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## **Exploring Personal and Professional Responsibility**

### **My Vexation**

It finally happened! I'm finally making the transition from graduate student to new faculty member: about time, right? On one hand, it's exciting to think about the possibilities for defining myself within a new community. On the other hand, the seemingly endless possibilities are a source of apprehension. I feel pressure to figure out how I can contribute to the science education research community. I feel pressure to figure out how I can contribute to the community into which I recently moved (my university community as well as communities that, intentionally or by default, are associated with the university). When thinking about contributions, I think it is important to ask: What ought to matter in one's career? I'd like to thank Adam Johnston for helping me realize that this is a vexation that afflicts me. As I work through the transition from doctoral student to faculty member I see certain responsibilities coming to the fore.

I feel responsible for my students. I'm teaching an elementary methods course. My students make me laugh, and, more importantly, I believe they are sincere about wanting to figure out how to teach science in their own classrooms. It would be a disservice to not address their needs, particularly since they are on the verge of beginning their own careers as teachers. I want them to be successful, both personally and professionally. I want them to feel that they are serving their students well. I want them to see that science is fascinating, and I think this is particularly important since some of them have indicated that they have not necessarily had good experiences with science in the past. I want them to develop a sense of what they believe to be important in science education, and I want them to have the confidence to teach science to young children.

I feel responsible for my own career. I would be lying if I said that tenure doesn't cross my mind (frequently). As I interact with students, it is natural (because of the pressure of an academic position) for me to look at them as potential sources of data. There is no doubt that pre-service teachers have a lot to teach us. Additionally, it is clear that many people have contributed valuable insights from working with their own students. However, one of the challenges I see with science education research is trying to balance one's research agenda with meeting the needs of one's students. One issue I see is trying to identify unique research questions while simultaneously meeting the needs of our students. Meeting students' needs seems particularly prudent since they are going to be responsible for educating children.

Ultimately, I feel responsible for doing something that matters. But what ought to matter in one's career? This is perhaps the crux of my vexation. I wonder about how a person's responsibilities change throughout the course of his or her career. Additionally, I wonder how the professional organizations with which we affiliate help us define and/or meet our responsibilities.

### **My Venture**

In last year's Crossroads vexation I raised the following question: To whom are science education researchers responsible? Are we responsible only to ourselves? This is a question that continues to vex me because, at root, I believe it forces me to confront what I'm trying to define as my professional identity, as well as my professional responsibility.

I encountered the issue of responsibility in many ways during my graduate education. Early in my master's program I had an advisor, Sherry Southerland, who impressed upon me the importance of participating in professional conferences. That was the point in my education that I learned that individual science educators are responsible for contributing to their broader community. During my doctoral program, I encountered the issue of responsibility in a different way. For three years, I had the opportunity to work with an amazing third grade teacher (whom I cannot name for confidentiality reasons). First of all, I will always be grateful to this teacher for opening up her classroom to me. Getting into a classroom as a researcher is not a trivial matter, and it seems that a crucial first step is finding a teacher who is willing to collaborate. When you consider what teachers are expected to accomplish each day you realize that your presence likely makes the teacher's day more complicated. Yet classroom-based research is invaluable for understanding the dilemmas and successes of science teaching and learning. Given this situation, I believe that we, as science educators, have a responsibility

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to contribute to the classrooms and other educational settings in which we work. An issue, however, involves identifying how we can contribute in meaningful ways.

I think it is important to be honest about what, and to whom, we are contributing. In the January 2006 issue of *Science Education* there is an editorial in which the author, Nancy Brickhouse, raises many thought provoking points. I think these points are ones that may prompt us to consider what ought to be the contribution of science education research. In this piece, Brickhouse poses the following suggestion:

What might it mean to do good research in science education? Here are some candidate standards:

1. Evaluation of learning speaks to important educational aims for science education.
2. There is a careful and honest description of who is and who is not benefiting in science education studies.
3. There is potential for influencing policy and practice. (Brickhouse, 2006, p. 2)

The message above makes clear that science education researchers ought to organize change. The issue, then, becomes how to envision change. Later in the piece, Brickhouse makes the following point: "It would be irresponsible for science educators to participate in creating illusions of equity that have little meaning in terms of students' abilities to engage in scientific competencies that really matter" (p. 5). There are two points in this passage that I think are noteworthy, particularly for thinking about the contribution of science education research. First, I think the idea of 'illusion' is helpful for thinking about how, or if, science education research actually makes a difference. Second, I think it is important for science educators to critically think about what it is that matters, particularly since we can get incredibly myopic when we think only in terms of our research agendas. When I think of the third grade class in which I worked, it is clear to me that illusions of equity and false impressions will not suffice. I suspect that 'what really matters' will depend on what one sees as critical components of education, and, certainly, there are numerous ways to define what really matters. I'll be honest, I'm struggling to succinctly and coherently define what I believe *really matters*. Yet when I think back to the third grade teacher who opened up her classroom to me, it is hard not to believe that one thing that matters is making the classroom a place where teachers are allowed to engage students in developing scientific competencies that matter. If science educators believe that current policies in education work against this vision, then perhaps it would be prudent for our professional organizations to address this issue.

I commend the organizers of Crossroads for taking a risk and starting the conversation. I think Crossroads provides a forum for bringing together people who are interested in engaging in important conversations in science education. I would like to press the organizers of Crossroads to share their vision of how this conference transcends the illusion of doing something that matters. To be clear, I think Crossroads represents something that does matter. But in what ways does a forum such as Crossroads prompt science educators to identify and/or define their responsibilities? In what ways CAN a forum such as Crossroads inspire these types of actions? What's next?

### **References**

Brickhouse, N.W. (2006). Celebrating 90 years of *Science Education*: Reflections on the Gold Standard and ways of promoting good research. *Science Education*, 90(1), 1-7.