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Bridging the Theory-practice Divide: A Creative Approach to Effective Teacher Preparation

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Abstract: Teacher educators need to remain current regarding the challenges that prospective teachers are going to face in their classrooms. One way to maintain this currency is for teacher educators periodically to spend some time in the K-12 classroom testing the theories they teach. This paper will discuss the benefits both teacher educators and prospective teachers will derive from engaging in such an activity.

I. Introduction

Preparing prospective teachers for the realities of today's classrooms is a complex and challenging undertaking for teacher educators. This complexity and challenge is a result of the changing nature of the classroom. Schools today face an increasing number of language learners, the mainstreaming of special population students, and, working with a standards driven curriculum, all of which present new challenges for the teacher as they attempt to meet their students educational needs.

As a result of this "new classroom environment" and the educational needs they present teacher educators must now seek different approaches to prepare prospective teachers to meet these needs because the traditional (e.g. coursework independent of fieldwork) approaches to teacher preparation are no longer effective in equipping teachers to address these issues.

It has been my observation that some teacher educators are so far removed from the K-12 environment that WHAT they teach sometimes does not reflect the realities their students face. Additionally, there is the belief that "learning to teach is a two-step process of knowledge acquisition and application or transfer" (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996, p. 79). The latter view infers a mutually exclusive relationship between the teacher educator, the prospective teacher and the classroom. In this approach to teacher preparation, the teacher educator provides the knowledge and the prospective teacher applies it. However, the teaching of theories or knowledge to prospective teachers and expecting that they will effectively apply them is an inadequate approach (Stuart & Thurlow, 2000;Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998; Adams, Shea, Liston & Deever, 1998) to teacher preparation. The assumption lying herein is that prospective teachers not only acquired the knowledge and theories in their program but the wherewithal to apply it in their classrooms. This, of course, might be true if the process of learning to teach were linear rather than dynamic; free of extraneous influences and circumstance rather than a complex mélange of variables This thought is best captured by Britzman (1991):

> "learning to teach is not a mere matter of applying decontextualized skills or of mirroring predetermined images: it is a time when one's past, present and future are set in dynamic tension. Learning to teach- like teaching itself- is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into

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> what one is doing and who one can become…Learning to teach is a social process of negotiation rather than an individual problem of behavior."

Since preparation of teacher candidates is, at best, a complicated process, teacher educators must consider adopting new practices: As such, for teacher educators to better prepare prospective teachers three things must occur: examination of their teaching practices and "the process of learning to teach" (Szabo, Scott & Yellin, 2002, p.1); utilization of field work to aid prospective teachers in their process of meaningful reflection and construction of practical knowledge (Perry & Power, 2004); and, finally, inculcating prospective teachers' understanding of the relationship between theory and practice (Szabo, Scott & Yellin, 2002). It is the consistent interconnection and persistent engagement in the above facets of learning-to-teach that show promise of more effectively preparing teachers.

In this paper, I will discuss a field-based approach I implemented to examine my own teaching practices in linking theory with practice and regaining currency in the real world of public school. I approached this project with the tentative optimism that my experiences would assist me in preparing prospective teachers for their "multiple roles and [the] contextual complexities of life in schools" (Knowles & Cole, 1996, p. 648).

II. A Theoretical Framework

The teaching of theory must be (or should be) inextricably linked to its application (Brunner, 1997). When students are exposed to theoretical concepts for the first time, they must be introduced to these ideas in a manner to which they can best relate (Brunner, 1997). Brunner (1977) refers to this "as grasping the structure of a subject." He further argues that "teaching specific topics or skills without making clear their context in the broader fundamental structure of a field of knowledge is uneconomical in several deep senses" (pg. 31), in that:

> "such teaching makes it exceedingly difficult for a student to generalize from what he has learned to what he will encounter later…The best way to create interest in a subject is to render it worth knowing, which means to make the knowledge gained usable in one's thinking beyond the situation in which the learning have occurred. Third, knowledge one has acquired without sufficient structure to tie it together is knowledge that is likely to be forgotten. An unconnected set of facts has a pitiably short half-life in memory."

Similarly, theories cannot be taught in a vacuum; prospective teachers must understand the relationship between the ideas they are taught and the applications they will encounter. One way to develop this skill is to arrange for this connection to be made in the context of their "lived" realities. Such learning-in-context will provide prospective teachers with the opportunity of questioning what they do and think (Brookfield, 1995). It is during this process of inquiry, thinking about their practice, that teacher transformation occurs.

Another valuable theoretical approach which informs this process is the constructivist approach to learning, which derives its name and its power from the belief that knowledge is best constructed when the learner actively interacts with the environment and, hence, constructs meaning from that experience (Hausfather, 2001). Similarly, Hall-Quest asserts in the editorial foreword to Dewey's Experience and Education, that "sound educational experience involves, above all, continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned" (Dewey, 1938,

p.10). The end result of this nexus is the teacher's ability to transfer teacher-knowledge to effective practice. In sum, the theories that drive this project are those of constructivism, the theory of integration, and the rigorous application of critical reflective thinking.

