

Learning from experience

Public perceptions of learning to teach English

If one were to listen to many politicians and policy makers talk about teacher education, one would think that learning to teach English involves simply three things:

1. learning theory in their education course at university; then
2. learning practical skills on the job (such as on teaching rounds or practicums in schools); and finally
3. learning how to make connections between these two separate and detached worlds.

As pre-service teachers of English continue to learn, it becomes apparent how inadequate an understanding this is of learning to teach. But leaving that aside for the moment, such a simplistic notion of learning to teach – one, for instance, that unproblematically separates theory from practical skills - raises a few questions about teacher education that should surely give pause for thought:

- Are pre-service English teachers blank slates or empty vessels? Do they come to their pre-service education course with no knowledge of theory, literary or otherwise?
- Have preservice English teachers never thought about the ways that various ideologies or theories operate within, or act upon, their worlds?
- Do preservice English teachers bring to their learning no prior knowledge or experience of teaching and learning within schools or elsewhere?
- How do the so-called ‘connections’ between theory and practice come about?

* * * * *

English teachers as life-long learners

It is a bit of a truism in education that teachers should be teaching their students to become life-long learners rather than just educating students for narrowly conceived vocational pursuits. Mind you, it is not that long since an Australian federal government, in the 1980s, was trying to force teachers to focus more on school as vocational preparation - ‘preparing students for employment’. This invariably meant narrowing down teaching and learning options, limiting student choices and creative potential, resulting in a much less rich and much less diverse curriculum.

These days, however, it is recognised around the world that learning should be lifelong and that learning is by no means even restricted to formal settings like schools or universities. (See report from International Labour Organisation, 2000, *Lifelong learning in the twenty first century: The changing roles of educational personnel*).

If this notion of lifelong learning is applied to learning to teach, then this implies three important ideas:

1. Pre-service teachers' learning to teach did not just begin at their first class in their Education courses.
2. Learning to teach is not restricted to formal classes or lectures attended at university, the readings done for these classes, or the teaching rounds completed during an education course.
3. Learning to teach does not conclude when a graduate teacher attends his/her final class, takes his/her final class as a student teacher, or submits his/her final assignment. Learning to teach does not conclude after three or five or ten or twenty years of teaching experience.

Some prompts for reflexive narratives

Many of the narratives listed in the section called *Becoming a Teacher* begin by thinking about some memorable or powerful learning experience/s recalled from one's own schooling, at primary or secondary school (or university for that matter)? Often, a good prompt for such thinking is as simple as: What do I remember about school? Sometimes, this question provokes very pleasant memories, and sometimes the memories are less pleasant. Often, the memory will not seem to be related to learning, until the writer-learner reflects more carefully. Was he/she learning while not realizing it? Was this pleasant/unpleasant experience in some other way important for encouraging/discouraging learning at that time? Reading any of the pre-service narratives would suggest that critical reflection on early experiences in one's life is a powerful prompt for a pre-service teacher's learning.

Often, though, the pre-service teacher narratives do not restrict themselves to memories of in-school learning. Some come to the conclusion that significant learning in their lives has taken place outside of school.

Stories of pre-service teacher learning experiences provide a rich resource for critical reflection. We have all benefited from the opportunity to share and hear about the wide range of socio-cultural and professional backgrounds that contribute to pre-service teachers' learning. It is powerful indeed when such stories can be the source of further learning for others and for ourselves, serving to generate authentic knowledge about teaching, and about English teaching in particular.

* * * * *

Learning around and outside the classroom

Racheal, a pre-service student, wrote about one of her early experiences in schools that had a profound impact on her learning, and which she now sees was a significant part of her learning to teach.

