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Exploring pedagogies to elevate inquiry: teaching action research in the third space

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ABSTRACT

This study chronicles a semester long inquiry focused on the impacts of pedagogical strategies informed by the tenets of third space theory on my own practices and understanding of students' learning outcomes in an action research course. As I applied new instructional strategies to promote discourse and critical inquiry, I reflexively explored how these approaches enhanced my impacts on students' learning and praxis of action research. This paper first provides a brief introduction to third space theory and then describes how I infused this framework into my course approach, the different types of data collected and analyzed to gauge the impacts of new pedagogies, and findings that emerged. These are summarized in relation to the conditions that both undergirded and elevated students' engagement, and directions for further research to advance the praxis of action research across teacher education contexts.

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Teacher educators across disciplines are expected to teach and support classroom teachers and other education professionals to enter the workforce with sufficient knowledge and expertise to meet children's diverse learning needs. This requires different layers of competence, most notably our ability to design courses that cover required content and reliance on pedagogies that appreciably advance our students' learning and professional skills (AACTE, 2010; Fenstermacher and Richardson 2005; NCATE, 2010). To maximize our impacts, we must regularly confront and balance our own professional priorities alongside shifting education policy mandates and institutional priorities (Zeichner, Payne, and Brayko 2015; Zygmunt, Clark, Clausen, Mucherah, and Tancock, 2016). Whether done collaboratively or individually, this process of review requires deliberate reflection. Moreover, it necessitates critical re/examination of the interrelated epistemological, social, and other pressures that shape the contexts in which we and our students work (Chetty 2011; Freire 1992, 2008; Gutiérrez and Vossoughi 2010).

Scholars have urged for wider adoption of teacher education pedagogies that reflect what Zeichner (2010) described as 'urgently needed new epistemolog[ies]' (p. 89). These entail innovative and dynamic partnerships with students to stimulate authentic inquiry. These intentional forms of collaborative discovery and discourse hold promise for more directly linking teacher education coursework to the complex professional roles,

responsibilities, and functions expected of our students upon entry into the teacher workforce. However, to facilitate these connections, we must place primacy on interactions that equally privilege students' learning needs as we concurrently expose them to professionally codified knowledge and theory (Fenstermacher and Richardson 2005; Gutiérrez and Vossoughi 2010; Woolf and Wamba 2018).

Teacher education programs have increasingly included action research (AR) coursework to advance graduate level students' seeking professional education credentials transfer of theoretical knowledge into practice (Vaughan and Burnaford 2016). This form of problem-based inquiry is well described elsewhere (see for example, Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2008). Conceptually and pragmatically, AR empower us to engage in situated inquiry as we address high priority concerns. It yields new understandings and knowledge through fully engaged responsive moves, often referred to as iterative cycles (Mills 2014) in contrast to experimentally controlled, sequential steps (Kemmis 2006). Despite its innate 'messiness' (Goodnough, 2008), AR focused coursework uniquely positions teacher educators to (a) forge critical partnerships with students – and they with their respective constituents, (b) elevate students' self-identified professional priorities and values, and (c) support students as they apply newly acquired knowledge to achieve valuable social outcomes (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, and Ronnerman 2016; Nilsson, Wennergren, and Sjöberg 2018; Sela and Harel 2012).

Emerging evidence suggests that two broadly described pedagogies positively impact students' learning outcomes in AR courses. The first reflects strategies to promote students' focus on individually identified professional practice dilemmas in the context of their own classrooms, schools, and professional communities (Amir et al. 2017; Gardner and Hammett 2014; Price and Valli 2005). The second emphasizes strategies to maximize students' access to rich feedback and support as they move through repeating cycles of action-inquiry-reflection (Aune 2002; Grant 2007; Nilsson et al., 2018; Schön 1987). However, the literature is sparse with respect to specific pedagogical approaches that situate and extend students' learning during formal AR coursework (James and Augustin 2018; Woolf and Wamba 2018).

The purpose of the current study was to expand this literature base by exploring whether instructional strategies informed by the tenets of third space theory (Bhabha 1990, 1994; Soja 1996) would enhance my pedagogical impacts on students' engagement and learning during a semester long AR course. I applied these new strategies to partner with students in ways that (a) integrated their intersubjective funds of knowledge, experiences, values, and priorities into ongoing AR course work while (b) concurrently teaching and supporting them to apply AR to address self-selected professional challenges (Hulme, Cracknell, and Owens 2009; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, and Collazo, 2004). As I enacted these new pedagogies, I reflectively and critically observed how select instructional choices elevated students' engagement and inquiry (McDonough 2014; Williams 2014), enhanced their professional efficacy (Fenstermacher and Richardson 2005), and strengthened my impacts on their learning (Loughran 2007; Whitehead 2008). This inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the impacts of instructional strategies informed by third space theory on students' critical engagement in action research to advance their professional learning?

- (2) In what ways do instructional approaches informed by third space theory extend my praxis in the context of teaching an action research course?

