone Soup*. I go back to the Scandinavian tale called “Nail Soup” that I remember from an old reader in my childhood.<sup>1</sup> Whether I’m telling it to children or as part of a community Thanksgiving food drive, I place the story anywhere that one might find refugees fleeing from whatever civil terror was current—Bosnia, the Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, the Tex-Mex border, or any inner-city neighborhood.

I tell of a sudden devastating storm and weary, frightened, mutually suspicious families or individuals who seek shelter in the same old barn. Only an old lame soldier feels free to offer everyone a share of his marvelous soup, made from a stone dropped in a pot of boiling water. It doesn’t really matter if the teller calls it a nail instead of a stone because what happens next depends on interactions rather than an object. As the old soldier chats on about how much better it might taste if he had a bit of this or that, individuals dig into their closely guarded bags and add potatoes, carrots, onions, beans, even a few old soup bones, and finally, a crowning taste of salt. In the end, the story says, there was enough soup for everyone. The next day, as the once-isolated clumps of refugees move on together, now willing to trust and support each other, they wonder about that old man and his nail or stone—was it magic?

More often than not, in the discussion afterward we conclude that cooperation and sharing are indeed a kind of magic—better than a magic wand or three wishes because it is always at our command.

## WHAT IS THE STONE IN THE SOUP FOR LEARNING COMMUNITIES?

The kind of magic found in *Stone Soup* is complex, requiring the interaction of three components: the stone, the old soldier, and the community—take one away and all you have is a cold stone and a group of isolated individuals. The same complexity is true of the work done by all who see stories as highly effective tools for learning. For the magic to work, the three necessary components are a rich story, a teacher/facilitator who invites interactions, and the learners/listeners who contribute further questions and insights that come together in a way that nourishes everyone's understanding.

Many years ago, a 5-year-old was sure that the stone itself was magic; I asked him to help the rest of us understand how the magic worked—was it an “abracadabra” kind of thing or a transforming power? “No,” he said, “it’s like that little brown thing Mama puts in soup that has all the flavors in it and you just boil them out. But it’s magic so you can make them be whatever you like for your favorite kind.”

In many ways the child’s perception of the story/stone as kind of bouillon cube capable of changing flavors according to individual tastes is a very apt image. It speaks to the importance of using a story/stone that is rich—that is loaded with all kinds of worthwhile ingredients. It also suggests the importance of being intentional about the way the old soldier/teacher/facilitator invites comments and questions. In later chapters I explore more closely strategies that keep questions open, yet guide and focus the inquiry the learning community engages in.

Still, the image of a bouillon cube doesn’t really work, when we think of the story/text as a *catalyst*. In chemistry, a *catalyst* is something that brings about a change, but that does not change itself. In the same way, the story or text itself remains the same, just as the old soldier claims to use the same stone or nail again and again to make soup. It is the reaction, or processing, that changes each time; in other words, it is the interaction between facilitator and the learning community. As I can attest, in the dozens of times that I have told *Stone Soup*, each time the conversation afterward was unique, resulting in different nuances in the understandings that emerged and the questions that lingered.

Nonetheless, there is a common element to all the discussions, reflecting the nature of the story itself. This too is consistent with the nature of a catalyst. Something that is an effective catalyst for certain reactions does nothing when combined with other components. Thus, while the story of *Stone Soup* is wonderful for exploring the power of sharing or cooperation, it is not a very good catalyst for discussing anger. In later chapters we will

be looking at crucial instructional decisions that go into choosing stories that can be a catalyst for the goals we have for a particular inquiry into one discipline, or across several.

### **How Can Texts Act as a Catalyst in Biblio-Poetry Therapy?**

I had become aware of the complexity of seeing the story/stone as a catalyst when I worked with my mother to coauthor a book on *biblio-poetry therapy*, the therapeutic use of poems or extracts from literature.<sup>2</sup> She and I teased out the differences between using a poem in a literature class, such as I might teach, and the therapeutic sessions she conducted in a mental hospital. We saw that it was not enough to “prescribe” a text that someone would go off to read and thus gain insight into the issues troubling them. The effectiveness comes from the way the poem or story acts as a catalyst for self-understanding through a skillfully guided discussion.

Like other creative arts therapies, biblio-poetry therapy is strengths-oriented. Sessions do not begin with the patients’ problems; they begin instead with their responses to a rich text that can trigger a recognition—that is, the images of a poem connect to something in the participant’s life. As the carefully facilitated discussion goes on, participants dig deeper into their own responses and juxtapose them with those of other participants. The goal is not a single “right answer” for everyone, but an enriched understanding that each constructs. It is the interactive process involving the facilitator and the group that brings out the insight and meaning that can be healing (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1984/ 2011).

