

Extending the Practicum: Problems in Integrating Theory and Practice

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On a bien souvent attribué aux cours qu'offrait l'université aux enseignants aucune valeur pratique et on a accusé ces derniers de dispenser un enseignement conservateur et abstrait. Ces critiques qui parfois touchaient profondément professeurs d'université et enseignants ne les a jamais amenés à remettre en question leur propre conviction. On a rarement vu les difficultés énormes que posait aux futurs enseignants la traduction en termes concrets de propositions théoriques et on a toujours résisté aux tentatives d'une transformation des programmes qui réduirait le temps que les élèves-maîtres passent en salle de cours. Présentement, les professeurs et les enseignants n'ont pas vraiment le temps de travailler ensemble bien qu'il existe des techniques pouvant joindre la pratique à la théorie. On a très rarement appliqué à la création ou à la modification de programmes les connaissances théoriques dont on disposait et il n'existe aucune étude détaillée qui porte sur l'élaboration des programmes.

Si on rend le stage plus long, il est fort possible qu'on puisse améliorer la qualité des programmes pour enseignants mais, d'un autre côté, on risque augmenter les conflits et les malentendus entre universités et écoles. Cependant, on a déjà mis sur pied, dans certains établissements, des structures qui semblent faciliter les rapports entre universités et écoles.

In a number of universities considerable pressure has been exerted to bring about longer school practica. In part, this reflects a push for greater involvement by teachers in the planning and offering of teacher education programs. In part, it reflects a more general dissatisfaction and frustration over teacher education programs as they have been organized in the past. The dissatisfaction and frustration are well justified; and extended practica could lead to their amelioration. But the results will not necessarily all be positive. In fact, the potential for improvement will be realized only if attitudes change, if appropriate strategies are employed, and if there is a strong commitment to program-related research.

A major part of the rationale for giving responsibility for teacher education to the universities is that universities combine teaching with the systematic search for new knowledge about education, schools, teaching, and learning. Direct contact with the latest and best thinking in the field should be an important element in the education of new members of the teaching profession as for any profession. But giving responsibility for teacher education to the universities has created some problems.

Professors, because of their specialized training and institutional membership, are socialized towards reflective thinking and a search for abstract, generalizable knowledge. Teachers, because of their special position, are likely to be more pragmatic, justifiably pessimistic about the value of research in education, and impatient with philosophical analyses. These different perspectives are both necessary in the education of beginning teachers and should be complementary, but frequently the views of professors and teachers are allowed to remain in conflict, with allegations of ivory tower thinking being made on one side and accusations of anti-intellectualism being made on the other.

The general goal should be to prepare teachers who are competent in classrooms as they presently exist, but who have the insight and commitment to improve their own teaching and the quality of education provided through the schools. Theory and practice must be effectively integrated in individual decision-making, in instruction in teacher education, and in the design and improvement of programs.

INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE IN INDIVIDUAL DECISION-MAKING

Each day teachers are faced with thousands of decisions and to ponder on each would be impossible. Instead they learn to react unconsciously to events which call for responses. A teacher's first few weeks and months in the school are extremely difficult because she has not yet learned habitual responses to classroom events and must make conscious decisions at a very rapid rate. An experienced teacher, on the other hand, has developed habitual responses to most routine and some non-routine events and can respond instantly and in ways that are usually appropriate with little or no thought. The pattern of habitual responding makes the job much easier but has obvious dangers since it can lead to insensitivity and lack of awareness of classroom events.

Ideally the habits which are formed at the start of a teaching career should reflect important educational goals and the latest insights from educational psychology. But the conditions under which beginning teachers work typically do not allow them time for thoughtful application. Immediate action is usually required and the first reasonably appropriate alternative to occur will be followed. That alternative is most likely to be one they have seen used by another teacher in similar circumstances in a school. It is unlikely to be the one advocated in fairly general terms by a psychology professor on a university campus. The alternative that occurs on a second occasion is most likely to be the one that was followed previously, or some variation of it depending on the result the first time. In this way particular responses are reinforced by success in the classroom, and quickly become habitual.