Conceptual framework

Originally proposed by Bhabha (1990, 1994), and later expanded by Soja (1996), third space theory builds on the metaphor of space to illustrate the fluid intersections of identity, culture, and socially produced knowledge. Bhabha contended that all forms of social interaction are shaped by three interrelated social spaces: the first or perceived space, the second or conceived space, and the third or lived space. The first space represents the cumulative impacts of socio-cultural experiences and the core cultural beliefs produced across diverse communal enterprises. The second space encompasses cognitively construed ideologies, norms, and priorities acquired through formalized training. The third or lived space connotes what Soja (1996) construed as the space of possibility. It is where new knowledge and understanding to promote social change is creatively generated.

Building on Bhabha's (1990, 1994) earlier work, Soja (1996) posited that the depth of criticality needed to advance social change requires explicit use of discursive and conceptual strategies that he labeled 'thirthing' or 'thirthing-as-othering'. He argued that these strategies were essential to affect radical social change. For Soja, 'thirthing' positions constituents' from diverse backgrounds and who value often competing priorities to collaboratively embark on a 'creative process of restructuring [knowledge] that draws selectively and strategically ... to open new alternatives' (p. 5).

Central to third space theory is the notion of hybridity. This represents a deliberate state of mind to consciously straddle and scrutinize the intersections of our biases, values, and beliefs in relation to how we convey these to inform our interactions. Hybridity requires a form of dynamic criticality and is manifested through verbally mediated 'thirthing' strategies. In turn, as we integrate 'thirthing' strategies into our discourse we increase our reliance on flexible socio-cognitive stances through which to interrogate dominant social norms and restructure them to advance innovative and progressive spaces of possibility.

In addition to deconstructing both veiled and explicit impacts of cultural bias on prevailing social norms, third space theory encourages the use of critical discourse to disentangle social conventions that cast contrasting beliefs as oppositional dimensions that are best reconciled by excluding rather than creatively recombining influences. This social practice, rooted in what Bhabha (1990, , Bhabha 1994) labeled 'binarisms', perpetuates social tendencies to over simplify and inaccurately construe complex social conditions in the form of dichotomies (e.g., 'professional-personal', 'public-private', and 'research-practice'). Soja (1996) argued that substantive social progress can only be realized when diverse constituents collaboratively adopt dynamic critical stances mediated through 'both/and also' logic (i.e., 'thirthing') (Hulme, Cracknell, and Owens 2009; Rutherford 1990).

The major contribution of third space theory (Bhabha 1990, 1994; Soja 1996) in designing the current study was its conceptual and pragmatic emphasis on reflexivity and discursive stances to selectively generate new knowledge to produce meaningful social progress. This framework represented a unique set of approaches to blend course content, collaborative learning structures, and deliberate discourse to enhance students' course based learning (Hallman 2012; Klein, Taylor, Oncore, Strom, and Abrams, 2013;

Martin, Snow, and Franklin-Torrez 2011; Moje et al. 2004). It also resonated well with my professional values and priorities, in particular my interest to identify innovative forms of engagement to facilitate students' self-directed professional development and ground their applications of AR to generate context relevant/new knowledge.

In the sections that follow, I describe the context in which this study unfolded, the specific strategies I adopted, how data were collected and analyzed, and the major themes that emerged.

Study context and procedures

Study context

This study was conducted while I taught a 3-credit graduate level AR course that spanned a 15-week fall semester. This course was regularly offered each fall by an education leadership program located in a densely populated metropolitan city in the US northeast. As per program requirements, entry into the AR course was limited to individuals who had a minimum of three consecutive years experience teaching full time as a lead teacher in a school setting. The course description from the host institution's graduate bulletin is excerpted and reproduced below:

This course introduces the methods and concepts of action research to education students interested in serving at the school district level. Participants learn and develop skills for problem solving and data-informed decision making. The course emphasizes the notion that action research is an inquiry process that is site-based¹ and involves all stakeholders. The stakeholders define the problem(s) to be examined, cogenerate relevant knowledge about them, execute research techniques, interpret the results, and implement action(s) based on what they have learned.

During this study, 15 students were enrolled in my section of AR (12 women and 3 men). These students were licensed teachers and on average had 5 years of experience teaching in public education (i.e., the least experienced student had been teaching for 4 years while the most experienced student had been teaching for 9 years). Students' roles and specific expertise varied: three were special educators, one was a music educator, one was a literacy coach, and three taught specific subject matter in high school settings. Additionally, two were assistant principals, two were clinicians, and three fulfilled quasi-administrative functions (e.g., grade level and/or specialty team leaders) in addition to their teaching responsibilities.

Consistent with program practices, weekly class meetings were convened on campus in face-to-face sessions. All course materials (e.g., syllabus, assignments, worksheets, assigned readings, and supplemental resources) were provided to students beginning the first week of the semester and were electronically available to them through Blackboard™ (Bb). Students in all sections of this course completed three-five brief literature reviews and a culminating AR project. No changes were made to these course expectations.

