

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 14 *Winter 2015*

Article 8

January 2015

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Recommended Citation

Ramsey, Lara; Greenstreet, Dena; Intrator, Sam M.; and Siegel, Don "Applied Learning as a Shared Experience: Two Models of Partnership at Smith College," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 14 (2015), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss14/8>

APPLIED LEARNING AS A SHARED EXPERIENCE: TWO MODELS OF PARTNERSHIP AT SMITH COLLEGE

The Smith College Education and Child Study Department structures a variety of opportunities for students to learn beyond the traditional setting of the college classroom. These experiences are distinguished by unique collaborations among professors, classroom teachers, college students, high school students and elementary students. The department runs two distinctive lab school programs. The first is the Smith College Campus School, a K-6 laboratory school located on the Smith Campus. The second is an out-of-school program run by Smith faculty and students that serves high school and elementary-aged youth in the city of Springfield.

What follows are two examples drawn from these programs of faculty and students teaching and learning from one another in an institution of higher education. In “Beginning with Complexity: The Initial Collaboration Between a Student Teacher and a Cooperating Teacher,” Lara Ramsey, Supervising Teacher at the Smith College Campus School, and Dena Greenstreet, Student Teacher at Smith College, Class of 2015, offer a dialogue through which they trace the unfolding of their collaborative work to transform the traditional student-teaching experience. In “Working Side-by-Side with Students in an After-School Program,” Sam M. Intrator, Professor and Chair of the Education and Child Study Program at Smith College, and Don Siegel, Professor, Smith College, share a version of the letter they send to each new cohort of graduate and undergraduate Smith students who participate in *Project Coach*, their sports-based youth development program.

Both the programs provide applied learning experiences: they consist of active, collaborative opportunities to connect theory and practice and to nurture learning and growth through reflective, experiential processes (Ash & Clayton, 2009). The ongoing reflection between student and teacher occurs through formal and informal processes that yield a dynamic of mutual transformation.

Beginning with Complexity: The Initial Collaboration Between a Student Teacher and a Cooperating Teacher

Lara Ramsey, Supervising Teacher, Smith College Campus School
Dena Greenstreet, Student Teacher, Smith College, Class of 2015

Introduction

During their student teaching experience, student teachers typically assume responsibility for classroom practice one small step at a time, starting with lower-stakes challenges and working from the supervising teacher in the lead to the student teacher in the lead. In this dialogic essay, we offer a glimpse into the ways in which we, as an experienced fourth-grade teacher and a prospective teacher, respectively, take up collaboration from the start of our relationship and imagine beginning student teaching by taking on complex and meaningful demands right away.

Our approach has its roots in applied learning pedagogy and in Dewey’s philosophy of experiential education. We conceptualize student teaching not as on-the-job training, but as an opportunity to immerse oneself in the field and experiment with putting theory into practice.

Essential feedback is gained via interactions within the multiple relationships that have a bearing on school practice (e.g. students, content, pedagogy, colleagues, and school culture).

Our plan is to co-select areas of teaching responsibility for Dena to take on that are multi-layered from the start, areas that involve research, problem-solving, imagination, and assessment for specific aspects of the social and intellectual fourth-grade curriculum. Making suitable choices for Dena's responsibilities could not happen without collaboration: we depend on finding and focusing on intersections between Lara's knowledge of teaching and teacher-education and Dena's self-knowledge, academic background, and interests. We designed a structure for collaboration that provides the support required to maximize our mutual learning and to ensure an extraordinarily thoughtful classroom environment for our students.

Lara: Our collaborative structure is as follows. For a given unit (such as soil studies, cursive, probability or poetry), Dena does the research and thinking necessary to identify essential questions and learning objectives. She crafts a sequence of connected learning experiences, and she develops assessment tools. Dena researches primary resources, activities, models, and readings. Throughout the planning experience, we are in conversation. I document all correspondence and meetings.

Reviewing these notes together, we chronicle the development of Dena's ideas about teaching and learning in concert with my ideas about mentoring someone into the profession. It is an experiment to see if the experience of student teaching is richer and more fulfilling if more responsibilities and opportunities for problem solving are offered from the start. It is also an experiment to see how mentoring student teachers using principles of applied learning pedagogy and experiential education shapes the experience for both supervisor and student teacher.

