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PARTNERING TO LEARN, EXPERIENTIALLY

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Introduction

Student teaching, framed as experiential education rather than on-the-job training, is a promising model that promotes mutual transformation between mentor and student teacher. In this article, I tell the story of how I came to think about applying tenets of experiential education to the partnerships I share with student teachers. Applying the model required me to rethink and redefine my role as a mentor teacher.

Realization and Revision

I teach at the Smith College Campus School, a laboratory school for the Smith College Department of Education and Child Study. The mission of the school includes serving as a mentor for and supervising Smith College student teachers. I have worked with one or two graduate or undergraduate student teachers each semester for the last 17 years, modeling my pedagogy in practice in my elementary classrooms.

At first, I did a lot of demonstrating and explaining in relation to my classroom practice. I demonstrated offering subject matter to elementary school students without mediating their experience of it, explaining to my student teachers that the learning needs to happen in the mind of the learner (personal communication, J. Szymaszek, February 25, 2015). I demonstrated asking questions that were designed to illuminate how the sixth graders were making sense of the material under study, explaining that such questions deepen their understanding and my understanding at the same time (Ramsey, 2003). I demonstrated helping my students reflect on their experiences in order to lift salient ideas from them. I embraced these pedagogical approaches with all of my students—*except my student teachers*.

I am humbled by the number of years that passed before I noticed that I had taken supervision to be one thing, and teaching elementary students to be another. I focused my creative and intellectual energy on designing learning experiences for the younger grades, and although I coached my student teachers, I did not engineer learning experiences. By following a model of supervision that I had not reimagined, I missed the opportunity to intentionally and systematically incorporate into my mentoring of them the elements I identified as central to educational experiences.

The model I followed went something like this. Student teachers took on responsibilities gradually, with early responsibilities including reading aloud at snack time or managing a hallway transition from one part of the building to another. Eventually, student teachers taught a stand-alone lesson that they planned following clear directions and feedback on a lesson plan. The reflection phase often looked something like, “What went well, what could have gone

better?” It was an efficient system that generally resulted in good lessons for the elementary students.

However, I doubt that I would have ever become a classroom teacher if I had entered the profession through the very model that I had been offering, for how would I have known, for myself, the multi-layered richness of teaching, learning, and curriculum? I had not offered the subject of teaching to my student teachers with its full complexity intact, nor had I engaged my student teachers as co-researchers of teaching. Student teachers didn't get to explore too many of their original ideas, and I had not crafted questions for their reflections that were research questions for me as well.

It was time to re-imagine my model for supervising student teachers with the tenets of experiential education intact. I wanted to learn how to help student teachers experience the rich and rewarding complexities of teaching. How could I do this without throwing them in the deep end? What model fell somewhere between a model of demonstration and explanation and full, un-scaffolded immersion?

And there it was: my research question. Who better to learn than from student teachers? With this thought, my model shifted. I was in it to learn, and that, for teachers, is always a seismic shift.

Revisiting the Rootedness of Experiential Education

Before I became a classroom teacher, I spent a decade in the field of outdoor education. At the time, I equated outdoor education with experiential education, and I believed that teaching in the outdoors was the only context in which I would enjoy teaching. Over time, however, I began to realize that the satisfaction I felt in teaching was not dependent on (or guaranteed by) being in the outdoor environment. What I really liked was my role as a facilitator of learning. I liked being an agent on behalf of students' transformative experiences, and I liked the work of making sensitive choices designed to augment student learning. In short, I liked my role as an experiential educator. I wondered if I could bring these dynamics of teaching and learning to the classroom.

Definitions of experiential education, also called applied learning pedagogies, differ slightly but tend to include the idea of students learning from reflection on real-world experience, with teachers facilitating students' experiences and reflections, and the interaction between teacher and student leading to mutual transformation. Patty Ash and Sarah Clayton (2009) offer this:

Applied learning pedagogies share a design fundamental: the nurturing of learning and growth through a reflective, experiential process that takes students out of traditional classroom settings. The approach is grounded in the conviction that learning is maximized when it is active, engaged, and collaborative. Each applied learning pedagogy provides students with opportunities to connect theory and practice, to learn in unfamiliar contexts, to interact with others unlike themselves, and to practice using knowledge and skills (p. 1).

Could I engage learners in these ways without taking students “out of traditional classroom settings?” I hoped so. Could I keep it “real world” within the classroom? Could I set up learning experiences that were active and collaborative, and could I create room for transformative reflection? These features, drawn from models of experiential education, came to figure prominently in my model of classroom teaching, and eventually, in my revised model of mentoring student teachers.