Course approach: third space informed instructional strategies

Although my primary focus in this study was whether and how my infusion of new strategies informed by third space theory (Bhabha 1990, 1994; Soja 1996) would

enhance my pedagogy and related impact on students' learning, I also utilized materials and course structures that I had developed over time in prior semesters when I taught the AR course. This included a combination of open, unstructured dialogue and semi-structured Powerpoint™ presentations to explore and scaffold students' emerging understanding of AR, elicit their responses to assigned readings, probe issues related to their individual (emerging/ongoing) AR projects, and explore spontaneously raised topics. All weekly class meetings were brought to a close by eliciting students' summative comments, insights, and questions. These were routinely memorialized in writing (as 'takeaways'), included in weekly notes posted on Bb, and revisited in successive weeks to launch discussion and inform our collective understandings.

Establishing expectations and transparency

On the first night of the course, as I went over relevant materials and expectations, I interspersed multiple open-ended questions to promote students' participation and initial goal setting. As students and I exchanged information about our respective backgrounds, training, and interests I alternately took notes and interjected comments/questions to confirm, clarify, and/or link emerging topics of interest. At this time I explained my intention to engage in a self-study during the semester while students concurrently engaged in their own AR inquiries. I shared the emerging questions framing my self-study and that I planned to chronicle and recursively explore these questions by maintaining, reviewing, and analyzing ongoing reflective notes and process memos.

In addition to foreshadowing the purposes and ways of applying AR, I provided a brief explanation of third space theory in relation to the central constructs of focus to me, in particular my interest in exploring how my/our adoption of 'thirding' strategies would enhance our collective learning outcomes. I also shared the pivotal cumulative experiences that had shaped this inquiry and the overarching pedagogical approaches that I envisioned using during the semester. Although I was not able to definitively articulate how these intentional stances and strategies would unfold, I underscored my desire to partner with rather than lead students, to support them as they critically entertained multiple truths, and to foster learning exchanges that transcended unproductive role boundaries as we advanced our respective professional priorities.

Fostering communicative safety and trust

In tandem with concurrent early semester conversations to set the context of the course, I explored students' perspectives about ways to create and maintain a safe environment to maximize learning. In addition to exploring prior course experiences that fostered engagement, I offered suggestions based on my own and other teacher educators' efforts to engender an atmosphere of trust, safety, and authenticity while learning and doing AR for the first time (e.g., Edwards-Groves [et al., 2016](#); Gardner and Hammett [2014](#); Nilsson [et al., 2018](#); Woolf and Wamba [2018](#)). As we explored these issues we became more familiar with each other and in turn identified and norms to frame our interactions and crystalize our efforts to ensure an atmosphere of mutual respect and shared social authority (Bryk and Schneider [2003](#); Aune [2002](#); Gaventa & Cornwall, [2001](#); Schön [1987](#)).

Students and I dialogically revisited these specific questions over the span of the first three weeks of the semester. This culminated with the production of three consensus-generated social norms and exemplars to regulate our interactions. On the whole, these norms highlighted behaviors to promote an atmosphere of respect, reciprocal exchange, and accountable critical engagement. Once drafted, I distributed the norms to students and posted them along with other course resources on Bb to elicit edits and consensus. In addition to this, the norms were periodically revisited and/or 'named' during exchanges to reaffirm their relevance and/or revise them as appropriate (see [Table 1](#)).

Neutralizing potential role relegated disruptions

It was vital for me to create structures that would both privilege students' learning needs and neutralize potential learning disruptions introduced as a by-product of my/our role mediated beliefs or practices (Chetty 2011; Grant 2007; Price and Valli 2005). To foster these conditions I explored students' perceptions about learning, in particular their suggestions about ways to preempt unconscious forms of disproportionate social power and/or 'teacher as leader' and 'student as passive recipient' stances in favor of shared authority (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). I also explored conditions in which students felt that people in positions of authority had marginalized or co-opted their status and/or censored their full participation. Last, I shared some of my own similar experiences. These exchanges amplified my insights about specific ways to nurture my/our collective adoption of role and status neutral stances alongside ways to foster authentic social trust (Bryk and Schneider 2003; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001).

In a direct effort to neutralize the ascribed and disproportionate authority subsumed in my formal role as the course instructor, I invited students to co-generate evaluation metrics that would determine their formative and summative course grades and guide their ongoing work during the semester. My specific goal was to increase students' authority, minimize their potential emphasis on course grades and/or 'grade production' behaviors, and further stimulate their self-directed learning (Chetty 2011; Grant 2007).

Table 1. Co-generated interpersonal norms.

