

THE CHALKBOARD

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BRIDGING THE GAP PART II: HOW DO WE PREPARE FOR THE REALITIES OF CLASSROOM TEACHING?

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Dean, School of Education

As a vibrant and innovative school of education, we benefit from any opportunity for discussion of the various theories and experiences that underpin our approach to teacher preparation; they comprise the worldview from which we teach, and are as diverse as the cultures represented in our school and community. "Bridging the gap" between theory and practice is a concept that unites these varied views into a single, focused question: How do we prepare teachers to teach in a real-world classroom? Whether articulated or implied, each educator has his or her own unique method of synthesizing theory and practice and incorporating both into the teaching environment. In this issue, Carolina Mancuso articulates the social context of childhood and secondary education as well as the necessity for transparency and improvisation as teaching tools. David Fuys takes a how-to approach to teaching a concept in elementary mathematics that uses children's everyday experience as a bridge to understanding a mathematical operation.

We will continue to highlight contributions on this subject in future issues and look forward to hearing from many more different points of view.

Teacher Growing Pains: Mending the Theory-Practice Rift

Carolina Mancuso

assistant professor, literacy program

We live in a culture where schooling has historically been biased in favor of the cognitive, where knowing and not-knowing create social distinctions no less palpable than having and not-having—indeed, where knowledge is often equated with wealth. Despite supporting scholarship, the notion of honoring the unity of mind, body, and spirit in the classroom remains far removed from the conversation that recurrently dominates the field of education. In a learning environment focused on standardized test scores, many equate the mastery of discrete facts with wisdom, profound thought and accelerated growth. Electronic sound bytes and parading images line the path to social, economic, and political power, with the myth of instantaneous success so touted in the media that students who learn at a pace or in a style different from the norm are often considered lacking in potential.

But learning and growing are far more complex, a fact we perhaps conceal by relegating so much of education to the realm of intellect. I question how complicit we educators may be in perpetuating this view. Surely, society's image of the teacher, linked as it is with technical rationality, helps sustain it. In emphasizing the parts over the whole, however, unfortunate dilemmas have arisen, among them the dichotomy between theory and practice in teacher preparation.

In the past year, my first at Brooklyn College, I heard echoed from graduate students in both the literacy and secondary-education programs the familiar assertion that too many courses are overloaded with theory. In my classes, I vowed to continue my attempts at unifying theory and practice, eventually deciding to adapt an assignment I had used elsewhere with positive results: having students create lessons for demonstration in class. The discussions following those model lessons had always been rich but rarely went beyond a cursory nod to theory. This time, I determined to extend the assignment in hope of bringing theory closer to center stage.

In one course, Topics in Literacy Education, students collaboratively constructed a lesson plan for a common grade level in their group. As they chose materials and strategies to employ in the lesson, I visited each group to help them brainstorm the various threads of theory supporting those practices. Over several weeks, groups worked together for some of each class, developing the lesson and exploring the aspects of theory they had each chosen to research in a formal paper. Following the interactive presentation of their lesson, they submitted a draft of that paper, which would be revised at the end of term. At midterm, each group demonstrated their model lesson, distributing to the whole class a copy of the lesson plan and an abstract describing each person's investigation of theory.

The groups received verbal and written feedback about the lesson from me and from the class. The following week, the groups revised their midterm drafts and handed them in for my written response, according to the rubric used for the assignment. In the last few weeks, they regrouped to consider revisions to the lesson, to share changes they had made in revising their papers, and to update the abstracts. For both the midterm draft and the final paper, they wrote in class a reflection on the process of their researching and writing. The final lesson plans and abstracts were then bound into a class publication which provided each student with a copy of the lesson plans along with information about theoretical connections.

The other course, Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum, had a separate midterm paper and a shorter class time, so the assignment became a one-time final project with an individual lesson plan. Students shared their lesson plans rather than demonstrate them, and in place of a long formal paper, they attached brief discussions of theories linked to the practices. They, too, wrote reflectively on the process and created a class publication. In both classes, students appreciated creating and demonstrating or sharing the lessons;

experiencing team-teaching (where applicable), receiving feedback from their peers and from me, and even more, taking with them a copy of everyone's work for reference and use in their own teaching.