A teacher's pattern of behavior may even depart substantially from her

own ideals. Conflicts between what she does and what she has been taught or believes, can be rationalized for a while until habits are established, and after that will generally not be noticed without some specific device for focussing attention on teaching behavior. A major challenge for teacher educators is to bring about that focussing and reflection so that theory and practice in individual decision-making can come together.

INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE IN INSTRUCTION IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Most discussions of problems of integrating theory and practice focus on attempts to make courses in “the foundations” practical and relevant, and practical suggestions theoretically sound and generalizable. The problem arises largely because the structure of university-based programs separates professors and teachers from each other and has them offer their perspectives to students independently.

Classroom teachers who are immersed in day-to-day operations frequently focus on specific activities rather than on generalizable principles applicable in a number of situations. Like the professors, they place high value on the ideas they find personally useful and tend to reject the others. Consequently, in their dealings with student teachers they typically fail to support and apply ideas presented by the professors, and may actually reject them as being impractical. On the other hand, perceptions of this lack of support by the teachers leads professors to consider that extending the practicum is undesirable.

There can be no question about the validity of insights derived from systematic study of major related fields of inquiry such as social psychology, philosophy, and psychology. But the problems of having those insights transfer and become influential in the student teacher’s in-class decision-making are enormous. The literature on transfer suggests that similarity of stimuli, stress on transferability, and practice applications in a variety of settings may help. This suggests that a detailed knowledge of what is done on campus is essential for supervising teachers, and underlines the necessity for what is advocated by the professor to be useable in the school situation. It seems logical for professors to follow the students into the schools, working with them directly or through the supervising teachers, to help them develop and apply insights derived from relevant disciplines in their daily tasks. But very few institutions have the resources to do this and few teachers have the time to spend with the professors anyway. A more manageable alternative would be to develop instructional programs around what happened in the schools during the practicum, using either videotape or the students’ recollections of specific events as the focus. But courses are typically organized to cover a specific body of theoretical knowledge that has been determined in advance, and are presented formally in ways that almost totally ignore the experiences the students

have had in schools. So an absurd situation continues, protected by the fact that professors and teachers have other heavy commitments and the same capacity for rationalizing and selective perception as the students.

INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE DESIGN AND IMPROVEMENT OF PROGRAMS

One might expect that specialists in curriculum development would apply their expertise in developing programs for their own institutions, and that educational researchers would give some attention to the effects of those programs on students. But despite many millions of dollars being spent on teacher education each year, and widespread concern about quality, very little systematic research has been done and most programs are the result of long tradition rather than careful design and evaluation.

The failure to consider what is known about transfer of learning that was mentioned above is just one example of almost completely atheoretical program development. It is a particularly notable and ironic example because the major conclusions on transfer are fairly generally accepted, and taught in courses that are set up in ways that almost prevent transfer from occurring. There are a number of sources of insight into the nature of teaching that have not been fully explored. Role theory is fairly well developed, individual decision-making has been extensively studied in economic psychology, marketing, and political science, and anthropologists have developed powerful techniques for charting and analyzing social systems such as schools. Ethnographic studies of school practica would be extremely valuable.

If we can accept the notion that teachers and professors have different legitimate perspectives on teaching, our inability to control all of what happens in courses and in the schools can be seen as a strength, not a weakness. We don't know enough about teaching to be confident of identifying all the things our students need to learn to do, and even if we wanted to do so we could not control the activities of university instructors, to say nothing of the large number of supervising teachers who are involved.

Attempts to force the use of specific training procedures and to focus on certain objectives to the exclusion of others are likely to fail. We can identify and insist on some core areas, however, and provide guidelines and techniques that can be applied flexibly and appropriately by individuals who are on the spot. It is likely that left to their own devices both professors and teachers will adopt certain useful procedures that were not anticipated by program designers. At the same time, detailed knowledge of what happens in the schools and in university courses is essential if major improvements are to be made. Both situations should be systematically studied.

Problems of Extended Practica

Extended practica can help to overcome some of the inadequacies in the conventional system of teacher education but there are a number of problems.

