Mystery Montage: A Holistic, Visual, and Kinesthetic Process for Expanding Horizons and Revealing the Core of a Teaching Philosophy

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Revealing the core of a teaching philosophy is the key to a concise and meaningful philosophy statement, but it can be an elusive goal. This paper offers a visual, kinesthetic, and holistic process for expanding the horizons of self-reflection, self-analysis, and self-knowledge. Mystery montage, a variation of visual mapping, storyboarding, and collage, is utilized to uncover the core of a teaching philosophy and to challenge teachers to expand their horizons within a more holistic context. We share our personal reflections and experiences and conclude by discussing possible applications of this process to other areas of teaching and learning.

Introduction

A teaching philosophy statement expresses a teacher's personal values, beliefs, and approach to teaching and learning. The process of writing a philosophy statement can help teachers to reveal the core of their teaching philosophy (e.g., the reasons why they teach), and to be more mindful or "intentional about what they do" in the classroom (McCready & Raleigh, 2009).

Writing a philosophy statement is a dynamic activity that new and experienced teachers should revisit regularly to reflect on their teaching practice and to help construct a deeper understanding of why they do what they do in the classroom. It can be challenging, however, for new teachers to write their philosophy statement, particularly because the process of determining how one's personal beliefs and values influence professional goals can be an elusive task. McCready & Raleigh (2009) suggest that teachers need to engage in three developmental processes to be more mindful of why they do what they do in the classroom: self-reflection, self-analysis, and self-knowledge. In the first stage, teachers begin learning about themselves and reflecting on their teaching practice. For instance, by completing a teaching or learning inventory, teachers may begin to construct knowledge about their personal beliefs

and values. They may then write a paragraph in their philosophy statement reflecting on specific examples from their teaching practice. An example of this type of approach is used by Quezada (2004).

Self-analysis is a more deliberate study and critical self-evaluation of one's beliefs and an understanding of why one teaches the way they do. Nilson (2010) describes a self-analytic approach in which teachers identify a key belief, the assumptions that underlie that belief, and the implications for the classroom. While self-reflection is a systematic process resulting in a more complex and interrelated mental schema of teaching, the key difference is that self-analysis involves an element of critical reflection that involves ongoing self-improvement (Brookfield, 1988).

Self-knowledge results from a process of analysis and critical self-reflection within a broader, more holistic context. This involves building a more interrelated mental schema that compares commonalities and differences. In a self-knowledge approach, multiple interpretations are made, problems are framed and reframed in different ways, and there is a deeper, more intimate, and holistic understanding and awareness that emerges along with continued professional growth. For example, De Voss et al. (2008), suggest a self-knowledge approach in which teachers first prepare their teaching philosophy in writing, then remix and reformulate their statements in various digital media including slideshow presentations, websites, digital visual collage, and digital movies. This process of framing and reframing philosophy statements is an important part of self-knowledge because it requires teachers to think about different and more intimate associations within their teaching practice.

In this paper, we describe a holistic, visual, and kinesthetic technique for constructing teaching philosophy statements that we call mystery montage. The mystery montage is a natural sketch that helps to develop free-flowing associations amongst a number of variables. While the approach by De Voss et al. (2008) is similar in the reframing aspect, what distinguishes mystery montage is beginning with a collection of materials of unknown significance rather than prewritten philosophy statements. In

this paper, we will demonstrate how the nature of mystery montage makes it an effective method for framing a teaching philosophy by engaging teachers in all three developmental processes of self-reflection, self-analysis and self-knowledge. Throughout the paper, we have included reflections from each author, attesting to their personal experiences in building mystery montages. We will conclude with several ideas for broader and future applications for expanding horizons in other areas of teaching and learning.

Building a Mystery Montage

The first stage of building a mystery montage is to create a "mystery box" full of tokens of information about ourselves, clues to our lives as teachers: cards, images or photographs (of metaphors or real life experiences), quotes, mementos, feedback from students, or any other materials that might possibly relate to our personal or professional teaching development, practice, strategies, beliefs, or attitudes. This gathering stage corresponds with the first developmental stage of self-reflection.