As a classroom teacher, I have tried to preserve the integrity of the subject matter of the world by thinking of ways to offer it to children without oversimplifying it. By resisting the urge to package subject matter—poetry, fractions, American history, gravity—for seamless consumption, we preserve something of the real world for students to experience. As Lisa Schneier observed:

We organize subject matter into a neat series of steps which assumes a profound uniformity among students. We sand away at the interesting edges of subject matter until it is so free from its natural complexities, so neat, that there is not a crevice left as an opening. All that is left is to hand it to them, scrubbed and smooth, so that they can view it as outsiders (quoted in Duckworth, 1996, p. 128).

When we do not hand down subject matter “scrubbed and smooth,” there is something textured with which to interact, making the essence of “experiential education” possible in the classroom. In the classroom, I have learned to embrace my students’ points of confusion rather than seek to eliminate them. I find that puzzlement, theirs and mine, is a tractive force for learning, both in the classroom and in the “real world.”

This dynamic of teaching and learning is collaborative; I learn about teaching as students teach me how they learn (Duckworth, 1996). The questions I ask my students—what do you think and why?—support my research interests while simultaneously initiating students’ reflection on experience. These features of education—preserving the integrity and complexity of subject matter, building a dynamic of perpetual learning and teaching, and providing systematic reflection—are features of experiential education that can be central to classroom teaching. I made a commitment to bring a collaborative dynamic of teaching and learning to my next partnership with a student teacher.

Supervision Revised: A Case Study

My next student teacher partnership, with Dena Greenstreet, Smith College class of ’15, was a fortuitous match. Dena came to the practicum with questions of her own that dovetailed nicely with mine. She had enjoyed teaching in non-traditional contexts (she had spent a semester doing coral reef education in Belize and she had led girls’ empowerment music groups), but the classrooms in which she had observed as an education major had not inspired her. Dena wanted to find out if classroom teaching could stimulate her enough to become a career choice, and I

wanted to know if I could offer an experience of teaching that was stimulating. (See Ramsey, Greenstreet, Intrator, & Siegal, 2015, for another account of this experience.)

I had a research questions in mind, and I asked Dena to join me in the experiment:

- What happens when 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?
- What happens when student teaching is framed as experiential education, rather than on-the-job training?
- What happens if we begin with complexity instead of graduated responsibilities?
- What if we trust that through full immersion in teaching, the important ideas and skills that are sometimes laid out in advance will emerge in a meaningful context?
- What if we trust that there will be failure, but that we can make it meaningful, maybe even more meaningful than a series of assured, mini-successes?

Simply asking Dena to join me in a research project qualitatively altered my model of supervision. It added focus, stimulus, and meaning to her practicum and to my mentoring role.

In addition to the dynamic instigated by identifying ourselves as co-researchers, Dena was eager for these qualities being researched to shape her experience. She understood that I hoped to trade types of safety; whereas her teaching experiences were not guaranteed to go smoothly in this model, there was a greater safety (we hoped!) in depending on the element of risk to lead to rich learning. Dena understood that I didn't have experience mentoring in this vein and that I would be learning from her experience to better understand the model. I would document what happened and what I learned, and she would document what happened and what she learned. We bought tape recorders to record her classes and our conversations afterwards, so that we could listen and reflect.

At first, I thought that Dena's work in the classroom would look much different from that of previous student teachers. I could not imagine offering her the full complexity without also offering more responsibilities and more work. However, it wasn't possible or responsible to increase Dena's workload, so I had the chance to work on the problem of offering "full complexity" in small chunks. This is not actually any different from the choices I make around teaching sixth graders history or science: one well-chosen artifact or one well-chosen experiment can be key to a world of ideas. What would I choose for Dena to try, or to think about?

Ironically, I ended up asking Dena to plan the same lesson I have asked other student teacher to plan, a lesson about pronunciation codes in dictionaries. The difference was that I told Dena less about how to do it and focused more on her experience of thinking it through. I let go of worrying about the product—the sixth graders' experience of her lesson.

My genuine interest in Dena's ideas had the effect of focusing Dena's attention on her own ideas in turn. For example, she asked me if I thought her introduction would work, and I asked her why she thought it would or wouldn't. By asking her to explain, I framed an occasion for her to

give reason and language to her current best idea. Through explaining her idea, Dena evaluated it and made changes.

Dena invented an experience aimed at hooking children's curiosity about pronunciation codes. She researched and selected stories about the history of English language pronunciation. She chose words whose codes were suitable for children to puzzle through. The culminating phase of her lesson was the presentation of a poster on which she had written a rhyming verse in pronunciation code, a verse that pointed students to a treasure hidden somewhere in the classroom. By the time her lesson was ready to teach, Dena had participated in processes that I know to make teaching meaningful to me: inventing with aim, researching subject matter, making small yet significant choices about what to offer students as fodder for thought, and creating a consequential task. I had been there to help her ideas along, but they were her ideas. This was both experiential education and teaching, not observing and training, and it was engaging for both of us.