- a) Unless total time is increased, extra time in schools will reduce time on campus and consequently reduce the amount of course work that many professors and teachers consider essential. One response is to offer the courses anyway during the evenings when schools are not in session. This creates a number of problems for the students who must cope with the new and difficult task of teaching at the same time as meeting the demands of the courses.
- b) Extended practica assume that the schools are the best place to learn much of what has to be learned to be a teacher, and that teachers have areas of expertise that professors may lack. These are valid assumptions. It is also true that professors have valuable insights that are not shared by many teachers. Effective and sensitive communication between both groups is essential if they are to complement rather than conflict with each other.
- c) Teachers don't necessarily represent ideal models for students to follow and extensive reliance on schools will tend to perpetuate some undesirable teaching practices. The teachers typically make no claim to perfection, but frequently defend particular practices vigorously. Attempts by professors to advocate alternatives can be very threatening since they can imply that procedures being used are inferior.
- d) Visiting students in schools during short, intensive practica is very time-consuming and is sometimes viewed as a necessary evil by professors with administrative and research commitments on campus. Maintaining close contact over an extended period is far more difficult, but essential.
- e) Extended practica increase the importance of school placements. Instead of just finding placements, it becomes essential to find teachers who want student teachers for acceptable reasons, and who are willing to spend considerable time in working with them. It is also important to match the goals and talents of individual students with programs and teachers that are appropriate for them. Changes after a practicum have begun are sometimes necessary and can be a major source of misunderstandings.
- f) Both teachers and professors may lack training in effective supervisory procedures and knowledge of specific techniques to help student teachers learn from their experience in the schools. But neither teachers nor professors have the time for training in these areas and may see no necessity for it, with the result that experience in schools is much less useful than it could be.
- g) There is some evidence that a practicum can damage a student teacher's professional self-concept (Coulter, 1974; Wright & Tuska, 1966). Recommendations by researchers who have identified this tendency include

gradual introduction to teaching at varying rates, emphasis on productive communication between student and supervisor, and careful counselling.

Some Promising Approaches to Improving the Practicum

Faculty Teams

A number of institutions hire classroom teachers on short-term contracts to serve as members of faculty teams in offering teacher education programs. This has the advantage of establishing close working relationships between teachers and professors which may result in increased mutual respect (though the reverse may also be true) and knowledge of what happens on "the other side." It also provides for flexibility in planning since appointments are made on a yearly basis. This approach is probably used to its greatest extent at Simon Fraser University, where two-thirds of the faculty are teachers on short-term appointments.

Clustering

School placements can be clustered within schools to increase the efficiency of supervision and create the potential for concurrent work with school staffs and student teachers. Where an entire supervision load of perhaps fifteen students can be placed within a school there should be considerable potential for effective work. Several years ago the University of Georgia introduced field experience programs. Students registered for their normal pattern of required education courses, but, by agreement between instructors, the courses were set in schools and taught there. One member of a group of instructors would serve as team leader and make arrangements with a school to accommodate up to twenty students. Basic instruction in courses was provided through self-instructional modules, and the class met and was team-taught during school time on three days each week. The instructors visited classes regularly and tried to build their course offerings around the school programs.

The University of British Columbia recently established a number of alternate programs which involve placing up to twenty students in individual schools and establishing close working relationships between the school staff and teams of professors. These differ from traditional laboratory schools in that staff are not specially selected. However, they are still involved in the programs as both learners and instructors. The programs stay in a school for only one year before moving elsewhere, in order to help improve the school system. Initial responses to these programs have been very favorable.

Another interesting procedure was used in the Teacher Corps program in the United States. In at least one example, a group of twenty student interns were assigned to work with the same number of teachers who had registered for a master's degree program. Requirements for both programs were set in such a way that teachers and students attended the same class

for credit towards either graduate or undergraduate degrees. The courses were used to focus on and revise particular aspects of the school program so that curriculum development for the school was a major outcome. Unfortunately, the Teacher Corps program has now moved away from its earlier major commitment to pre-service education so that this kind of synergism is rare.