We discussed the difference between her work with mental health patients and personal growth groups and the storytelling I had been doing for a decade at that point. I was definitely not doing therapy. However, there was no question that part of the magic of the stories I told was that they had a strong biblio-therapeutic element. In the chapter on play, I will go deeper into this distinction as well as into the importance of maintaining boundaries. However, my field notes show that the stories that captured the children most profoundly were those that allowed them to think more clearly about who they were, what they were feeling, whether they were lovable/competent/powerful, or how they might deal with problems in a way that developed those qualities.

### **How Do Texts Act as a Catalyst in the Teaching/Learning Dynamic?**

The importance of a catalyst also came up in the early 1990s, when Sue Gottschall asked me to join in formulating a proposal to the Annen-

berg Foundation Schools Initiative.<sup>3</sup> We got the funding for what we called the Stone Soup Network; as the third annual report indicates, we felt the metaphor of *Stone Soup* was a perfect image for what we were doing.

In the more than three years of existence, we have come to understand how aptly we named our Network. The Stone Soup story is about the rewards of cooperation and the importance of a catalyst. The external partner, Hug-a-Book, is like the old soldier in the story—he knows that while no one alone has much to eat, the potential of having more than enough for everyone is there—if the individuals can drop the barriers of isolation and fear and work together. His strategy works but he is the first to recognize that the richness of the mixture—the cooking up of a real culture of literacy—comes not from him but from what has happened in minds, hearts, and classrooms of the participating schools. (Stone Soup Network, 1999)

All that I have said about the workings of a catalyst only reinforces the profound message of the *Stone Soup* story. The greatest nourishment comes from acting as a community. The catalyst is important, but it is equally vital that someone acts in the role of the old soldier to facilitate the collection of individuals in an interaction that will bring them together to collectively construct meaning and understanding—something that is the social-emotional and cognitive equivalent to the best soup ever.

As I go into more detail about the way learning develops through the interplay of stories and guided interactions, it is important to clarify that I am not talking about isolated strategies or a curriculum. My concern is much more fundamental: it concerns a *praxis*—a term that means the strategies used in one's practice work because they are grounded in well-defined beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning. In effect, this praxis calls for expanding the Stone Soup Network's mission to create a culture of literacy to a general mission to create a *culture of inquiry* in early childhood classrooms. Thus the overarching goal is to engage classroom learning communities in quality intellectual work; that is, to promote education in its root sense as "the condition of drawing or leading out" learning.<sup>4</sup>

It asks teachers to see themselves as *members* of their classroom community, playing the role of the old soldier in *Stone Soup*. At the same time, teachers need the support that comes from belonging to another level of community—a *professional community of practice*<sup>5</sup>—whose members actively support one another in continuously developing and improving their ability to orchestrate learning in a way that reflects their beliefs.

### WHAT'S THE STORY ABOUT PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE?

Perhaps the most fundamental core belief of the praxis we are discussing is that teaching and learning are profoundly interconnected. Lifelong learners are always their own teachers—when they are very young as well as when they are very old—but at all stages and ages, one's ever-expanding understanding owes much to the guidance of a coach/facilitator and to fellow learners, as well as to the texts and concepts being explored.

By the same token, in the course of guiding learners, good teachers are always learning more themselves. For them—as for all lifelong learners—digging deeper and being highly intentional are habits of mind. This praxis inspires them to be constantly working to

- Understand better what kinds of specific knowledge (information/facts and concepts) are relevant to the inquiry and are appropriate for the development stage and interests of a particular group of learners
- Clarify their own conceptual understanding of the foundational “big ideas” that underlie a specific inquiry; you cannot teach for understanding if you do not have a good understanding of what you are teaching
- Explore strategies and structure lessons and activities that are most likely to be effective in helping this particular group of learners carry out quality intellectual work

Schulman (1987) coined the term *pedagogical content knowledge* (PCK) to describe the complex interaction of these three elements: content knowledge, teaching strategies, and the students' needs.<sup>6</sup> Those concerned with teacher education in many disciplines, though especially in science and mathematics, have found his framework particularly helpful in addressing the serious implications for learning and teaching, for reasons such as the following:

- Especially in early childhood settings, teachers find it difficult to teach for understanding or to guide rich inquiries because of their own limited content knowledge. Particularly for areas such as math and science, teachers may bring negative attitudes that lead them to rely heavily on direct instruction, referencing teacher guides rather than setting goals based on formative as-

assessment of the needs and interests of the children in their classroom, including developmental considerations.

- Between teachers' own uncertainty about content and the overwhelming emphasis on achievement as measured by high-stakes testing, many classrooms do not function as learning communities. Too often, the norm is highly teacher-directed classrooms, where there is limited concern to engage, motivate, or empower the children. Classroom management strategies are also hierarchical, with an emphasis on extrinsic discipline rather than intrinsic self-regulation.

According to Chen and Chang (2006), the PCK approach calls for preservice and inservice training that addresses the *whole teacher* in that same way that early childhood educators recognize the importance of teaching the whole child.