When I initially presented the assignment, there had been strong resistance to the theory component. Early on, in the class where students collaborated in groups, some asked why I had not required them to select one theory and have each group member create a separate lesson from that theory, instead of the reverse. This led to a lively discussion in which they expressed their views about the heavy load of theory in education courses, and I revealed my use of theory in constructing the assignment and in other practices. As they worked, however, many were surprised by the discoveries they made in researching and articulating theory-practice connections; they also recognized how choosing the practices and then examining the theories could reveal greater complexity in the interrelationship. By and large, they found the interaction between theory and their own practices quite compelling and worthy of exploration, which led some to re-envision the role of theory in the context of their everyday teaching lives. Their writing also revealed insights gained about their own writing, learning, and teaching processes, suggesting that links to theory had enhanced that as well.

At the end of the semester many students rated the theory-practice project very highly in their written course evaluations. Though still very recent, my observations of these classes have already reinforced certain beliefs embedded in the three possibilities I raised above. First, students raised questions about my choices in constructing the assignment, extending them also to other practices and to the objectives of the course and program. Second, my responses to their questions led them to suggest changes in the assignment that increased their engagement. Finally, the presentations; assessments from peers and from me, and reflective writings on their papers, accommodated some of their expressed needs regarding the balance of practice and theory. Further reflection led to understanding how important it was for students to bring their lessons into the classroom and how invested they eventually became as they intentionally linked theory with their own practices and engaged in each other's work.

As a teacher educator concerned with teaching to—and from—the whole person, I try to help students realize that they already function both theoretically and practically, a fact made visible in their everyday lives through the natural flow of being and doing. I want them to recognize in their learning and teaching experiences the multifaceted improvisations necessary for deep understandings.

If we acknowledge the inevitable "transparency" of both teachers and students in the laboratory of the classroom, we can, if both sides are willing, create together a context for mutual growth. Three possibilities for implementing this growth spring to mind: First, perhaps the most obvious, teacher educators can disclose decisions that inform their own practice; second, they can elicit questions, concerns, and contributions from students relating to the objectives of the course and the program as a whole, possibly generating aspects of negotiated curriculum, and third, they can encourage metacognitive exercises, among them reflective writing, in which students record observations and experiences from their own learning and from lessons in the education class for discussion and assessment with the class as a whole.

This underscores the need for students in this profession to be acknowledged as part of the culture of teacher and education classroom—as colleagues in the field rather than just students. Perhaps the theory-practice fault line remains in place because we have not taken that seriously enough. I believe that such professional validation sparks recognition of their roles as agents of change in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Further, as both they and I consciously engaged in parallel tasks and shared reflective practices, we did indeed grow together, with the human face of teaching and learning manifest on both sides.

Where do great teaching ideas come from?

David Fuys, professor and program head, elementary mathematics education

For me, ideas for bridging the gap between theory and practice usually come from classroom techniques that I've pieced together over time. I try something, and it either works or it doesn't, I then rework the approach in a slightly different way, try it again, and it eventually becomes part of my teaching "palette." When I began teaching Education 58.3, the math methods course for elementary teachers, some twenty-five years ago, I took 35-mm slides of my students engaged in math activities in their public school classrooms. As a visual learner, I used the slides to record how my students were applying ideas from their coursework to their work with children. I also showed the slides in class to share their fieldwork. After a few years, I organized my slides by themes: How can we use attribute materials (colored shapes that teach logical reasoning) with children? How can we teach length in the metric system? How do we conduct assessment of young children on counting and numbers? Students enjoyed these slide shows, which generated discussion about how they, too, could adapt and implement such activities.

Five years ago, I decided to use prints instead of slides to capture mathematics teaching-learning in the field. I made an extra set for my students. Combined with lesson plans and samples of their students' work, the pictures, along with commentary ON what they have done in the classroom, could become the basis of a rich portfolio to take with them on interviews. After using my copies of the photographs to create a portfolio of my students' fieldwork for a couple of semesters, I arranged the photos by topic, added captions to highlight the act of teaching a particular topic, and stored them in color-coded folders. The folders are displayed in class when certain topics are taught, presenting students with a visual image and reflective comments about classroom practice. In math, you can't just read about or talk about what you do in the classroom--you need to see it. The folders show student teachers engaged in the art of teaching by using hands-on activities that stimulated discussion about mathematics. They showed concrete math activities that enable children to connect action and language with symbols, thereby constructing meaning for mathematics. With the portfolios, students get a tangible feel of what went on in the lesson.