Interpersonal Norm	Exemplar
Engage respectfully	Acknowledge, affirm, and seek clarity about others' comments, beliefs Reflectively check/modulate our individual word choices, pace, and non-verbal communication
Engage reciprocally	Self regulate, i.e., pay attention to time 'on stage' and/or in the shadows Use consensus generated interruption/facilitation cues Listen actively i.e., ask true questions Frame clear, thought provoking questions Avoid veiled advice giving; clarify messages/needs
Engage critically and accountably	Communicate needs/clarify when confused Do the reading, thinking, and journaling Synthesize and apply new ideas Be open minded; try on 'both/and also' filters Collect multiple forms of data/artifacts; monitor effects

Toward this end, I invited students to collectively parse course assignments and related performance evaluation formats to isolate pivotal components and craft consensus generated metrics for our collective use. This process spanned three to four weeks as we alternately took turns adding to, removing, and rephrasing performance expectations and associated point values. I then applied these metrics when I reviewed students' work; students used them to guide their preparation of required assignments².

Adopting 'thirthing' strategies to advance authentic inquiry and discourse

To directly support students' authentic engagement in inquiry it was important to both explore and honor their intersubjective knowledge while simultaneously stimulating their increased reliance on 'both/and also' logic and stances. To elevate these stances I adopted and routinely modeled my use of 'thirthing' strategies to encourage students' creativity and flexibility as they critically deconstructed the relative merits of solutions dominated by linear or other forms of 'traditional' problem solving priorities. Through this combination of applying, modeling, and deliberately explaining my reliance on 'thirthing' strategies I endeavored to scaffold and augment students' inclusive connections (i.e., their ability to legitimize) of their accumulated experiences and values with their evolving AR projects' goals and action steps.

Throughout the semester my adoption of 'thirthing' strategies was cognitively bounded by curiosity and a commitment to discovery. This was an integral component of my course approach; it grounded how I situated students' ongoing effort to selectively integrate new insights, values, and priorities as they applied AR to address professional dilemmas (Grant 2007; Wong 2014).

Eliciting and providing critical feedback

Students had multiple opportunities to provide feedback to me about my course approach and their related experiences during the semester. However, they were also free to complete the course without sharing any feedback about their interactional learning experiences. That is, although I routinely elicited student's insights and feedback at the end of full group and individual meetings this was voluntary and emerged organically in the form of spontaneous comments and observations during class discussions. In addition to oral feedback, students were encouraged to include reflective feedback (about the course, my feedback and/or interactions, their own ongoing learning experiences) as an optional addendum to submitted assignments. Last, I elicited voluntary and anonymous feedback mid-semester (i.e., the eighth week) via an email invitation to complete an online survey. This was comprised of six questions that were focused on my course approach; it was accessed through SurveyMonkeyTM. To affirm the context of this survey, my verbal and written invitations emphasized that participation was both anonymous and voluntary (See Appendix).

Throughout the course, I worked closely with individual students to support their emerging research and applications of AR. In addition to frequent individual meetings, I provided extensive technical and conceptual feedback on all submitted assignments. By segmenting feedback in this way I provided explicit technical guidance to strengthen students' academic/critical voice in writing (e.g., editing, format, grammatical, and other suggestions) and offered conceptual feedback in the form of rhetorical and probing

questions to sustain my focus on stimulating students' critical review and integration of ideas culled from the literature, their situated data collection, and reflexive actions.

Data collection and analysis

As noted above, I maintained extensive reflective and process notes throughout the semester. To ensure comprehensiveness, I wrote brief weekly process notes after and occasionally in advance of each class, small group, and individual meeting. At the end of each week I wrote detailed reflective notes to summarize my interactions and impressions (i.e., topics raised and perceived impact of prepared/accessed materials and assigned readings in relation to students' learning). These also captured ideas about potential adjustments I might make to enhance learning, insights that surfaced in relation to the literature, and questions to further explore, either with students or through the literature.

I also retained and reviewed work that student produced and email correspondences with students. I explored and analyzed these multiple sources of data each week and then again as a whole at the end of the semester. That is, each week I read and re-read prose comments multiple times to gain familiarity with the ideas conveyed and to notice recurring words, ideas, and underlying themes. Once familiar with these ideas and themes, I explored the data through repeated stages of open coding to inductively uncover meaning rather than assign this in relation to preset theoretical constructs or codes (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Creswell 2013). As such, data analysis unfolded through repeated passes and successive stages of in vivo and thematic analysis. At the close of the semester, I revisited the data as a whole and repeated this process of reflexive discovery, comparing and contrasting ideas, themes, and codes. These iterative cycles of review and analysis continued until no new ideas emerged (Creswell 2013).

Trustworthiness

At different points in the semester I shared my emerging impressions, codes, and interpretations of accumulated data with students and a colleague with extensive experience teaching and employing AR. These exchanges allowed me to gauge whether my understandings resonated with students' impressions and experiences (i.e., member checking). They also enabled me to collaboratively audit my iterative analyses, coding schema, and representations.