Dena: I want to be fully immersed in my student teaching experience, and I want to be changed by it. So I was excited by Lara's proposal to record our dialogue, as it immediately brought our work to a new level of meaning and respect.

Lara: To me, this collaboration feels right. Before this undertaking, my methods of teaching elementary students and my methods of working with student teachers have been out of alignment. With my fourth-graders, I am intentionally present and visible as a learner and as a researcher of my students' ideas. I repeat and rephrase what I think students have said to clarify my understanding of their intended meaning. I write down things students say, and I consider students' ideas seriously. When I think of something I never thought before as a result of listening to learners explain (Duckworth, 2001), I let them know, and I explain it back, asking if I have been true to the story of our co-evolving ideas. I look for mutual transformation (Nakkula, 1998) as evidence that my students and I are engaged in a dynamic, growth-oriented model of learning to teach.

I am surprised that it has taken me this long (15 years!) to think about a model for collaborating with student teachers that is in keeping with my philosophy of education for my elementary students. When I started supervising student teachers, I adopted a model of supervision that I did not question even though it was not deeply fulfilling. What has happened is that, over time, I have felt that my student teachers are not as moved by the experience of teaching and learning as

I am, and I began to wonder if the reason why is because their experience in my classroom was reductive. In giving student teachers “manageable sized chunks,” was I eliminating intellectual and social invigoration?

Now I find myself re-conceptualizing my aim for the experience of student teaching in my classroom. I am pulling from my own thrilling start in education as a leader of therapeutic wilderness expeditions and service-learning trips. I don’t know if I would have fallen in love with teaching if I hadn’t had the chance to “fall in” so completely. I hope to create a context for teaching in which Dena can “fall in”—and hopefully thrive.

Over time, I have learned that to make the most of immersion experiences, a facilitator must ask valuable questions and guide the process of reflection, articulation, and assessment. I will do this by asking Dena to join me in turning our semester together into a research project. As Vivian Paley (1987) points out, the teacher’s effort to capture better data results in the students’ efforts to clarify and more carefully articulate their ideas. The mutual effort to understand and refine an idea furthers the idea itself, in the process of which, students teach and teachers learn. Student teachers, who are deliberately and overtly learners and teachers at once, are in a prime position to appreciate the bi-directionality of learning and teaching.

Dena: I think of classrooms and student-teacher relationships as intellectual safe spaces meant for exploration, dialogue, and learning from one another. It would be naive of me to think that I had nothing to learn from my students, so the concept of mutual transformation just seems natural to me.

Lara: Our shared question is, “What happens if a student teacher is given a complex teaching task right from the start, one that has the potential to draw on the skills and offer the rewards that an inspired, accomplished teacher would enjoy?”

Often, student teachers are given only simple, low-stakes tasks to accomplish when they are new to the classroom. These tasks might involve management without curriculum, making bulletin boards, or providing clerical support to the supervising teacher’s workload. Experienced teachers know that these responsibilities contain layers of significance, but for pre-service teachers, the layers of significance may be hard to see, especially if they are framed as “low-stakes” and require no original thinking. What if a student teacher’s first lesson was, in no uncertain terms, a “high-stakes” undertaking? What if, from the start, student teachers engaged in trying to inspire while communicating new information while tapping into imagination while also teaching students to listen to each other and make sure everyone has a pencil? I asked Dena if she was up for this (I honestly don’t know how it will work). For the reasons explained above, I invited her to enter the semester with me, “willing to experience meaningful failure” instead of less-meaningful success. She said yes!

Dena: To be honest, my first reaction to Lara’s proposal of “meaningful failure” was a rush of nerves. Failure is not often celebrated at Smith. But my second thought was, “Okay, well...if I want my students to work hard, think divergently, and challenge themselves for me, I should begin by getting outside of my own comfort zone for them.” Mutual transformation is one thing,

but I am even more intrigued by the idea of mutual risk-taking and mutual bravery in the classroom.