The second stage, which corresponds with the process of self-analysis, involves identifying associations between these pieces of information, discovering relationships and emphases that result in a contextual structure (i.e., piecing the clues together). Montage is an artistic process that involves adding layer upon layer of images to create a more complex composite; our process builds on the concept by mixing visual mapping (Margulies & Maal, 2002), storyboarding, and collage to build associations amongst the tokens of information collected about ourselves from the mystery box (Figure 1). The visual framework of the process helps to develop a greater sense of self-knowledge by building new associations between philosophy and practice that may have previously been unidentified and unrelated. Montage is therefore a mysterious process in which unexpected juxtapositions reveal new associations and understandings while identifying an overall sense of purpose and deeply felt significance. The process also helps to expand horizons by challenging teachers
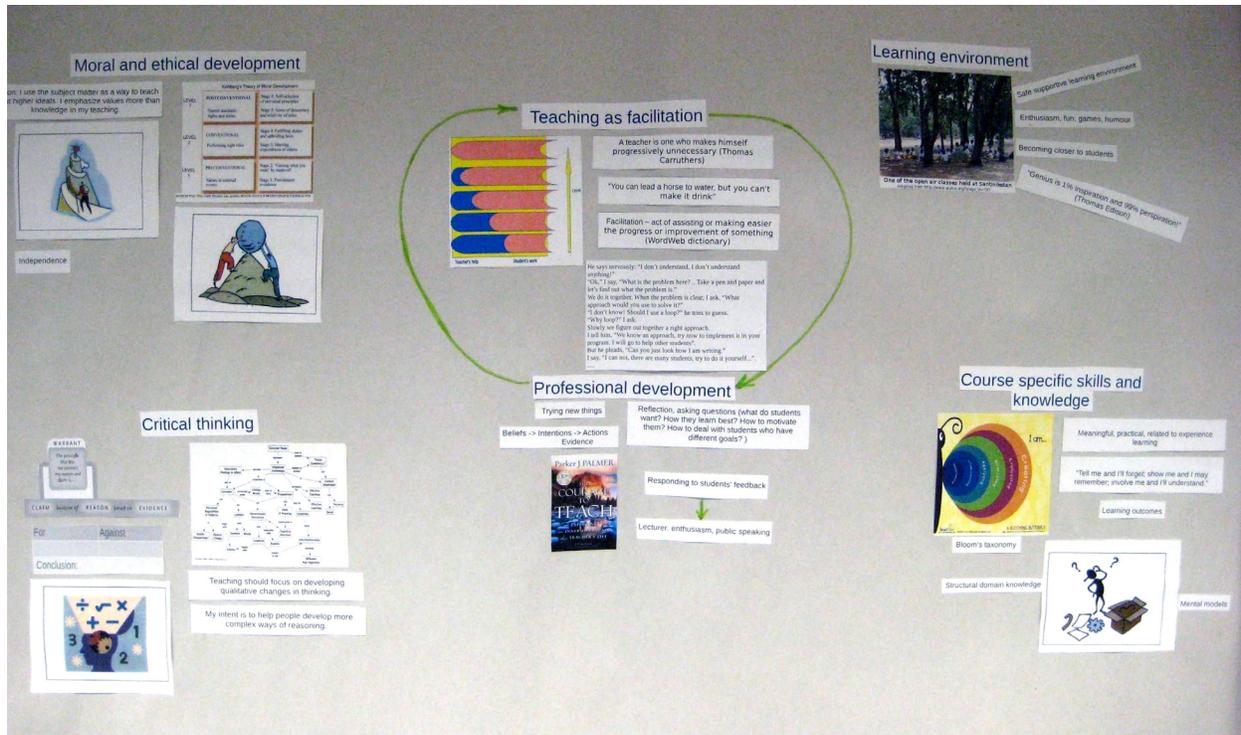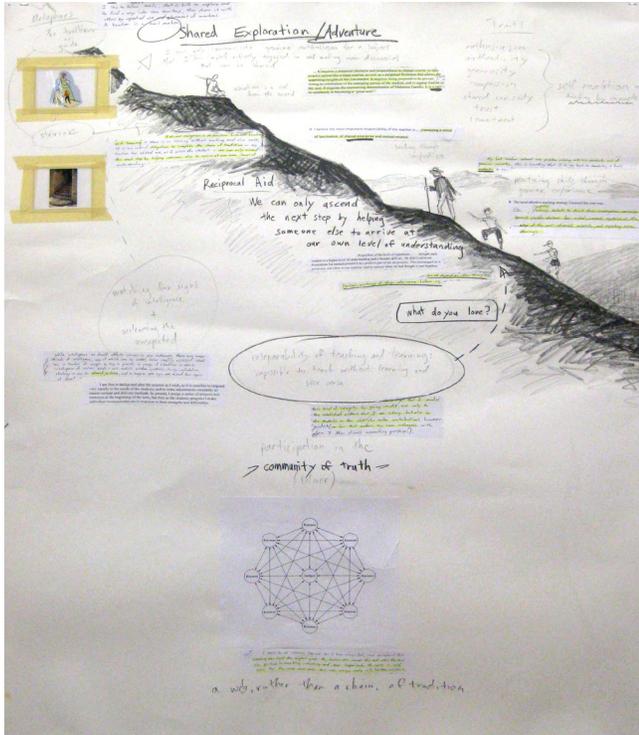
Figure 1
Mystery montage of Mayya Sharipova

to think more broadly and holistically about what influences their teaching practice.