III. The Role of Fieldwork in Teacher Preparation

Field experiences are significant means through which to develop prospective teachers' understanding of the why, what, and how of teaching and learning. However, simple placement of student teachers in the field does not automatically result in a valuable experience for the teacher candidate (Zeichner, 1990). After all, not "all experiences are genuinely or equally educative" (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Dewey (1938) asserts that "it is not enough to insist upon the *necessity* of experience, nor even of *activity* in experience [emphasis mine]. Everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had" (Dewey, 1938, pg. 27).

Although, there is little doubt among teacher educators about the role of fieldwork in preparing better teachers, "there is persistent concern that such experiences do not reach their full potential value" (Bowman & McCormick, 2000, p.256). Several circumstances may account for this: traditional structures of student teaching (Zeichner, 2002), which are often developed out of "convenience or tradition" (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990, p 517) rather than innovative practices; limited resources to carry out field work (Goodlad, 1990; Darling Hammond, 1999); the individualized nature of fieldwork (Goodlad, 1994); the quality of the field placement (Laboskey & Richert, 2002); and a traditional approach to university supervision (Bowman & McCormick, 2000). Empirical evidence and current thinking suggest that many time-honored and time-worn field experience practices, such as those referenced earlier, need to be either refurbished or abandoned all together.

One viable solution to teacher-educator lack of currency lies in the periodic return of teacher-educators to the public school environment with the intent of gaining practical experience. A return to the living laboratory of the K-12 classroom will allow teacher educators to test the theories and concepts they teach as well as to examine their own teaching practices while making pertinent and necessary revisions and adjustments in their practice.

IV. Approach

From several years of informal conversations with teacher candidates during office hours, class discussions, brief encounters with them in the hallways, and reading their observation journals, I have concluded that for teacher preparation to be effective it must take place in the context in which it occurs, the school environment.

Over the course of several semesters, I utilized various approaches to field work, such as focused observation activities with required critical reflective inquiry of their observation and case study development and analysis of issues of interest to the prospective teacher. Although these exploratory attempts at "teaching in context" yielded some satisfying results, I became increasingly restless with my methodology. Searching for something new and innovative, I assumed the role of a 9th grade Algebra-I teacher, sharing teaching responsibilities with the teacher of record.

This pilot project was conducted at a high school located in a predominantly Hispanic community in Southern California. The high school population consisted of approximately 95% Hispanic with Asians, Caucasians, and African Americans constituting the remaining 5%. I selected this school because of its cultural location (a high percentage of minority students,

Mexican and South-American, of low socio-economic status) as well as the current commitment between the university and the school district.[2]

Four students fully participated in this pilot project. Because the majority of my students were themselves classroom teachers (on emergency permit) or holding jobs outside of the field of education, the remainder of my college class members participated in a somewhat more limited way. The project full-participants observed my classroom experience for a minimum of two class periods twice weekly. In addition, a thirty to forty minute critical and reflective debriefing was conducted immediately after the observation. If time constraints prevented this from happening, the requisite discussion session took place in my university office later that same day. During these discussion sessions, participants were encouraged to speak freely about my teaching strategies and my interaction with the algebra students, as well as the general classroom atmosphere; they provided insights into the events of the period, explored various perspectives on the relationship between classroom practice and education theory, highlighted various concepts already covered in class discussions at the university, interpreted and analyzed particular incidents and offered suggestions for solutions; further, they discussed with me the reasons I had handled an issue or situation in the way that I had. In addition to these discussions, all participants maintained an observation journal in which they reflected on the various concerns and issues they encountered, some entries of which are noted below:

It is important to note here that the 9th graders received a combination of before and/or after school tutoring; tutoring from the student teachers; exam review activities; and, homework to practice Algebraic concepts.

A. Student #1

First reflective entry: How do I adjust Piaget's cognitive theories to meet the different learning stylesin my classroom? It does not seem as if it applies. Especially, when I have to interpret the curriculum standards in order to teach it to my students who have such grave disparities in their learning levels.

Second reflective entry: I also find that learning the concept takes so much time and I don't have the luxury to study it in a way that would help me put it into practice due to the day-to-day demands of my classroom environment. I know that the things that I learn in this course are important and informs my teaching in some way. But, I don't see it, yet. I know that students are at different stages cognitively, intellectually, socially, and so forth. That's evident! I see it demonstrated in my students everyday. So I don't need a theorist to tell me this. My problem is how these seemingly relevant concepts, theories, help me motive, J--e. How does it help me teach my academically diverse students complex curriculum standards while being cognizant of their overall development – social, emotional, behavioral?

Third reflective entry: I find myself not wanting to learn these concepts because I don't know yet howto readily apply it to my class. I hear my peers speak of how they have applied cooperative learning in their classroom and how successful it was. But, I am afraid I don't share those experiences. Dr. Hughes – struggled to illustrate this concept in class last night and there were no videos except from her high school class regarding this issue. So I was really stuck.