I want to become an educator in order to help young people appreciate, connect, and get excited about the world around them and all it has to offer them. Last summer I had a life-changing experience teaching hands-on, out-of-school lessons when I traveled to San Pedro, Belize, with Smith College Coral Reef Ed-Ventures to implement educational summer camp programs for local children. The children of San Pedro live in a small island town, half a mile away from the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, yet due to the domination of high-priced boat tours geared towards international tourists, most of the children have never actually seen the reef. The focus of our camp was on coral reef conservation with the goal of connecting our students to that ecosystem. Our lessons were woven into the community as we connected with local conservationists, families, and business owners for support. We fundraised until we were able to afford a trip out to the reef with the children, and that was a day I will never forget. Our students were able to connect all we had learned in lessons at camp with what they were seeing before their eyes in the water.

This experience further fueled my passion to become an educator, but it was also a turning point for me: it was then hard for me to imagine going back to classroom teaching and feeling the same level of fulfillment and freedom that I felt teaching outdoors. At this point in my career as an undergraduate student, I am still wholeheartedly invested in learning about education, but I can no longer imagine myself being fulfilled in a classroom setting in the future. But, as Lara says, “We shall see!”

Lara: By now, you must see why I feel we cannot afford to introduce new teachers to the experience of teaching in classrooms as anything less than “brain-work of the most creative and appealing sort” (Cohen, 2011). If people coming into the profession with Dena’s vision for what education could be turn away in search of “fulfillment and freedom,” we can hardly expect our youngest students to find fulfillment and freedom in the classrooms left behind.

Based on Dena’s interests and aspirations, and on the fourth-grade curricula, we decided that she would create a series of lessons about soil and erosion. Her task is to convey information about soil (its composition, how it forms, why it’s valuable) as well as inspire a sense of wonder for this ordinary stuff beneath our feet. “I love the challenge of making soil fascinating,” she said, “That sounds *really* good.” Why save soil? Why prevent erosion? And here comes the problem-solving part—how? We imagine that Dena might have cookie trays filed with soil for students to shape in different ways, and students will test the run-off resulting from a watering can “rain storm” sprinkling onto the “field” while it is elevated on one end to create a 30-degree slope.

Dena: I feel great about this starting point, and I am really looking forward to seeing how these lessons evolve, and if the students will find them interesting. I know that I learned about soil composition at some point during my education, but I actually can’t *remember* the lessons, and none of the facts really stuck. I basically had to re-learn it all when I began my work as a horticulture student and gardening intern at Smith. My goal is to help my students realize how miraculous and interesting soil really is, and *remember* it!

Lara: I'm not sure what will happen when we field-test this plan—either the erosion lesson for fourth-graders or the higher-stakes intro-to-teaching campaign. We may end up wishing we had started with managing a quiet line and doing read aloud. But my hypothesis is, quiet lines (and management in general) will emerge as important in the service of more central ideas about teaching and learning if we put the central ideas on the table right from the start. I think read aloud will be elevated to its rightful place—not low-stakes and management-driven, but as window for forming community, pushing ideas, expanding language, and more.

Dena: I think the reason why I am not inclined towards teaching in a classroom is because I have felt confined when working in them before; confined by traditional structures, desks in rows, state requirements, and in the case of public schools, suffocating standardized testing demands. But, like I said, I want my student teaching experience this fall to change me. I am interested to see if our “meaningful failure” experiment will shift my perspective on classroom teaching and open it up as a possibility for my future as an educator.

Conclusion

Lara: I feel extremely lucky that Dena is enthusiastic about our project. I keep wondering if our shared enthusiasm for the work we are doing together is the fortuitous upshot of our personalities and learning styles or if this level of active, passionate engagement is result of offering a collaborative experience of immersion and structured reflection. In the conceptualizing stages, I for one have felt more keenly motivated to correspond, read her words carefully, and to consider with equal care what I might offer in response. In listening to our initial tapes, I have already noticed that I do more than half of the talking, a dynamic I want to change so that I can learn more from Dena. I also notice that our conversations about soil studies are not product-oriented, but idea-centered. I find that I do not have to worry about the lesson plan because no plan has ever been created with more thought and care.