Findings

Analysis indicated that students' participation and engagement in AR was directly influenced by two primary socio-cognitive conditions: social trust and cognitive dissonance. These are described in narrative form to illustrate how these conditions emerged over time and as a byproduct of third space informed pedagogies. Findings are organized around the interrelated themes that emerged. This discussion features multiple student comments and excerpts from my reflective memos to ensure depth, richness, and clarity. Pseudonyms are used to identify students.

Trust as an evolving condition of engagement

Throughout the course, I consciously adopted collegial, role-neutral stances and engaged in deliberate steps to foster an atmosphere of trust. Students experienced these strategies in different ways. Though initially skeptical early on in the semester, some students experienced shifts over time as illustrated in the following comments. In feedback shared the third week of the semester Irene wrote, 'I still am not really sure about all this "trust building stuff" but if it keeps certain people from dominating everything I'll be happy'. Somewhat similarly, on the fourth week Janet commented, 'I never had a professor focus so directly on getting students to agree about how to keep everyone safe – it has been a bit uncomfortable but refreshing at the same time'. By the middle of the semester (week seven) Irene's perspective shifted, as evidenced when she commented, 'In looking back I can see why we needed to spend all that time setting up safe communications'. Amy similarly observed, 'it felt silly [to set class rules and norms] because we are all adults like Colleen said, but then again, we all were so guarded for a while and that blocked us'.

Students' experience of trust was a pivotal foundation that also shifted as they grappled with crossing the boundaries that delimited self- versus passive or other-directed forms of participation. This is reflected in the way Donny's comments on the fourth versus the ninth weeks of the semester describe his shifting 'ownership' of course based learning. Early on (week four) he remarked, 'I get that you keep wanting us to take the lead, and you keep going back to those rules we made up about how we will learn together but I basically still want a normal class, you know, where you tell me what it is I have to do and then I get it done'. Later on in the course (week eleven) he wrote, 'Ironically, after all the talking we did in class, I began to talk more about this project with my team and so now I'm presenting at an upcoming professional development seminar'. Connie similarly described her shifting perspectives as a byproduct of crossing back and forth between self- versus teacher-directed learning. On week three she wrote, 'I really felt it was a total time suck and waste that we spent so much time on how to organize our conversations. I kept waiting to hear what you wanted us to do because I didn't know anything about AR' while later on (week twelve) she wrote, 'I have to say that hanging in and being willing to vent about my frustrations ended up helping me work better with my staff and our kids'.

Trust and engagement were appreciably strengthened through evolving reciprocal exchanges that were distinguished by collegiality and humor. For instance Esther described feeling encouraged to engage with others because 'I knew the expectations and everyone was relaxed and not showing off. I felt like they would help me try and find different ways and angles to address my situation'. Somewhat similarly, Nate commented, 'maybe I shouldn't make a big deal about this but really making sure that everyone commented on topics was important, plus we had a lot of laughs. It made it easier to think about things out loud and not worry about being judged'.

Confronting epistemological beliefs

By the fourth week in the semester, course content focused on the conceptual and procedural contributions of and differences between different research traditions and their ontological roots. As class was transitioning to a new topic, Rena expressed her

building frustrations and concerns about AR. In a somewhat animated manner she observed, 'But we've all been taught to be objective and not involved and that for research to be useful you have to control not get involved with participants. This whole approach is mixing everything up'. She was specifically put off by what she labeled as AR's 'completely loosey goosey' structures and the ways that data collection, analysis, and iterative action steps overlap. Similarly frustrated but a bit more pensive, Nate commented 'As I see it, you are asking us to unlearn or suspend what we do and teach our kids to do ... [but] seem basically ok with us challenging you like this'. Summing this evening's 'takeaways', Maureen observed 'I'm going to stay skeptical because this doesn't really make sense to me but I'm also going to give this "both/and also" thing a chance because I really don't have other solutions right now.'

These comments showcased how students were actively confronting contradictions between course emphasized beliefs and approaches and prior imprints that framed what they believed to be 'acceptable' ways to produce knowledge and research. More substantively, their experiences of trust seemed to mediate their willingness to adopt 'both/and other' stances as they entertained new and somewhat discomfoting ways to conduct research. This is reflected in comments such as, 'if nothing else, our norms sanction all these arguments' (Rachel), 'I don't feel 100% sure about what to do but am willing to go with a new flow' (Grace), and 'I'm grateful for the support because it is going to be difficult for me to merge my reading into my actions without verifying if the ideas will work' (Esther).

Embracing confusion and dis/comfort to advance inquiry

Students and I experienced differing degrees of dis/comfort throughout the semester in relation to transferring/assuming ownership for their ongoing AR inquiries. Interpersonal tension ebbed and flowed as we cyclically negotiated our roles and responsibilities to each other in the context of the course. Many of my reflective notes described tensions and uncertainty about the relative effectiveness of the discursive strategies that I was using to facilitate collaborative discovery. Students' comments frequently described fluctuating levels of stress in relation to choosing their own topics and approaches to implement their AR projects. That is, they felt 'enormous pressure' and a sense of urgency to 'figure out what was expected,' choose 'good' and 'acceptable' topics," and 'work through confusion' as they learned about and applied AR.