For next term, I hope to place these portfolios in learning areas outside the classroom and have my students compare how different grade levels teach the same math concepts, such as teaching word problems in conjunction with children's literature. With a digital camera, we could place the photos and captions on a web site and use them as a storyboard. My colleagues and I could then project them in the classroom and have a "show and tell" of how various math activities can be taught. Students could access them from home and discuss them using a chat room on Blackboard.

Whatever technology you use, initiatives like this bridge the divide between the classroom and the field. My students can take what we have discussed in class out to their classrooms where they are student teaching and then, through photography, bring it back to Brooklyn College. They can interact with the material and concretize what we are discussing in class. It's an exciting way to bring the field into our classroom.

Program Updates

Lincoln Center Institute Summer Sessions

Bridging the Gap between pedagogy and practice was the subject of a day-long seminar lead by Hilary Easton with guest educator Claudine Jellison in July. As part of the Lincoln Center Institutes summer program for educators, the session presented an interactive study of ways to implement esthetic education ideas and techniques into classroom practice. The Institute's Summer Sessions off School of Education faculty an in-depth exploration of the role of the arts in teacher preparation in day-long or week-long workshops using experiential study of dance, music, theater, visual arts and architecture.

Martin Brokenleg is Keynote Speaker at Building Bridges Conference

Martin Brokenleg, professor of Native American studies at Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD, and dean of the Black Hills Seminars, presented the keynote address, "The Circle of Courage, a series of concrete strategies for raising respectful and courageous children in a nonpunitive environment" (National Education Service, 1990) to a full house of City University of New York educators at the fourth annual Building Bridges Conference at Brooklyn College in May.

The conference is sponsored by the Freshman Year College, Brooklyn College, and the CUNY College Now program.

The Brooklyn College String Project: Music Education Takes a Bow

Jane Palmquist, *professor and coordinator of music education*

The Brooklyn College String Project presented an exciting and varied program featuring Brooklyn schoolchildren from more than forty public and private schools who are studying stringed instruments with students in the Conservatory of Music. The spring program, held in May at the Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts at Brooklyn College, presented performances by beginning and intermediate students and concluded with performances by the teachers' ensemble. Part of a nationwide consortium of twenty-six programs providing low-cost stringed instrument instruction to schoolchildren ages 5 to 18, the Brooklyn College String Project also provides paid teaching experience to college music majors,.

The project will offer beginner violin, viola, 'cello, and string bass classes in Fall, 2002. Students and teachers are invited to suggest music from their cultural heritage for inclusion in future programs. For more information on registering for the Fall String Project, please contact Jane Palmquist at 951-5136 or JaneP@brooklyn.cuny.edu.

Council for Exceptional Children Meets in New York

The annual meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) opened on a poignant note in New York City in April as the victims of September 11 were honored with a musical tribute by the New York City Police Department Emerald Society Pipe and Drums. Special education students Davonna Brown and Ajuwon Harewood from D75 served as honor guard. The Local Arrangements Committee, headquartered at Brooklyn College and served by volunteers from various CUNY and New York City public schools, was chaired by Dean Deborah Shanley. Assistant Dean Kathleen McSorley, Pauline Bynoe, assistant professor, and Gloria Frank, administrative assistant were also on the team. The conference, which attracted 6,000 participants to New York City, provided the venue and opportunity for educators in all aspects of special education to share knowledge and expertise in an exciting, diverse environment. The CEC is a professional organization dedicated to promoting good practice among special education professionals and advocating for education on behalf of individuals with special needs.

Multi-Media Learning to Enhance Early Childhood Program

Carol Korn, associate professor and faculty director, Carleton Washburne Early Childhood Center

A program developed with funding secured by Dean Shanley and Scott Yates, information technology, through the School of Education's Booting up Brooklyn Initiative, will soon integrate streaming video, distance learning, and video-conferencing into the learning environment at the Early Childhood Center's preschool classrooms and infant/toddler rooms. Carol Korn, Brooklyn College, and Professor Dolores Lowe Friedman, Kingsborough Community College, are collaborating to develop instructional materials for the new technology aimed at providing enhanced instruction for faculty and students from both Brooklyn College and Kingsborough, as well as a base for further development efforts in the area of early care and education.

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