Dena: Collaborating early-on, having these conversations well before school begins, and establishing an understanding of each other's opinions, doubts, and passions has brought me a good deal of comfort, but also excitement. I am no longer afraid to begin this brand new experience because I have a mentor teacher who has validated my doubts, fears, and concerns about my future as an educator, and turned them into something positive- an experiment. I am excited at the prospect of being challenged and creatively engaged from Day One in the classroom.

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Working Side-by-Side with Students in an After-School Program

Sam M. Intrator, Professor and Chair of the Education and Child Study Program, Smith College
Don Siegel, Professor, Smith College

As summer turns towards fall, we welcome a new cohort of graduate and undergraduate Smith students to Project Coach. A sports-based youth development program, PC teams the Smith College community with city youth in a sports-based after-school program where undergraduate and graduate students teach teens to coach and mentor children in city elementary schools. The program serves the same mission as a traditional "lab school" except our focus is on out-of-school time. The program has a unique staffing structure. We call it a cascading apprenticeship model: Smith faculty work alongside graduate students and undergraduate students. The primary role of the Smith students is to serve as core staff in the program and as mentors to approximately 50 high school students that in turn mentor and coach elementary aged students. The program is set in the North End of Springfield, which is one of the poorest communities in Massachusetts. As part of their orientation, we ask new staff to read and reflect on a letter that describes the mission of our organization and shares what we have learned through our direct on-the-ground experiences in Project Coach and through the many conversations, observations, and interactions we have had with staff, leaders, and youth participants in Project Coach and other programs.

A key element of the letter emphasizes how we (faculty members) work alongside students in the program. This is a distinct element of Project Coach. The conventional structure in higher education would involve a faculty member coordinating an opportunity for a student to get involved in an organization and then bring back what they have learned to the classroom. Teaching about teaching or instructing a course underpinned by theory can often sway us to think about curriculum, pedagogy, in a manner that discounts the enormous significance of human relationships in education. We can become beguiled by the language of theory or by efforts to frame practice through elegant conceptual frameworks. By contrast, working alongside students within an organization, which we think of as grounded practice, can provide a regular and humbling reminder that this is hard work and that many of our sophisticated aspirations for pedagogy or to induce students to engage in higher order thinking depend on the capacity to forge trusting, caring, and reciprocal relationships with young people. This is the emphasis of our letter.

Dear New Staff:

Welcome to our team. On the surface we may appear to be a sports program, but our ambitious and audacious mission stretches beyond athletics. We seek to help children and teenagers grow towards becoming successful young adults.

Simply put this is a daunting task. Many of the young people we work with come from complex circumstances. They have grown up poor, attend schools that have large numbers of underperforming students and in Springfield only graduate 52.1% of students from high school. After school, they mostly return home to neighborhoods where the systemic challenges of concentrated poverty take their toll including high crime rates, gang activity, poor housing, sub-standard health care, and limited access to job opportunities. Most of the young people that flow through our program would fall into the demographics of a group where only 8% of them would be expected to graduate from college.

Despite the ‘underdog’ odds, we hold to a defining objective that seeks to help every young person who moves through our program graduate from high school, head off to college and ultimately graduate from college. We know there is chatter about whether college is ‘right’ for every young person. However, our view is that every young person who moves through Project Coach should at least have this option. Foreclosing on it in middle school or the early high school years, before a youth has considered such a possibility, seems unjustified, and may foreclose on many future opportunities that the youth was not in a position to know about at an earlier age.

We strive to defy long odds and we can only do that with your commitment and talents. There is a long and impressive line of empirical research that investigates those factors that most promote student academic achievement. These studies unequivocally reveal that the quality of the teacher is the single-most crucial in-school factor linked to how well students grow academically. In other words, teachers make the difference inside of school. We believe the same is true in the out-of-school context. Adults in the out of school setting have the same critical influence by the relationships you cultivate, the activities you plan, the expectations you set, and the fidelity with which you follow through. In a sense, you are the hinge upon which all-else swings.

We’re counting on you. There is no ‘secret sauce’ although we believe in four fundamental principles.

- Your personal presence and way with young people counts—a lot!
- Youth need adults who care for them and help keep them organized
- You must learn to teach youth how to become successful adults
- We must keep on talking together, thinking together, reflecting together because this is hard and complicated work

Who you are matters!