Student engagement deepened in tandem with their increased tolerance of uncertainty – and willingness to openly confront this dis/comfort. This was illustrated in the following comments: 'It was totally stressful but eye opening when we kept going back and forth in class to clarify what my research was all about' (Grace) and 'I had a hard time trying to look at things from those both/and also filters and even though I felt on the spot when everyone was asking me questions it helped that they really zeroed in on what it was that I wanted to do and different ways to go at this' (Rena).

The cyclic nature of AR also contributed to students' fluctuating dis/comfort as they critically reviewed the literature, engaged in recursive analyses, and integrated their shifting insights to inform their ongoing inquiries. These complex experiences were captured in comments such as: 'All this is helpful because it is making me think but it's hard to decide which pieces to add' (Gina) and 'I came into the conversation feeling

like I knew what to do but now after everyone's questions I feel like I need to rethink things' (Rachel). In some cases, the fact that students' research was bounded by the semester's calendar exacerbated students' dis/comfort. This is illustrated in the following comments: 'I am getting really overwhelmed because this could just keep going on and on but the clock is ticking' (Irene) and 'it is very stressful to not have a specific set of steps to follow because I have a lot on my plate in other courses too' (Connie).

Stages of criticality

By the sixth week of the semester students' in class contributions and participation reflected increasing levels of criticality. Exchanges also included spontaneity and an atmosphere of lightness that *was* often punctuated with humor. Also by this time students' participation in class discourse demonstrated increasing stages of synthesis as they blended ideas from their readings and each others' insights to elevate their ongoing work. This progression was captured in the following process notes: 'students laugh more freely and seem to respond both more thoughtfully and warmly to each others' questions', 'they have come to tease me as I probe for alternate "both/and also" perspectives', 'I can see the threads of different articles in their comments' and 'they increasingly offer thoughtful insights connected to what they are reading'.

It was noteworthy that students' increasing levels of criticality was evident in their *oral* discourse much sooner than in their written work (e.g., written summaries of project ideas, early research syntheses). In fact, the first set of written assignments only marginally approached the levels of criticality and original thought that had been evident in group discussions during the same period of time. When I explored this with students they offered different explanations. In the majority, students conveyed an underlying sense of fear that 'paralyzed' them when they first approached the written task of formulating a critical synthesis of the research. This was in stark contrast to the sense of ease they associated with 'thinking out loud in class'. This underscored students' perspective that writing critically rather than descriptively required a 'different set of thinking skills' for which many initially felt unprepared.

To some extent, students' criticality as expressed in writing deepened and was positively influenced by how closely their AR projects aligned with their professional priorities. This was evidenced in their increased clarity and coverage in their written work. Students echoed this recurring observation. For example, Rachel noted, 'I kept going around and around until it felt like my ideas really represented me and ... then I could write better about my project'. Similarly, Maureen said, 'Once I figured out how to focus on what I wanted to do not what my principal was pressing me to do it got a bit easier to use my own voice ... and to express it in writing'.

Connecting open discourse, critical feedback, and efficacy

It took time for students to engage critically and collaboratively. However, as they moved through the semester, their ability to make connections between their respective ideas, actions, and emerging findings was elevated through their collaborative discourse with peers. For instance Mina said that she initially 'felt stranded by [her] inability to separate out what was working and why' but that this feeling abated as she worked through her ideas with class peers. Elaborating on one experience she said, 'I did feel that the data analysis was completely overwhelming but when we worked in our group

I could see how to make sense of things and then I felt like I'd really accomplished something'.

Students' efficacy also appeared to be mediated by prior learning experiences and differing epistemological imprints as evidenced in Irene's comments: 'At first I literally wrote down everyone's feedback and had to read it over three or four times because it was too much to process in the group. But once I got what Gina suggested about the way to bridge my goal and different articles I felt more comfortable talking about my project with everyone'. Similarly Gina observed, 'It was nerve wracking to work through all my doubts. At times, I just wanted to do what people suggested but writing about things helped me drill down and re-center myself'. On the whole, efficacy grew as students 'dug deeper ... read, thought, and wrote more' (Amy), opened up to new ways to 'think about and connect [class peers]' "so what" and "what if" questions' (Janet), and manage self-doubt. This was well captured by Esther who observed, 'I kept vacillating between everyone else's suggestions and my own insecurities about whether I did things the right way. I knew what I wanted to do and felt I could do it but everyone's feedback made a huge difference for me'.

For the small number of students for whom English was a second language, discomfort was additionally mediated through patience and tenacity. This was reflected in Rachel's observation, 'It has always been hard for me to express my ideas because English is not my first language. All the time we spent talking about and going over things from the "what ifs" side helped but the thinking out loud helped me the most. Then I had to take time on Saturdays to go over my class notes so I could keep up with weekly comments'.

