

New Understandings of Liminality

Pausing at the Threshold of Action

Elizabeth Petroelje Stolle, Katarina Blennow, & Martin Malmström

Teacher Education

liminality

Emotions

Action

Community

This self-study reflects the work of three teacher educators from Sweden and the U.S. who aim to contribute to a widened understanding of how emotions do something in the move from reaction to action in a liminality caused by derisive discourse around teacher education. That is, when teacher educators allow themselves to dwell in their emotions instead of performing emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012), emotions play an important role at the threshold of action. We seek to answer the following research question: How does liminality offer space for us to process our emotions and move towards action as teacher educators? We used concepts of emotions, liminality, and action to frame this study. We used an iterative process to both generate data while also engaging in analysis. Data included written narratives and real-time dialogue. Three themes emerged: ambivalence, community, and transformation. Findings suggest the following narrative, which we don't share as a linear model, but rather to note chronology. We experienced ambivalence marked by sorrow and loss, caused by the intense emotions experienced from the derisive discourse around teacher education. This ambivalence moved us into a liminal space, opening us to new beginnings, but we found ourselves in need of community. To move forward and act, we needed others (i.e., each other). Now, we sit poised at the threshold of the liminal space as a community, feeling empowered to act as transformers of teacher education.

Context & Objectives

This self-study builds from previous work that explored how emotions, caused by derisive discourse around teacher education, do something to move us from reaction to action (Blennow et al., 2023.). That is, teacher education is impregnated with emotions, and much is written about the emotions of teacher educators (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2009; Cutri & Whiting 2015). Additionally, both Swedish and U.S. media emphasize negative aspects of teacher education such as insufficient teacher knowledge, lack of cognitive science, and absence of discipline in classrooms (Malmström, 2018; Edling & Liljestrang, 2020), ultimately framing university-based teacher education as a “failing enterprise” (Cuenca, 2019). This news weighs on our emotions. Thus, we, three teacher educators from Sweden and the U.S., explored how negative discourses about teacher education positioned us and made us feel genuine emotions. Instead of hiding and ignoring these emotions with surface acting, we came to see the power in embracing emotions as signals that we could move into a new space as we matured towards activism, incubating and developing our ideas/acts/repertoires. We came to see this new space as the liminal space where we found freedom and unity to approximate and try out various acts of activism, which could counter the derisive discourse in the political sphere. This use of liminality was an important outcome in relation to previous research on teacher education, where liminality is complex, dark, and something to move through (Calderwood & D’Amico, 2008; Kofke & Morrison, 2021; Thomas, 2019).

For us, with the help of emotions, we came to see liminality as a space to construct our political roles as teacher educators. For this self-study, we looked to develop a deeper understanding of the liminal space. In that, we asked the following research question: How does liminality offer space for us to process our emotions and move towards action as teacher educators?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frame

Dialogic thinking served as the theoretical perspective that informed how we structured and engaged in this self-study. Dialogic thinking acknowledges and responds to other perspectives, seeking to understand and enact a sensitivity to the differences between these perspectives in hopes of achieving richer understandings of ideas and others. We looked to Buber's (1958) work to understand true dialogue requires individuals to move beyond just experiencing each other, but rather entering into relationship. Only in relationship can individuals engage in dialogic thinking as a "shared search for understanding . . . an act of 'thinking together'" (Phillipson & Wegerif, 2019, p. 33). We also valued Bachtin's (1986) notions that dialogue is an unending process, or quest for truth, where questions are continually asked and answers are always critically explored. According to Bachtin, "[e]ach individual utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication" and echoes previous utterances as well as pointing forward to new utterances (p. 93).

Additionally, this study is informed by concepts of liminality, *communitas*, and action. In our original study (Stolle et al., 2018), to understand how both positionality and emotions impacted our work as teacher educators, we looked to liminality as an important concept that highlights the complexity of identity formation and where we seek to position ourselves. Liminality, derived from the Latin term *limen*, means threshold. Van Gennep (1909/2010) describes thresholds as phases individuals go through in rites of passages, the act of becoming. However, we chose to draw on Craft's (2001) work of "possibility thinking," viewing liminality as a freeing space where "nothing is fixed and anything is possible" (Bayliss, 1999, p. 81). For us, as teacher educators navigating both societal positions and managing emotions, the liminal space offered us a place to engage in the dialogic approach, which Wegerif (2017) describes using Keat's (1817) words of "negative capability", or the ability to remain in uncertainty until a creative solution emerges. We see the liminal space as a positive, freeing place that allows for immersion and incubation – a space to think, reflect, discover, and learn as one sets on a trajectory of transformation (Lorenzi & White, 2019).