There is no special rulebook or incantation to working with youth in the out-of-school context. So much of the work flows through your personal qualities. As Parker J. Palmer, a well-known educational philosopher observes:

The secret is hidden in plain sight: good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood—and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning.[1]

Good youth workers possess the same capacity. They weave connections between themselves, the youth, and the larger world. Once the relationship is sound, the learning that can be accomplished can be transformative and distinct from what a young person might be experiencing in other areas in their life, such as school.

Your passion for young people, your energy to get them excited about their future, and your own record of diving in and becoming animated by your own activities are why we hired you. Passion is a quality notoriously difficult to pin down, but it has to do with connecting students to what you want to teach and an intensity of commitment to persevere.

While passion often connotes an inward fire, you must find ways to communicate with young people. There are people who have passion for art, writing, and sport that drives performance in quiet and private ways. We honor this type of passion, but believe that for you to thrive in our program and impact young people, your passion must emanate from you as enthusiasm. John Wooden describes enthusiasm as what infuses and stimulates those you lead. “As a leader, you must be filled with energy and eagerness, joy and love for what you do.” We view our program as a community of practice and we believe that like any intensive community we are vulnerable to contagion and infection. When a staff member brings energy and passion to the community we all get ‘infected’ by that heat and drive. Conversely, lethargy and cynicism can also infect us in ways that derail our best aspirations for the work.

Clearly, we want staff who are “fully there” when they show up at our program. In sport they call it “game time,” in drama and music they call it “show time.” When you show up, we ask that you come prepared to channel all of your energies into the physical, cognitive, and emotional labors of the work.

Teach about Success both Explicitly and Implicitly

Passion and enthusiasm without direction would just be random energy. We are a community of practice singularly devoted to fostering the development of the skills and talents of the youth in our program. As a staff member who has experienced success in your own life, we hope that you can introduce, teach, and reinforce those critical lessons that relate to cultivating success. We hold to the idea that the skills related to achievement profoundly malleable. As the psychologist Heidi Grant Halvorson conveys:

Research tells us it's using the right *strategies* that leads to accomplishment and achievement. Sounds simple, but strategies like being committed, recognizing temptations, planning ahead, monitoring your progress, persisting when the going gets tough, making an effort, and perhaps most important *believing you can improve*, can make all the difference between success and failure. [2]

Her premise is inspiring: we can help young people learn these strategies of success. She and others believe that youth need to be inspired and aspire to worthwhile goals. They need to have realistic strategies for reaching them, and ways to deploy such in their day-to-day lives. As well, they need you to be their support systems to help them stay “on the rails”, or re-engage when they go off track. Changing behavior and building internal and external assets is not easy, but for young people who remain committed to our program success will come.

We have many explicit lessons that teach kids the rudiments of success, but even more important are the implicit ways that they learn these things from being part of our community and culture. We all believe that when each of us commits to doing “whatever it takes” to help kids thrive, the community becomes stronger, and the youth that live in it come to internalize the values we promote and lessons that we teach. Being part of this process is ennobling, and shows us all how providing equal opportunity to those who are disproportionately underserved can “level the playing field” and make it possible for them to compete with those who have had many more advantages.

Help Young People Learn to Manage and Control Their Lives

The ability to manage one's self is encapsulated by the umbrella concept described as self-regulation or self-control. It includes the ability to concentrate, to overcome counterproductive impulses, to work autonomously, and to restrain oneself when tempted by various diversions. The good news is that self-regulatory skills can be acquired. In fact, under the right kind of instruction, which includes appropriate guidance, modeling of effective strategies and creating supportive and challenging contexts, they have been found to be quite malleable. We believe that the array of activities in Project Coach is uniquely suited to promote this type of learning for the following reasons.

First, an optimal condition for developing and honing self-regulation occurs when youth have an opportunity to pursue their own goals and pursue meaningful experiences of their own volition. As a voluntary activity, Project Coach provides young people with many opportunities to make choices about what they do, how they will do it, and with whom they will do it. Over the years we have learned that when youth are given such decision-making authority, they are more likely to adhere to the decisions that they make, and to fulfill the commitments they have made to one another, and to the program. In essence, youth learn self-regulation from being given opportunities to self-regulate. We see your job as nurturing this process, and providing guidance to our youth when they are diverted from fulfilling their roles by the complexities in their lives.