It was noteworthy that for some students it appeared to remain difficult throughout the semester to reconcile their uncertainty, dis/comfort, and personal agency. This is illustrated in Gina's and Donny's comments: 'I get what you are going for but honestly I just needed you to directly tell me how to do AR since I've never done this before' (Gina) and 'I really never got it. I wish that your Powerpoints broke down the steps of AR instead of focusing so much on "big ideas" and making things up to us' (Donny).

Equivocal impacts

Analyses also demonstrated that in at least one pivotal instance early on in the semester, my perceptions about meaningful ways to establish role-neutral and shared authority did not fully align with students' perceptions. This is discussed below.

Authority transfer or obfuscation

On the fourth week of the semester as students were arriving and I was getting myself organized I casually asked if anyone had any 'lingering questions' about the written research synthesis that was due the following week. In response, I found myself in the midst of what felt like a tsunami of staccato questions that crashed around me. I was in fact stunned by students' palpably high levels of anxiety. It was evident that students and I had understood, valued, and/or experienced prior weeks' work parsing assignments to generate consensus-driven guidelines and evaluation metrics to guide their work [in different ways](#).

As I explored their questions and apparent anxiety, I probed why students had not raised their questions or shared their concerns earlier. I also asked how they had made sense of having spent time co-generating performance expectations. In this context, I explicitly explained that my focus had been to share authority with them by parsing and reconfiguring course expectations so that *these and related* evaluation metrics would be transparent. This exchange continued for some time as students offered different insights. After a lull, Colleen light heartedly commented, 'I actually thought that underneath it all you needed us to help you divide up how to assign points to the different parts'.

As I spontaneously erupted in laughter students in turn began to laugh. Once we settled back into conversation, we again revisited our differing retrospective experiences. One student observed, 'Well, yes, I did get that you were trying to give us control over the grading but I wasn't really sure how that was going to play out' (Maureen). Another (Connie) stated 'Even though we did go through everything it didn't help me figure out what I had to do'. Finally Irene commented 'I got the big picture about the assignments but that didn't translate into exactly what I needed to write ... I kept waiting for you to go over it again and give us an example of what to do and just ended up waiting too long to ask about what we had to do'.

Summary

On the whole, findings demonstrated that third space informed instructional strategies did enhance my ability to stimulate students' critical engagement, discourse, and learning outcomes during a semester long AR course. Further, students' engagement in AR was positively advanced through their adoption of flexible 'both/and also' stances as was their ability to critically confront competing epistemological beliefs and disruptive prior learning experiences. Findings were mixed with respect the extent to which third space informed strategies meaningfully neutralized our respective role influenced authority and social power.

Discussion, implications, and direction for further inquiry

This inquiry simultaneously explored whether my adoption of new instructional strategies informed by third space theory positively contributed to students' engagement and learning outcomes and my own praxis in the context of a semester long graduate level course. Findings demonstrated that third space informed pedagogical choices fostered an atmosphere conducive to collaborative discovery and partnering with students as they learned about and engaged in AR. Further, these strategies facilitated students' ability to integrate and transfer theory into their own practices as they addressed individually selected site-based (i.e., classroom, school, and/or community based) problems of practice. As such, findings demonstrated that third space theory informed strategies advanced my praxis of AR.

It was noteworthy that the current findings echo earlier studies that demonstrated the overarching influence that students' experience of trust had on their willingness to engage in inquiry marked by cyclic and dynamic rather than linear or sequential moves (Amir et al. 2017, Yan 2017). This lends further support for increased reliance on course conditions that explicitly prioritize interpersonal respect and safety, reflexivity, and

sustained critical discourse as doing so encourages ‘boundary crossing’ learning and innovative knowledge production (Gutiérrez and Vossoughi 2010; Woolf and Wamba 2018; Zygmunt et al. 2016). Moreover, this study extends the literature base by describing deliberate and intentional moves that foregrounded and equally privileged students’ and my accumulated intersubjective experiences, values, beliefs, and priorities as we reciprocally negotiated social trust and our collective learning. Further research is needed across teacher education contexts to more fully tease out and articulate strategies and conditions to both generate shared authority and situate students’ learning needs at the center of coursework.

I relied heavily on strategies described by Soja (1996) as ‘thirding-as-othering’ and flexible ‘both/and also’ logic to elevate my pedagogy, relational transparency, and reflexive commitment to knowledge production. These pedagogical choices required substantial time, energy, resources, and vigilance. Moreover, they were grounded in and sustained by my own learning agenda. While it is true that many teacher educators routinely engage in time-intense course approaches to advance students’ learning and AR (see for example, Aune 2002; Bryant and Bates 2010; Hallman 2012) we typically do not have access to sufficient incentives or resources to sustain these forms of teaching and learning conditions. In light of the potentially far reaching benefits of third space informed instructional strategies across teacher education contexts, this study highlights an urgent need for wider institutional structures to promote these and similarly dynamic pedagogies generally and specifically when teaching AR (James and Augustin 2018; Sela and Harel 2012; Vaughan and Burnaford 2016).