### **HOW DOES PARALLEL PROCESSING PROMOTE PCK?**

Addressing the whole teacher means the praxis that informs early childhood classrooms should also inform preservice and inservice teacher development. Both should promote teaching and learning as a dynamic that honors the Confucian dictum:

- If I teach by telling, you are likely to forget.
- If I teach by showing, you may remember.
- If I teach by engaging you in exploring and evaluating, you will learn for yourself, for a lifetime.

### **What Is Parallel Processing?**

Ever since I first began doing workshops and presentations, it has seemed natural to me to begin with a story and an extending activity. This approach, which is used by other colleagues at Erikson, can be described as *parallel processing*. Teachers are introduced to a strategy or concept in a way that parallels the pedagogical content knowledge they need to support their classroom learning communities. The power of this strategy is that the adult learners are engaged by the story and use it to problem-solve. In effect, they not only have a model of how to use a story to engage young learners in problem solving, they know in their hearts, as well as their minds, how a story can draw one in to explore and to learn.

### Why Start with a Story?

The story might be done as an oral storytelling; yet often it is strategic to use a picture book and to literally involve the group in a reader's theater presentation. In any case, beginning with a story and an extending activity creates a dynamic that is very different from that of the full frontal demonstration or lectures. At best, the "sage on the stage" scatters pedagogic pearls that the audience may (or may not) scramble to pick up; but there is no question about who *owns* the knowledge. At worst, the line between lecturing and scolding gets very thin when the presentation focuses on a catalog of what ought or ought not to be going on in classrooms. In contrast, hearing a good story is always a pleasure. At the same time, it is a *story*—it's about someone else dealing with a problem in a context distanced enough to free the group from feeling defensive or scrutinized. Usually all listeners get drawn into making sense of the story for themselves. Even if the group expects the tale to turn the focus back to them and their teaching, it can be enjoyable to predict how the characters or the problem situation might relate to that session's topic.

The group is given a learning task that is set at a high level of complexity. The intention is not to model how teachers might use this specific task in their classrooms, nor to have them pretend or simulate the responses children might give. Rather this is a purposeful and authentic problem situation that is meant to engage adults in experiencing the cognitive dissonance of a novice learner. In other words, they are being asked to construct their own understanding of something that parallels the kind of understanding they will be guiding their students toward.

For example, we have asked adults to make sense of an English shepherd's counting system in order to help them understand how a young child can easily confuse arbitrary number names and numerals with the numerosity or quantity represented by a number (Hynes-Berry & Itzkowich, 2009). In the debriefing that follows, the group analyzes how their assumptions and misconceptions, as well as their personal level of mathematical understanding, might have played a part in frustrations and breakthroughs that they experienced in completing the task. They also discuss the role group functioning played in their learning. Then they look for parallels and connections between their experiences and the strategies they might use to help young children move through the landscape of learning, from confusion to misconception to understanding. The ways that parallel processing has been used to introduce preservice and inservice teachers to all the strategies and practices discussed in this book include the following:

- A professional development session on higher-order thinking begins with the adult group members doing a reader's theater of a classic tale like *Goldilocks* or *Cinderella* and then going on to brainstorm questions and problems they have from an adult perspective.
  - \* The debriefing begins by reviewing how open or how closed their questions were; they go on to analyze how these questions led the group into moving up and down the inquiry ladder.
  - \* As they dig deeper into the connection between the kinds of questions that are asked and the kind of thinking and learning that results, participants work with partners to plan how to get the children in their classrooms asking and answering more open-ended questions.
- To emphasize the strong impact the classroom climate can have on a classroom, a teacher study group session opens with a read-aloud of a picture book in which the social-emotional dimension plays a central part in the book's problem situation; a few of the texts I've used this way include Pete Seeger's *Abiyoyo*, John Burningham's *Edwardo, the Horriblest Boy in the Whole Wide World*, Alice Schertle's *Down the Road*, David Shannon's *David Goes to School*, and a chapter from *Mr. and Me* by K. W. Willis.
  - \* The discussion focuses on the adult characters' responses to a child's mistakes and misbehavior; drawing evidence from the words in the text and the body language and facial expressions in the illustrations, the group considers in what ways the responses may or may not have been productive in helping the child recognize or change the behavior.
  - \* The group moves quickly to examining their own beliefs about the relationship between classroom climate and classroom management problems; they also explore how their school and classroom rules function and whether punishment or positive discipline is more effective. Many indicate they are going to use the book in question to open up a discussion of these issues with their students.

### **What Is the Parallel Between the Problem Solving Done by Learners and by Teachers?**

Parallel processing also takes place in the planning and implementation phases of the teaching/learning dynamic. An effective guided inquiry calls for teachers and learners alike to be problem solvers. However, the