

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 14 *Winter 2015*

Article 5

January 2015

Reflections on a Collaborative and Relational Framework for Teacher Development

Heather Curl
Bryn Mawr College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tithe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Curl, Heather "Reflections on a Collaborative and Relational Framework for Teacher Development," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 14 (2015), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tithe/vol1/iss14/5>

REFLECTIONS ON A COLLABORATIVE AND RELATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Heather Curl, Lecturer, Education Program, Bryn Mawr College

Introduction

The teacher certification program offered through the Bryn Mawr / Haverford Education Program—in which I have been teaching in recent years and through which I earned my own teaching certification—is based on a conception of teaching and learning that is collaborative and relational. In collaboration with high school students and veteran teachers, prospective students have the chance to learn firsthand from the experiences of others engaged in teaching and learning. Embedded within a semester-long methods course, I, as the teacher educator, help to facilitate the development of these relationships between practitioners and pre-service teachers. Through these relationships, knowledge acquired through experience is shared, built and applied—all toward the goal of pre-service teachers developing a complex pedagogical stance toward their teaching practice that is their own.

This enriching and inspiring process requires me, as the professor, to model reciprocal teaching and take seriously the importance of individual construction of knowledge, particularly in relation to teaching practices and engagement with students. In this description of my experience, I hope to explicate the challenges associated with teaching in this manner alongside the incredible benefits to both the empowered learning of my students as they enter the teaching profession and to my own learning as a teacher, researcher and human. Thoughts on how this approach shifts the “role” of teacher within teacher education are also considered.

A Collaborative Approach: Demonstrating Grounded Individual Practice

The undergraduate students working toward secondary teacher certification in the field of their major enroll in a methods course during the first semester of their final year in the program. This course aims to prepare them for the twelve-week student teaching experience in the spring (and serves as an introduction to a career in teaching). In addition to reading and analyzing practice-oriented methods texts [1] and integrating these practices into their own emergent education philosophies, these prospective teachers also dialogue with two key informants on practice: high school students and veteran teachers. In this way, the instruction of this course is accomplished in collaboration with others.

Working in consultation with a teacher from the high school with whom the Education Program partners, each of the prospective teachers is partnered with a freshman high school student during the second week of classes. After an initial meeting in the high school the students attend, college and high school students “dialogue” with one another each week over email and learn about and from one another through writing. In addition, the recorded weekly meetings of the high school student group are listened to as key “texts” of the course, with content of each weekly meeting matching the content of focus in the methods course. Students in the program are able to practice getting to know a young person while also being reminded of the complex feelings they had when they were in high school. Prospective teachers are also encouraged to

challenge the course texts and research read through the sometimes-contrasting perspectives of the high school students. The weekly emails continue throughout the semester and close with a final in-person meeting during which the college students host the high schoolers on campus and overall learnings through the program are shared and celebrated.

During the third week of classes, prospective teachers are introduced to another relationship, this time with a veteran teacher. These meetings are in person, with a small cohort of other prospective teachers also becoming certified in their area. The veteran teacher prepares and presents five one-hour long lessons throughout the semester while the students are charged with the task of writing and sharing at least three questions about practice in preparation for each meeting they have together. Hands-on activities, lessons learned from practice, and individualized trajectories within the field of teaching are just some of the incredible benefits the prospective teachers gain through this relationship, which also lasts throughout the semester.

From each perspective, prospective teachers are supported to take what resonates for them individually toward the construction of their own pedagogical stance and associated practices. They document this thinking in a substantive final e-portfolio. Through this experience, prospective teachers do gain content and information about practice (i.e., what they should or should not do as a teacher based on student opinion and what has worked or not worked for practicing teachers). In addition, and perhaps more importantly, they develop the capacity for building relationships with others and cultivate the tendency to learn from others in practice through the relationships they build.

This collaborative approach to teacher education helps to bridge the sometimes-staggering gap between literature meant to support teacher training and the actual practice of teaching. This collaborative structure also positions the human element so key to work in education as central. It is this human aspect of teaching that, though incredibly important but difficult to prepare for, supports teachers to stay invested in and committed to the classroom despite the difficulties and pressures they may experience.

Personal Growth: Keeping Teaching and Learning Dynamic

In addition to the benefits described by the prospective teachers and evident in their final work, taking this collaborative approach to teacher education supports the growth of my own teaching practice and pedagogy as well. As I make sense of the new ideas presented from high school students and veteran teachers, my own knowledge about teaching and learning is clarified or complicated. My own knowledge about teaching and learning, then, remains embedded in and challenged by practice.