Supervision Techniques

Techniques of effective supervision are seldom studied systematically, but some approaches have been developed and used with considerable success. A set of procedures developed for the Harvard–Newton and Harvard–Lexington summer program has been described by Cogan (1973) and Goldhammer (1969). Cogan identifies eight steps in a cycle of supervision: establishing the teacher–supervisor relationship; planning with the teacher; planning the strategy of observation; analyzing the teaching–learning processes; planning the strategy of the conference; the conference; renewed planning. Cogan suggests that these steps be used flexibly as appropriate in particular circumstances, but not be omitted lightly.

Training supervising teachers in techniques of clinical supervision and videotape feedback is a delicate task since it must be done in a way that enhances rather than detracts from the teachers' status and role. At the University of Saskatchewan, training in supervision has been given to teachers on released time for the last four years, and similar training programs are now offered in most faculties of education in western Canada. At Simon Fraser this training is provided by university-appointed program consultants who work in the schools and offer local workshops throughout the province for both university supervisors and supervising teachers.

Teacher Self-Evaluation

Training in the skills necessary for continued effective self-evaluation and improvement throughout a teaching career is an important part of any teacher education program. It is probably essential that these skills be applied during a practicum and that the results of self-evaluations be taken seriously, if they are to be actually used by the students after they have graduated and are no longer under direct supervision.

Two very similar techniques of assisting students with systematic self-evaluation that have been used successfully in recent years at Simon Fraser University are Guided Self-Analysis (Birch, 1969) and Classroom Process Analysis. Both techniques involve systematic analysis of videotape (or audiotape) replays using coding schedules which highlight particular features of verbal interaction. The systems are designed as self-controlled interventions in the pattern of interaction in regular classroom situations, in contrast with other schemes such as microteaching which functions in a carefully controlled setting, or any of the many systems of interaction

analysis whose primary objective is to describe patterns of interaction rather than attempt to change them. Guided Self-Analysis and Classroom Process Analysis assume that discrepancies between "ideal" and actual patterns of interaction, which can normally be rationalized or ignored, will provide a source of powerful motivation for change towards the teacher's ideal if they can be highlighted by systematic self-analysis.

Sequencing of Program Components

Variations in the sequencing of practica and other components of programs have been tried at a number of institutions with considerable success. Internship programs which provide for half-time teaching responsibilities for periods of up to one year preceded and followed by intensive course work have been offered at the University of California for a number of years and are not uncommon. At Simon Fraser the usual sequence of campus presentations followed by practica is reversed. The sequence of experiences for students involves repeated cycles of school experience followed by periods of time for guided reflection, reading, and instruction. The hope is that shared classroom experience will make campus presentations more intelligible.

Whatever sequence is followed the practicum must be seen as an integral part of a program rather than as an interruption. This implies that students (and supervising teachers) must be carefully prepared for their work in the schools and that follow-up activities take place on campus.

The cycle of supervision advocated by Cogan is capable of application to a whole practicum and would provide for pre-practicum planning conferences, specific observations, post-practicum conferences, and so on. Other techniques can also be used to supplement the practicum and focus on particular events rather than general impressions. One such device is the use of a "critical incidents" technique through which the students provide detailed descriptions of events that occurred during the time in school to provide a very specific focus for discussion, analysis, and consideration of the application of theoretical insights. Another procedure has students participate in classroom simulations by instructing a small group of other students, each of whom has an assigned role representing particular learning difficulties or personality characteristics.

These procedures have all been used successfully and can be recommended with some confidence. There are two additional practices which seem to be essential if extended practica are to be introduced without strain.

Program research and development activities, including in-depth formative evaluation, are essential and should be part of the teaching responsibility of specified faculty members. This will not occur in a

systematic and thorough manner if it is done on an overload basis or if it is left to individuals' personal research interests.

The final and perhaps most important point is that classroom teachers must be considered as equal partners in a joint enterprise. At the same time it must be recognized that they will need help with techniques of teacher training, and some assistance through time, money, or course credit so that their participation in teacher preparation will not detract from their major responsibility to their own pupils or place unreasonably heavy demands on their own time.

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