Turner (1969) described liminality as the opposite of structure. In liminality, this anti-structure could feel unsettling and painful, but it can also be liberating. That is, stripped of status, roles, and specific characteristics, people find *communitas* in the shared experience of liminality. *Communitas* is a kind of community that is temporary and transitory; it is being *with* one another. Turner compares the "spontaneous, immediate and concrete nature of *communitas*, as opposed to the norm-governed, institutionalized abstract nature of social structure" (Turner 1969, p. 127). Liminality is a withdrawal from social structure. People are equal and unselfish in liminality, meeting each other as whole human beings. *Communitas* is existential: it is "a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared" (Turner, 1969, p. 138). Turner is hopeful that when we move beyond liminality, we can keep the feeling of sharing something and that despite prior differences, this shared experience might lessen the divides between us. As our study is situated during the global Covid pandemic, we see the Covid era as an overarching kind of liminal experience in itself, offering an opportunity for withdrawal, yet serving as a bonding, shared experience where individuals across the globe felt a heightened solidarity produced during the liminal moments. As members of the teacher education community, equally experiencing derisive discourse, and at the same time the impacts of the Covid pandemic, the three of us felt drawn together in the liminal space. This sense of community occurred naturally as we sought out others as a step towards action, recognizing action cannot exist in isolation.

From the *communitas* within the liminal space, we ultimately seek to take action, disrupting the derisive discourse in transformative ways. Thus, we took up Arendt's (2018) conceptualization of action, which articulates the difference between labor, work, and action. 'Labor' is natural and centers around consumption to survive. It is repetitive and necessary day in and day out to live. 'Work' is artificial and does not exist in nature. Rather, in work we craft and build (e.g., build a house, write a book). 'Action' is telling the story of people's lives, which involves acting, communicating, and expressing ourselves. Action must be done in community, not in isolation. Arendt expresses concern that action is

being reduced to work or mechanical behavior; humans should not just be cogs in a machine, but active storytellers - humans taking action by authoring their own stories. This resonates with Turner's work on structure and anti-structure, where *communitas* is needed as a recurring juxtaposition to structure: "Structural action swiftly becomes arid and mechanical if those involved in it are not periodically immersed in the regenerative abyss of *communitas*" (Turner, 1969, p. 139).

Methods

To answer our question, we served as critical friends who toggled between writing personal narratives - a way of "bending back on the self to look more deeply at self-other interactions" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740) and embracing Skerrett's (2008) notions that personal biographies shape teacher educators' identities and influence the lived experiences of teaching and researching - and engaging in synchronous online discussions, thus enacting Taylor and Coia's (2009) argument that "real-time dialogue" is critical "to process and discuss meaning" (p. 177). This dialogue allowed us to enact our theoretical frame of dialogical thinking. Thus, in both writing and dialogue, we tried out ideas on each other, asked challenging questions, and facilitated reflection on events/experiences/alternate perspectives (Schuck & Russell, 2005; Wegerif, 2017). As close friends and insiders to the phenomenon of experiencing deep emotions around derisive discourse on teacher education, we sought a reciprocal relationship where we encouraged each other to dig in, feel, and explore emotions with hopes of coming out with new ways to be and act (Stolle et al., 2019). Data sources included: written narratives, an online collaborative space, and regular online meetings via Zoom.

Building on previous work (Blennow et al., 2023), we framed our written narratives as an opportunity to further explore critical incidents (Brandenburg & McDonough, 2017), individually reflecting on times when something occurred that positioned teacher education in a way that evoked a strong emotional response. By expanding and extending our narratives, we moved beyond the *who, what, and how* of the derisive discourse into the *what's next* in action. We shared our narratives with each other in an online collaborative space (i.e., Google folders). Using the comment feature, which served as a tool for asynchronous discussion, we formulated thoughts, questions, and connections around the critical incidents and moves toward action. Simultaneously, we met virtually twice a month to share emerging themes and persisting questions around the data in real-time. Through this iterative process, we both generated data while also engaging in ongoing analysis to uncover ways we experienced, and then moved beyond, these critical incidents in similar, yet distinct and unique ways. Ultimately, we reflected on 15 critical incidents, expanding 6 of these. We then analyzed for recurring themes, identifying the following findings: ambivalence, community, and transformation. Combining these various methods allowed us to systematically analyze our data (Samaras & Freese, 2009).