The third stage corresponds with self-knowledge, and uses the montage to reveal the core of one's teaching philosophy. Similar to the method proposed by DeVoss et al. (2008), the process of framing and reframing teaching materials over a period of time can help teachers understand the significance of different associations amongst the various aspects of their practice, a form of self-knowledge. The process of framing and reframing embraces creativity, fluidity, and flexibility, while speaking strongly to the idea that teachers (in any stage of their careers) are still becoming who they are in unique and diverse ways. In the following statement, Kim Ennis describes the process of montage and how it helped him to discover the core of his teaching philosophy:

> I began by physically gathering all kinds of materials—artist's statements from my exhibitions of paintings,

course outlines for the studio classes I have taught, evaluations from the same classes, letters of support from students and colleagues, diagrams of the teaching-learning situation from my reading, quotes from philosophical and religious texts, excerpts from my own reflective writing, anecdotes about my favorite teachers, images that express my personal outlook–and literally spreading them out on my studio floor. Next, I condensed this material. A certain amount was simply culled and other texts were edited down to their most basic elements and images were cropped. All this was done in a completely physical manner with scissors and a waste basket, keeping all the elements within my visual field. This constant peripheral awareness stimulated new ideas for additional

FIGURE 2
Mystery montage of Kim Ennis

materials that could be included, and also began to establish relationships between certain key elements.

A third phase of arrangement in space grew out of the editing process. Certain elements became central, and lines of connection began to create a web of relationship between these and more peripheral ideas and images. This centralizing process created a center of gravity around which all aspects of my teaching experience began to coalesce, and which also attracted still more ideas and materials from my files and beyond.

Once the arrangement became compact and clear enough, I began to adhere the materials to a large sheet of drawing paper. I began to draw lines of connection, to emphasize certain elements using highlight markers and graphite

crayons. In some cases I pasted new material over old, or erased some parts of the drawing, so that the entire process became completely plastic and changeable.

The writing developed naturally from the concept map because all the elements were already arranged in a visually apparent relationship in which some were more dominant than others. Thus the structure of the statement was established along with effective imagery and illustrative details, all in accord with my deeply felt philosophy (Figure 2).

For me, the unique advantages of this method were: 1) that it is largely visual, and therefore more amenable to visually oriented learners than purely textual approaches; 2) that it is largely physical, and therefore directly sensible and manipulable, therefore more accessible to kinesthetic learning; 3) that it is readily altered, and therefore more open to spontaneous and intuitive changes; 4) that the resulting map is a structural analog for the resulting written document, therefore a blueprint that makes the writing process genuine and coherent.

Expanding Horizons: Possible Applications

Formulating a teaching philosophy statement can be intimidating and overwhelming for new faculty members and graduate student teachers with limited experience. Collecting a "mystery box" of items and organizing these items visually can provide guidance in structuring a philosophy statement by providing a visual overview of key points or crtical incidence thereby helping to identify central themes. Using a divergent reflective strategy of this kind might

FIGURE 3
Mystery montage of Carly Priebe

be a helpful starting point to enable new teachers to discover an organizing principle to frame their philosophy statement.

In addition, faculty and graduate students who have already written teaching philosophy statements might benefit from the use of mystery montage to revisit, reflect on, and possibly reconstruct current philosophy statements. Because the process is slightly removed from the philosophy statement itself, teachers can become liberated to explore new areas and connections. As the following statement illustrates, this might result in new directions for a philosophy statement or simply reinforce current key themes:

> I found mystery montage useful as a way to reflect on my current teaching philosophy statement. I decided to *root* my storyboard in community (my central theme) and create a tree-themed map where all the branches *grew* from the central theme. Through the mapping process, I was able to see

(literally) connections that I had not previously made within my written statement. I was also challenged to connect everything back to the central theme, which strengthened and solidified my written statement (Carly Priebe; see Figure 3).

The process might strengthen links between ideas to form stronger connections and continuity throughout an already written statement, as described here:

> For me, this process really emphasized the connections and relationships. I was able to put comments and feedback with students in the same place with my goals, aspirations, and favorite teaching quotes, and it helped me to see just how much all of these things align. I realized through this process how much of my teaching is centered on stories and storytelling…

For my continuing professional development, I can continue to think about and map out different aspects of my teaching with my comments from students and this will help me build different associations for future development.

Finally, as alluded to in the previous reflection, mystery montage can be useful in generating new evidence. While the central themes or the heart of the philosophy statement might not change, the process of broadly scavenging for clippings, documents, pictures, and words related to teaching tends to inspire a new vantage point from which to view the evidence.

Some less obvious, broader applications that could be explored in future research might include the use of mystery montage to organize ideas in collaborative work, an application that was utilized in the writing of this paper, as well as to connect and link main themes and topics to develop portfolios. The more linear, narrative version of storyboarding, as opposed to the mystery montage, could also be used to illustrate the learning process over time by creating a before-and-after picture.

Conclusion

Mystery montage is a useful method for framing a teaching philosophy statement that engages teachers in the processes of self-reflection, self-analysis, and self-knowledge. Its fluid and intuitive nature challenges teachers to expand their horizons within a more holistic context, while providing the ability to reveal, through a deeper sense of self-knowledge, the core of one's teaching philosophy. The method could be used creatively in a variety of other teaching and learning contexts to help both teachers and learners build self-knowledge in a visual format.

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Biographies

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