[2] Human subjects clearance was not needed for this research.

B. Student #2

Reflective entry: I think I got it! The theory of motivation. I so want my students to want to learn. Then it occurred to me that (as I watched Dr. Hughes struggle with how best to motivate A----a and some of the other low motivated students) that she missed something important – what interest them). She talked about it in class but she didn't do it. I don't know why! I will ask her later.

Reflective entry – a week later: This week Dr. Hughes planned to review for the upcoming exam. S----n and I have worked hard all weekend putting together a Jeopardy Algebra game. We weren't sure if it would work but Dr. Hughes let us try anyway. It worked well! I was so relieved. The students were excited and very much into the game. I thought it was because the method was fun, innovative and so forth. I was worried about no real reward (e.g. no homework, etc.) except for the points they received for the correct answers in each category. Much to our surprise (Dr. Hughes, too). The students were really into the activity. They didn't seem to mind that all they would have at the end of the period was just points for first, second, or third place. I am not sure if the students learned much in preparation for the exam. But, they indicated that they liked the game, that it was fun. Dr. Hughes informed us the next week that a majority of the students had passed the exam… We had hope that the game would motivate the students to go home and study as a result of the positive feelings of giving the right answer and being praised by their team-mates and teacher.

These sessions (as well as several days of my teaching) were videotaped; these tapes were then used in my university class as a teaching tool to enhance the curriculum and to demonstrate best or worst practices. This procedure provided a rich foundation for discussion by both full and limited participants. The limited participants benefited from watching the video of my teaching as well as listening to the discussions between me and their student colleagues. The retrospective discussions allowed all students the opportunity to form sound and valid arguments, to make explicit their practical knowledge, and to apply this new knowledge to current educational issues. Throughout the entire experience, I provided extensive feedback to guide interpretations and encourage critical reflective inquiry.
It is important to note here that the 9^{th} graders received a combination of before and/or after school tutoring; tutoring from the student teachers; exam review activities; and, homework to practice Algebraic concepts.

V. Reflections

I found from my experience that when both the teacher-educator and prospective teachers are actively involved in both the college class and the K-12 environment, the ability for everyone to teach and learn simultaneously was enhanced. Furthermore, this process made it possible for me and my prospective teachers to identify and examine the convergence of theory and practice. The goal of exposing students to the process of teaching and learning through such organized field experience was met. I fervently believe that a process similar to that which I have described has the potential to augment the quality and merits of the field observation requirement. As such it contributes immeasurably to the overall ability of the students to teach effectively in the K-12 environment. A summative entry from my own journal follows:

What I learned as a Teacher Educator. As an educator I learned that it wasn't just about teaching the theories of motivation, Piaget's theories of cognitive development, or Vygostky's Zone of Proximal development in my Educational Psychology course. Rather it was about teaching motivation as it came to life in my Algebra class instead of in abstract form. I was challenged with how best to motivate my 9th grade students. I tried no homework if they completed their worksheet, etc. But, I was faced with the fact that most of my students did not understand the concepts. So with the help of the collaborating teacher we divided the class into several smaller groups and assigned them work that met their skill and comprehension level. This approach worked very well.

The next semester I used the experience to exemplify how Piaget's theory of Cognitive Development might inform high school teaching. My college students remarked how very beneficial this was. Of course, I did not do away with teaching the stages of the theory of Piaget's Cognitive Development, etc.

What this experience did for me was to transform how I teach and how I constructed my course curriculum. Theoretical concepts were paired with some real life classroom experience I had encountered. My text selection was based on how well the authors presented complex theoretical concepts (that is their approach to illustrating these complex theories in the hope of increasing comprehension, and possible later transfer of this understanding). As a result, I looked for the level of language used to introduce complex concepts, case studies, activities that would facilitate understanding and skill acquisition.

VI. Suggestions for Change

The serious nature of the process of preparing students to meet the demands of their profession requires a critical examination of the professional requirements. One such requirement is the familiarity with the changing nature of the profession. Meeting this requirement will likely provide insights on how to interpret and integrate professional standards and expectations into program course work and requirements.

Educators can meet this requirement in one of two ways. The first is, a return to the environment of professional practice for a semester or a year-long reintroduction to the field. The educator may serve as a social worker, counselor, or teacher performing duties similar to what their current students would do once in the field. The second approach to gaining familiarity with the current practices in one's field is to allow former students to return to the college classroom to share their lived experiences and current practices as it relates to theory.

The above approaches can be combined or employed separately. I prefer the approach wherein the educator returns to the field. Implementation of one or both of the above approaches or a variation will no doubt demonstrate how serious we are in bridging the divide between what our students are learning in their college classrooms and what they do in their jobs.

As a result of my experiences, I am now even more convinced that faculty currency is critical to the development of well-grounded students who can effectively respond to the demands and challenges of their profession.

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