Outcomes

Findings suggest the following narrative, which we don't share as a linear model, but rather to note chronology. That is, we experienced ambivalence marked by sorrow and loss, caused by the intense emotions experienced from the derisive discourse around teacher education during a global pandemic. Data showed the pandemic caused us to pause and experience/feel our emotions, yet this time of reflection was defined by a certain ambivalence – it was the best of times; it was the worst of times. Processing our sorrow and grief signaled movement into the liminal space, which became a place of possibility toward action and an opening for us to new beginnings. Yet, we found ourselves in need of community. To move forward and act, we needed others. Now, we sit poised at the threshold of the liminal space as a community, feeling empowered to act as transformers in productive ways. Data revealed that in our "interacting with the world," we saw ourselves as transformers of teacher education (Zeichner & Pena-Sandoval, 2015). We recognized weaknesses in the current system, but liminality offered space to pursue acts of advocacy in hopes of transformation. Thus, we share 3 examples of how these themes were encountered in the critical incidents.

Example 1: Elizabeth

Elizabeth wrote about a critical incident involving a specific meeting where faculty from across her university were collaboratively revising the teacher preparation program based on new state-level requirements. Elizabeth explained the complicated relationship her teacher education faculty have with faculty of the liberal arts and sciences, remembering that "it seemed Education was being positioned with a lower status, or less valuable." She wrote:

I had a few moments of crisis where I felt 'less than' or 'undervalued' as a teacher educator...Initially, as I sat in the meetings, I felt shame, sadness, and insecurity, which produced anger in me...hot anger. And, at that moment, I felt alone and defensive.

In acknowledging these feelings of being alone and in conflict with others, Elizabeth experienced ambivalence in the liminal space, which moved her to converse with colleagues and seek a path forward:

The notion that we never feel closer to others than when we're fighting a common enemy rang true. My colleagues in the College of Education and I rallied together in new ways to consider how we could not only reposition ourselves in light of our content-specialist colleagues, marking our own identity, but also how we could transform teacher education to be more collaborative and less hierarchical. That is, we recognized the opportunity in front of us to transform our teacher preparation program with the State of Michigan's expectations for program revisions/revamping.

With *communitas*, Elizabeth could embrace the liminal space, acknowledging her emotions, yet finding ways to envision transformative acts. Specifically, she took on leadership roles within the curriculum committees, validating her work, and the work of her colleagues in teacher education, with teacher candidates. In this, her actions of self-positioning opened doors of transformation as she was able to effectively collaborate with colleagues in the development of a newly revised program.

Example 2: Katarina

Katarina shared a story with a similar plot: A negative event becomes a push into liminality, but in the dwelling on emotions, community was found. The situation unfolded when Katarina and a colleague rented a cottage:

Our host told me he was an upper-secondary teacher. I replied something like, 'wow that is good to hear, I work in teacher education'. I immediately felt a bond to him, connected by pride and joy. That feeling of pride and joy quickly disappeared into shame though, because our host answered 'Ah, well, you know that old saying: Those who cannot teach become teacher educators'. He then said how bad the teacher education, which he had attended, was. I felt shame and said, 'Well, surely me and my colleague are not that bad'. Both his 'old saying' and my reply could have been attempts at jokes but neither of us smiled or laughed.

Katarina initially felt connected to this teacher but quickly felt cut off when he distanced himself from her as a teacher educator. The shame and sadness she felt signaled to her that she was in liminality. The first response from Katarina was an individual defense, where she avoided losing face by distancing herself unconsciously from teacher education. The sadness and shame stemmed from the feeling of being wrong about the supposed social bond between her and the teacher, and the vision of losing the bond to all other teachers, as well.

Something was not what I thought it was, the world was turned upside down, a well-known structure disappeared. What it is to be a teacher educator changed. My colleague was in the cottage but I did not immediately feel I wanted to go in there. I felt lonely.

Katarina experienced liminality as a loss of structure. But in the liminal space, wallowing in the emotions, the sadness and shame started to change and move her forward into anger on behalf of teacher education, anger that she did not say something positive about teacher education. She formulated several things she could have said to the teacher, coming back to the community of teacher educators:

My feeling of community with the teacher educators grew. I could talk about what happened with my colleagues and write about it here, in my narrative, meeting with others as a whole human being, including every layer of emotion I had felt. Through that community, I started to feel hopeful again and reached out for the community of teachers, feeling like part of the web of teachers and teaching again.