Second, our community values giving and receiving forthright feedback. In learning to coach a sport our youth learn to provide feedback to their players on their performance, effort, and behavior as team members and competitors. Similarly, they come to learn how important

feedback is to their own lives, and to fulfilling their short and long-term goals. Consequently, as their mentor and coach, you will help them learn to use feedback to become better coaches, students, and community members. In essence, practice at doing this builds their self-regulatory capacities, by teaching them that feedback is the fuel that allows them to improve on whatever task they chose to engage.

Third, youth in Project Coach work on an array of complicated activities that require tremendous attention and focus over long periods of time. Not only do they coach sports, but also read books with their teams, produce videos about the program and themselves, and participate in community forums. These activities are demanding and require sustained attention and devotion. By following through on such endeavors they learn to be responsible, to disregard diversions, and to multitask. In so doing, they learn to marshal their considerable energy. Again, you are intricately involved in working with our coaches on these projects and providing both technical and emotional support.

Fourth, throughout all of what we do a youth's emotions may often rise or fall depending not only on things that happen at Project Coach, but things that happen at school, with their friends, or at home. We also know that adolescence can also be a very challenging time when hormones rage, decisions get made impulsively because the executive function systems of their brain are still working erratically, and changes in their bodies can make youth feel uncomfortable about themselves. Nonetheless, in the midst of such internal disequilibrium, they still need to perform the tasks for which they are responsible. Here, you will play the role of counselor. While we teach coaches techniques on how to help their players adjust their arousal levels to optimize their sports performances, we want you to help them to understand and to apply these methods to themselves. Consequently, by having such resources and understanding their applications in different contexts they will gain another level of control over themselves.

Some Practical Suggestions

Given that you are on board and ready to go, here are some concluding thoughts that will help get you "off the deck" once you begin:

1. We depend on each other: We have a curriculum and explicit structures that guide our work. We have operating principles, rituals, and long-standing ways of being together. Despite the presence of structure, this work eludes codification and simple rule. Instead, we spend a lot of time figuring things out together. We talk things through, we ask questions, and we depend on our collective judgments and our communal counsel.
2. Do your best work during the minutes before sessions begin, during transitions, and when we have downtime. Unscheduled time is an opportunity for informal conversations. It's a time to check in, ask questions, listen in on conversations, and generally pick up on things that are important for you to know as a mentor, educator, and ally of the young people. Many times staff will congregate amongst themselves and miss out on the opportunity to pick up information or build connections and trust.

3. Never turn down van time. Driving kids around means that you are a captive audience as are the youth. It's a time to talk, laugh, ask questions and tell stories. Being in the van with youth provides opportunities to just hang with a captive audience. It is really amazing what gets discussed during these times and what you can learn.
4. Show up at their games, concerts, performances or other events. We encourage staff to go to our kids' football games or attend a concert where they are performing. There is both symbolic power in this gesture, but it also presents an opportunity to see youth in a different context.
5. Share Your Knowledge. The field of youth development is emerging. Even those folks who have worked in the field for many years, remain humble, and readily convey that we are still only beginning to understand how best to do this work. There are exciting opportunities to contribute to building knowledge in the field, and discovering best practices. Attend conferences, write about your work, and get involved in professional networks.

Between us we have worked for over 65 years in education. During this time we have learned that there are many unknowns when working with youth, but by always thinking about their interests first, and learning to empathize with the reasons for why they behave as they do, irrespective of how rational or irrational you may think their behavior to be, will usually get you to the right place. We both believe that more than any type of setting—life-changing work can be done in out-of-school organizations.

Sincerely,

Sam Intrator and Don Siegel
Smith College and Project Coach

[1] Parker J. Palmer and Megan Scribner, *The Courage to Teach Guide for Reflection and Renewal*(Jossey-Bass, 2007), 104.

[2] Heidi Grant Halvorson, "The Success Myth," *Wall Street Journal*, sec. At Work, July 24, 2012.