I have explained how two tenets of experiential education featured in our collaboration: one, I engaged with Dena's learning as a learner myself, setting the stage for mutual transformation; two, I offered Dena teaching assignments that were not simplified or geared toward easy success. The teaching tasks I gave Dena challenged her while also tapping her intellect and creativity, resources I am proud to encourage in student teachers.

The third feature of experiential education that figured into our pilot project was the form and function of reflection. It would no longer do to ask, "What went well, and what could have gone better?" Ash and Clayton (1999) describe the imperative of reflection on learning from experience:

When reflection on experience is weak, students' "learning" may be haphazard, accidental, and superficial. When it is well-designed, reflection promotes significant learning including, problem solving skills, higher order reasoning, integrative thinking, goal clarification, openness to new ideas, ability to adopt new perspectives, and systematic thinking. A critical reflection process that generates, deepens, and documents learning does not happen automatically—rather it must be carefully and intentionally designed...it is not enough to tell students, "Now it is time to reflect."... [Without guidance] reflection tends to be little more than descriptive accounts of experiences or venting of personal feelings" (pp. 1-2).

Our re-design of reflection included several changes. Previously, I had used weekly supervision meetings to review lessons taught (students wrote reflections on their own time and shared them with me at the meeting) and also to impart information about upcoming lessons. Now, I made time for reflective writing as part of our scheduled weekly meetings. Previously, I asked student teachers to think about what they learned from teaching their lesson. Now, I asked more specific questions as well, questions that I spent time crafting in advance of our meetings based on what I had observed. Previously, only my student teacher did reflective writing after lessons, but now, I did, too. We called this part of our meetings, "divide and write." When we came back together to share what we had written, our shared reflections informed next steps.

Before we launched this experimental model of student teaching, one thing I worried about was whether the skills I would ordinarily emphasize as prerequisites for teaching full lessons would emerge and get their due attention. For example, I was afraid that management strategies and formative assessment techniques would not occur as necessary considerations as readily as planning lesson introductions or consequential tasks. However, what I found is that everything that needed to emerge did emerge, and better yet, in context.

For example, Dena's lesson on the pronunciation key included an activity where students decoded a clue that directed them to a treasure that was hidden in the classroom. She did not plan for the management that twenty-one children decoding a single clue and pursuing a single hidden treasure would require. After the lesson, Dena wondered if the mayhem of the treasure hunt had ruined her lesson, and I told her that was exactly the thing we should divide and write about that day. At the end of the day, Dena did not regret her treasure hunt or the noise it created, but she thought about the importance of management "not to keep it quiet, but to make sure no one's ideas get lost." Dena wrote, "Management might be about something more than keeping order, as I previously thought. Management might be more like sculpting, balancing order and enthusiasm."

In addition to the topic of management, Dena discovered the topics of assessment, lesson objectives, and the difference between productive confusion and useless confusion (as a tool for learning) through the unforced progression of experience and reflection. We both kept track of Dena's ideas about teaching and how they changed over the course of the year. Toward the end of the year Dena made the observation that all of her biggest ideas happened to be things she had written reflections about.

I do not think this is a coincidence, but an indication of the power of gearing her reflections toward meaningful parts of her experience. Dena also noticed that she was starting to "reflect in advance" because of our reflection routine. Toward the end of our year together, Dena wrote, "The questions that shape our lesson plans shape the learning experience for students." She found this to be true of her work with fourth graders, and I found this to be true of my work with her.

Conclusion

In future partnerships with student teachers, I will continue to position myself as an active learner. I imagine I will be always be able to authentically ask myself, "How does someone learn to teach?" I can continue to ask myself, "What teaching experiences can I offer that keep the subject of teaching complex while still being suitable for someone new to the field?" By researching my student teachers' learning experiences, I will help them identify authentic questions for themselves. It is likely that our questions will be refined or revised during our time together, but beginning with a practice of reciprocal inquiry will make a difference to all that unfolds.

It turns out that the most transformative changes in my approach to supervision happened to my frame of mind, and there were no practical or material obstacles. I mean to maintain this frame in future supervision work:

- Offer teaching tasks that supply the rich complexity of teaching.
- When designing teaching tasks for student teachers, consider the risks involved in ensuring success versus ensuring growth.
- Focus on the student teacher's experience and evolution of ideas more so than the outcome for the students on which she is practicing (I found that with this as my focus, lesson plans were created with utmost care).
- Think with increased sense of purpose about how to direct a student teacher's reflections, for these reflections will become landmarks in her learning.
- Finally, share with my cooperating teacher all that I am learning from our collaboration as I learn it—allow myself to be openly changed by the exchange of ideas, for teachers who learn create students who teach.

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