In this critical incident, Katarina first felt outside the social structures she envisioned, yet was able to reconnect with the community of teacher educators. Through liminality, she moved from a personal, defensive response to engaging with the teacher educator community in ways that offered paths towards countering the derogatory discourse and repositioning, or transforming, teacher education. The key in this situation seems to be striking a balance between *communitas* and structure.

Example 3: Martin

Derogatory discourses of teacher education made Martin ambivalent. He wrote about a critical incident involving a newspaper article in which an unemployed actor worked as a substitute teacher for three months. Based on her experience as a substitute teacher, the woman wrote a piece about the sorry state of Swedish education and was subsequently interviewed to give her “expert” opinion. Martin felt guilty for not finding energy to take part in the debate but was later relieved when other teachers engaged in the dialogue. He wrote:

At least two teachers, and a few others, gave a totally different picture of what it is to be a teacher. One of them explained how fed up she was with people who think that anyone can teach (the author/actor thought her rhetoric skills would suffice). To me, the teachers' replies were a breath of fresh air.

Having done research on “literacy crises”, Martin felt a moral obligation to speak up when ill-informed ideas about education were voiced in the media. But the oversimplifications and exaggerations made him somewhat sad and indifferent, causing him to withdraw from the debate. Within the liminal space, he felt tension as he initially experienced guilt around his lack of engagement in debates such as this. However, the liminal space offered time to reflect on these emotions and tensions. He realized his inaction was actually a form of action, as he came to use the debate as empirical material in scholarly texts, public presentations, and teaching. He came to see his role differently, positioning himself as an expert in the field critically studying the debates and using them as empirical data. In liminality, Martin reflected on how using the derogatory discourses as empirical material provided space for him to take action in other arenas by problematizing the discourses. Presenting his research to other scholars, teachers, and students, *communitas* was built as Martin found solace in that this community would probably gain a more nuanced view, thus producing more informed utterances in the future than those engaged in the popular discourse of student literacy. Even still, ambivalence prevailed. Martin was not certain whether his line of action was taking the easy way - would taking part in the media discussion reach far more people? This example illustrates the non-linearity of our thoughts and actions, and how our actions were not considered a final solution, but rather an effort to stand up to ourselves and attempt some sort of action.

Conclusions

Covid opened space for us to feel emotions deeply, wallow in them slightly, and then reflect on using them for good, change, and advocacy. That is, emotions signal that we are in a new liminal space as we mature towards action and, ultimately transformation, incubating and developing our ideas/acts/repertoires. And in this liminal space, we find unity and *communitas* to approximate and try out various acts of activism. This rhymes well with Bakhtin’s (1986) theory of dialogism, according to which utterances do not only answer to and echo previous utterances but also point forward to new utterances. In our case, our acts of activism could be seen as new utterances that counter the derisive discourse in the political sphere.

The critical incidents shared in this paper have been small life-crises throwing us into liminality. Turner (1969) confesses the need for negative experiences to spark *communitas*. The liminality we experienced has been existential in the sense that to exist is partly to “stand outside the totality of structural positions one normally occupies in a social system” (Turner, 1969, p. 139). The humbling and invigorating experience of liminality enabled us to gain and experience *communitas* together as researchers but also offered us *communitas* while entering back into the social structures of teacher education. The action that grows from the liminal experience is a work towards a balance between *communitas* and structure, where *communitas* breaks into the cracks of the structure.

We have grown a wish to rid ourselves from the clichés associated with status and to enter into vital relations as well as, in Arendt’s sense, act through authoring our stories, constructing our political roles as teacher educators in hopes of

transforming teacher education. Our self-study can be seen as a small-scale withdrawal group (Turner, 1969, p. 202), and although we recognize this withdrawal can occur at any time/place, because of the impacts of Covid on our social interactions, a unique liminality emerged and our need for *communitas* shifted. The self-study has been a withdrawal from normal modes of social action where there is time to scrutinize the values and principles of the culture in which it occurs. Authoring our own teacher educator stories, and gaining a reality-check by sharing and discussing them in dialogue, has also been a stepping stone in the move towards action and transformation.

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Elizabeth Petroelje Stolle

Grand Valley State University



Katarina Blennow

Lund University



Martin Malmström

University of Malmö



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