I was one of very few Australian born students. The school population was largely made up of immigrants and refugees. There were Italian,

Greek, Lebanese, Vietnamese, Chinese and Turkish students, just to name a few. From Grade 1 to the beginning of Grade 5, I spent a great deal of time teaching other students how to speak English. I was often given a group of about four or five students and sitting either in class or in the yard we would recite the alphabet using picture cards or alphabet books. As part of the school's commitment to encouraging these students to communicate, performance became a major part of the curriculum. Every other day we were able to put on a performance of any kind. Between classrooms there was another small room that was defined by partition doors and during the afternoon these doors would be open and the two classes would come together to watch students perform. Many of the students would perform traditional dances wearing their traditional costumes. As for myself and my Australian friends, we would shake away to Prince's *Raspberry beret* or Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and *Beat It*, complete with the glove. I loved this part of the day, everyone was happy and we all cheered the performers on.

Racheal Minos

[Click [here](#) for more of Racheal's reflections]

Of course, not everyone has such vivid or clear memories of learning and teaching with our peers. This particular experience is interesting because it presents a model of teaching and learning where the distinction between teacher and learner is blurred and problematised. It's worth reflecting on the ways in which such a blurring can be positive in English teaching and learning.

* * * * *

Partnerships and Co-Mentoring

Some educators advocate an approach to learning, both in pre-service years and throughout teachers' professional lives, that encourages learning partnerships rather than one group learning from another. In these partnerships, relationships are characterized by a blurring of the line between teacher and learner. Mullen and Kealey referred to it as a much richer form of 'mentoring' than is traditionally understood by that term. This is how they describe it:

'Mentoring does not need to imply a hierarchical arrangement or status differential, nor does it need to imply that teaching and learning occur as a one-way street. Rather the potential for synergistic co-mentoring exists between mentors and mentees..... Mentoring becomes paradoxically empowered as mentors' and mentees' roles become indistinguishable. Co-mentoring is a process wherein learning becomes greater than the capacity for individuals to produce on their own, without guidance or feedback. Attribution of who has done or created what part of larger whole becomes 'difficult' when co-mentors speak in their learning of shared responsibility, and synergistic efforts.'

Mullen and Kealey (1999)

*New Directions in Mentoring:
Creating a culture of synergy* (p. 196)

* * * * *

Learning from/in other professional contexts

But, as said earlier, relevant learning does not just emerge from experiences in schools. Having completed her arts/law degree Julia, another pre-service students from 2003, worked as a legal officer in a Federal Government department for a short time. When reflecting on her journey into English teaching, she used the following to construct some sense of her experiences working in that environment.

‘I need that Executive Minute yesterday. The Minister’s not happy as it is. Get it done.’ (My boss to me via email from the next room.) ‘I don’t care if the Queen’s coming to dinner. We’ve got managers’ drinks and the Secretary is going to be there, so finish the Ministerial I was working on, plus the one you were working on, and circulate them before you leave tonight.’ (My boss to me via phone from the next room, at 4.30pm on a Friday. Guess who left at 10pm that night?)

Julia Maier

[Click [here](#) for more of Julia’s reflections on the ways in which she learned from different experiences]

Julia wrote that it was this sort of experience that prompted her to begin preparing to become a teacher. She used this vignette to communicate a sense in which her professional identity in teaching, even as a pre-service teacher, was much stronger and clearer for being valued by her colleagues. As she wrote about this experience, it became clear that she had developed a critical awareness of the professional issues mediating this experience. The experience per se did not provide the wisdom, but her critical reflection on it was proving to be generative.

Experience is a rich resource and a mediating influence for learning to teach, and yet it should not be considered an unquestionable good. Experience, as Feiman-Nemser has said, can inform learning, it can stimulate further learning, and yet it can also inhibit learning. All teachers might do well to pay head to Dewey’s advice to ‘extract the full meaning’ of experience rather than treating it as some sort of fetish that immediately bestows wisdom on those who are ‘experienced.’ Pre-service teachers already have such a wealth of experiences about which they can reflect, and they will always look to engage in professional conversations with more experienced teachers in order to benefit from their wisdom and understanding. However, pres-service teachers should also appreciate that they too have much wisdom that can be valuable in any professional conversation about teaching and learning to teach.