Similar to others’ observations (Goodnough 2008; Wong 2014), at multiple points in the semester students grappled with confusion and skepticism about the merits of AR. In particular, they experienced a great deal of dis/comfort with AR’s iterative cycles of action-inquiry-reflection and often struggled with its emphasis on collaborative rather than sequential, isolated, or ‘controlled’ steps/participation. Substantial time and discourse was devoted to supporting students as they critically deconstructed the disruptive imprints of prior training grounded in positivist traditions and the unique contributions of AR. Findings in the current study amplify recommendations for teacher education programs to introduce more frequent innovative learning opportunities that expose students to multiple forms of critical inquiry rather than placing primary emphasis on approaches that mirror positivist traditions (Bryant and Bates 2010; James and Augustin 2018). This deliberate exposure would better position students to reflectively explore extant literature and research in order to deepen their professional knowledge and expertise (Chetty 2011; Kemmis 2006; NCATE 2010). Moreover, this will more directly facilitate students’ ability to critically interrogate and reconcile competing priorities, the impacts of prior learning, and differing epistemological beliefs to advance their professional practices (Nilsson et al., 2018; Yan 2017; Zeichner et al., 2015).

Trust was a pivotal condition that undergirded my work with students and their increasingly reflexive engagement with me and each other. This echoed findings demonstrated by other scholars who have studied AR coursework (see for example, Amir et al. 2017; Bryant and Bates 2010; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). As such, it further underscores the fundamental need for teacher educators to explicitly prioritize pedagogies that engender mutual respect, authenticity, and interpersonal safety. In addition, this finding crystalizes our need as teacher educators to dismantle and confront the multiple layers of veiled, ascribed, and other forms of social authority and power that we bring into our interactions. That is, if we are to truly

partner with our students it is incumbent upon us to willingly and freely share authority with them and become as vulnerable and as open to knowledge production as we encourage them to be with us (Woolf and Wamba 2018).

As noted, throughout this study I consciously confronted issues of role regulated and other forms of social power and bias and my perceptions about how these manifested in my interactions. Findings suggested that my intention to neutralize disproportionate social and role regulated power with students was realized in varying stages, in different ways, and at different points in time. As such it remains unclear whether I successfully neutralized the disproportionate power ascribed to me in my role as instructor. Irrespective of this equivocal finding, my praxis of AR was advanced as lendeavored to hold these intentions at the forefront of my reflexive interactions and discourse with students. That is, by consciously relying on flexible 'both/and also' logic and hybridity I recursively placed primacy on the accumulated experiences, values, and priorities that students raised and presented through discourse. Arguably as described and enacted by me, these stances most certainly reflected my own unique construals, dispositions, demeanor, and biases. Inasmuch as these interrelated inputs and interpretations limit the present findings, they also serve to richly inform my continued research and work with future students. Last, findings encourage other teacher educators to deliberately expand on and explicate pedagogies that simultaneously promote students' interrogation of theory and epistemologies while also disrupting unproductive habituated forms of learned passivity.

Notes

1. The inclusion of the phrase site-based in the AR course description is intended to convey the program's overarching belief that professional learning must be directly connected to and informed by the needs and priorities of the communities within which students regularly interact and work.
2. In consideration of the forms of collaborative learning and engagement that I was focused on fostering, I would have preferred to convert the course grading to a pass-fail format. This would have more closely aligned with my goals and the strategies I employed. However, I did not have institutional authority to do so.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix. SURVEYMONKEY™ QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey is both voluntary and anonymous; that is, none of these questions require any personally identifying information. These questions are intended to elicit your honest feedback, commentary, and insights about the course structures and approaches that I have adopted. Thanks for taking the time to share your thoughts.

Questions:

1. I have endeavored to engender an atmosphere in class that is collegial, warm, role-neutral, and conducive to open (i.e., uncensored) dialogue. Do class interactions reflect this atmosphere?

What conditions/actions have most directly contributed to this atmosphere?

What else is needed to strengthen it?

2. You have all identified individually motivating topics to explore. Have specific course structures contributed to your sense of efficacy while you engage in your inquiry?

What would further support you?

3. We spent time over three to four weeks early in the semester generating performance criteria that I would use to evaluate and grade your work, and you would use to maximize participation. Please share what you thought about this process and how it impacted your learning experiences.

4. Please comment about your experiences of engaging in a purposeful review of the literature while simultaneously incorporating new ideas into your practices and monitoring their impacts.

5. Please comment about your experiences of implementing new ideas into your practices while simultaneously adjusting these in response to ongoing individual reflection and peer/instructor feedback.

6. So far, what has most supported you to engage in this new form of research?

7. Please use this space to add any other feedback or comments.