That students are learning in collaboration with others also enables me to model reciprocal teaching, particularly when the perspectives of the practitioners with whom we collaborate are different or even in conflict. As my students take on the profound challenge to accommodate students' needs, maintain high expectations and measure their effectiveness as teachers, so do I. Within our collaborative approach, I am consistently able to grow and allow new perspectives to inform our course content and conversations. In fact, with each new school year comes an

entirely new cohort of high school students who will teach both my students and me their particular perspectives about teaching and learning. This is invaluable.

In addition, since prospective teachers are charged with the task of articulating their own pedagogical stance based on each perspective we discuss in the form of a substantive e-portfolio, I am able to learn from their compelling and changing analyses as well. Through drawing on experiences with her veteran teacher and high school partners, one recent prospective teacher who participated in this program wrote about the importance of engaging in one's work as a teacher with *intention*. She outlined the analytical import of the concept and considered examples of intention in her field placement. I used her analysis as a springboard through which to analyze my own pedagogy and considered the activities planned for class with this focus in mind.

A student teacher the following year grappled with how to teach students to engage in critical inquiry and active construction of knowledge when they were not used to learning in this way. He described scaffolding as necessary to bridge students' capacities and comfort with his own commitment to high expectations. I drew from his analysis key learning about my own practice and the alternative writing I ask my students to do. Though still committed to student-generated focus and analysis, this proves important for me to keep in mind as I work with students only used to writing structured essays based on a professor-generated prompt.

These are just two examples of many in which the final work of my students inspires my own writing, challenges my own commitments and re-energizes my work for the following semester and beyond. That students learn in collaboration and through integrating various positions is central to this intersection of teaching and learning.

The Role of the “Teacher” in Collaborative Teacher Education

Within this framework of learning to teach in consultation with practitioners and students, the role of the professor has the potential to shift in tremendously valuable ways. Though in some contexts, I do view my position as supporting the development of key “teaching skills” via the course texts in a structured way (i.e., the construction of curriculum, the creation of a well-researched and organized lesson plan, effective strategies to maintain high expectations), I also support the intersection and connection-making across the learnings accomplished in both of these collaborative relationships. Therefore, rather than a holder of information, my role becomes one of facilitation: I facilitate the relationships between the practitioners, students and prospective teachers, and I demonstrate how one constructs knowledge about their practice in concert with the experiences of others. I view this as necessary in order for students to make the learning they accomplish their own as they create their own philosophy / pedagogical stance through the final portfolio.

In order to accomplish teacher development that matches the complexity of the profession, the “student” (in many contexts) must become central. A destabilizing of the professor as “all-knowing” is one aspect that supports this more holistic approach to teacher development. In my encouragement that students learn in collaboration with and from others toward the construction of their own thinking—and in my own willingness to learn from my students—I hope to

demonstrate the importance of the student as an active participant in his or her education and the necessity of always learning from those around you with the goal of improving practice.

The difficulties of this process are important to recognize as well. The need to assert authority and maintain respect is a complicated task taken on by educators at every level. The tendency to view a professor who is willing to learn from others (even high schoolers!) as less powerful or intellectual is also prevalent. In addition, it takes incredible time and emotional work to support the development of relationships from outside those relationships. The “teaching” of these soft skills alongside the hard skills of creating a lesson plan and managing a classroom require flexibility in pedagogy and increased awareness of each individual relationship as it is developing. The process can be exhausting, yet the rewards are evident. Even when the relationship a prospective teacher builds with her veteran teacher specialist or high school partner is tenuous or on the surface, she has the chance to learn through that experience what she might do differently. Prospective teachers also learn the difficulty of building relationships and how one might still learn from a colleague with whom one does not necessarily agree. This focus on learning in every context is central to what I believe makes a successful teacher.

Ultimately, the new ideas and experienced voices which help inform what is learned in our class make a tremendous difference and teach new and important content alongside key skills and ways of engaging with others that make the work of teaching and learning more possible. Witnessing the growth my students accomplish alongside my own development over the last number of years solidifies my commitment to this collaborative and relational framework for teacher development.

Notes

[1] The books I use include:

Cook-Sather, A. (2009). *Learning from the Student's Perspective: A Sourcebook for Effective Teaching*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Perrone, V. (1999). *Lessons for New Teachers*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Tomlinson, C. & McTighe, J. (2006). *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Richardson, W. (2010). *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lemov, D. (2010). *Teach Like a Champion*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Johnson, L. (2011). *Teaching Outside the Box*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.