

Synthesizing Theory and Practice: Praxis for Professors

By Patricia H. Phelps and Patricia M. Ryan

Once upon a time, Thea and Laticia, two educated princesses, lived in two ivory towers in two faraway lands. Aspiring and practicing field workers came daily to hear their words of wisdom. Both princesses knew about crops, diseases, soils, and weather conditions and shared their knowledge with those who would soon grow food for their kingdoms.

Thea and Laticia read and attended meetings to stay current. But sometimes they felt as if they were just “going through the motions.” They wanted to get their hands dirty again.

One day Thea and her handsome prince went to another village. But she was unable to find an ivory tower from which to offer her services. Thea was offered a contract as a circuit speaker but decided instead to remedy her discontent. She returned to the fields.

Later, Laticia’s king bestowed a study respite to the princes and princesses of his land. Laticia, too, chose to spend this time in the fields, working with the crops and soil. At the annual Diet of Fields and Crops, Thea and Laticia shared their plans. They resolved to write letters and to share pictorial images and their journals.

Once in the field, Thea and Laticia tried out new techniques, relearned long-forgotten basics, and regained their energy and enthusiasm for helping future field workers. Field work took a physical toll—wrinkled hands, dry skin, blistered feet, and mud-spotted, rose-colored glasses. But the opportunity to prove their

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ability to survive, even excel, in the fields excited them.

Thea and her prince moved to another village where she scaled the ivory tower again, and Laticia returned to her ivory tower. But they are different now. They are renewed! They've modified their approach to preparing field workers. Thea and Laticia, valuing their experiences, wish to return to the fields. Their kings will fulfill this wish. They decreed that everyone like Thea and Laticia should periodically venture forth from their ivory towers.

The field workers are teachers; the field itself is field-based experience. The rest of the tale is true!

What can we learn from this "fairy tale?"

"Praxis"—derived from the Greek verb meaning "to do"—is "the systematic and concerted synthesis of theory and practice."¹ Praxis—reflective practice—includes a four-stage learning cycle that produces greater self-awareness and improved performance: concrete experience, observation and analysis, abstract reconceptualization, and active experimentation.²

In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau demonstrated the value of praxis by returning to nature, using his knowledge, and experiencing renewal. Just as Thoreau had the chance to think, reflect, ponder, and experiment, college-based teacher educators need continuing professional development, especially *Walden*-type experiences to exhibit praxis.³ Right now, these educators may not have access to meaningful development activities essential to their professional well-being.

Returning to the public school classroom holds great promise for promoting continued professional development, and assuring "clinical fidelity."⁴ Teacher educators can better respond to the needs of pre-service teachers by working directly with the public school students they will teach. The public school classroom provides a laboratory where teacher educators can apply the principles and practices of their teacher preparation programs, and can update their experiential bases.

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A passage from *Walden* illustrates the potential of praxis:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.⁵

Let's substitute the italicized words for the corresponding words in the original:

I went to the *classroom* because I wished to *teach* deliberately, to front only the essential facts of *teaching*, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not *taught*.

Professors committed to praxis do not teach concepts artificially, in segmented ways, but by integrating theory with their own teaching practices. Some observers hope that education professors will be remembered for relating learning to the real world.⁶ Teacher educators should aspire to such distinction. Teacher educators in Great Britain must demonstrate recent, relevant teaching experience. American teacher educators are not yet subject to the same requirement, but our venture into the public school classroom shows the personal and professional rewards that can accompany a voluntary experience.

We learned strikingly similar lessons—and noted some key advantages—from our experiences, though we came from different types of teacher education institutions and taught different “diverse” populations in different school systems.⁷ What were these advantages? First, this work “humanizes” teacher educators and can help make teacher preparation programs more realistic by dealing with the challenges faced daily by classroom teachers. “Recent and relevant experience,” an observer notes, “can make the teacher educator more current, more innovative, more secure in the content which is being presented to the teachers of the future.”⁸

Our required classroom assignments, for example, are now more meaningful. Students may compose a script for the first day of school or construct a test on a unit of study. Prospective teachers receive

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these practical activities positively. Our classroom management and educational psychology courses draw upon personal experiences and anecdotes to illustrate concepts. John's use of a whole roll of tape to "decorate" his desktop, or Rebecca's disappearance behind the curtain, for example, illustrate attention-getting behaviors.

Our *Walden* experience increased our enthusiasm for our work, gave us greater assurance that our students can make a difference, and provided us with knowledge about adolescents of the 1990s. We now devote more classroom attention to discussing the needs, interests, and personalities of these students.

The structure, content, and process of teaching graduate courses to practicing teachers have changed. Firsthand, reality-based data can support or reject theories, philosophies, and policies. Dictums about "best practices" address the 1990s culture of the urban teacher and the culture of the 1990s underprivileged urban teenager. We are committed to making teaching more engaging and interactive as a result of our classroom experience.

Finally, our credibility and self-confidence have markedly increased. Diminished credibility lessens the authority of professional education, notes one educator, and credibility is undermined when pre-service students find the performance of their instructors inconsistent with best practice.⁹ The outpouring of respect from practicing teachers was the most profound result of this experience. Our "real" classroom experiences, remark our students, have made us more credible as teacher educators. They know we understand.

Two lines from "Into My Own" by Robert Frost best capture our improved self-confidence:

They would not find me changed from him they knew—
Only more sure of all I thought was true.

Professional growth, note two astute observers, "is envisioned as an odyssey whose purpose is not knowledge in an abstract sense but knowledge of a very personal and purposeful nature."¹⁰ By keeping a journal during our "real" classroom stay, we recorded our thoughts and exposed the "inner sanctum of teaching." Reflective journal

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writing—and sharing excerpts with others—helps to overcome the privatization in teaching that persists in higher education.¹¹

Our journal exchange enabled us to overcome our isolation by connecting with a colleague with a similar experience. We exposed our vulnerabilities by sharing our thoughts and feelings, including our fears. But the benefits outweighed the risks. “The growth of any skill,” notes one scholar, “depends heavily on honest dialogue among those who are doing it.”¹² The journal exchange provided numerous insights that permitted us to restructure course content and activities. Our students are now required to keep journals to document their learning about teaching. So do we.

An example: Our *Walden* experience and our journal exchange led us to redesign our classroom management and the educational psychology courses. The central theme for these courses is “control.” Students’ “vision” for learning now serves as an organizing framework for learning about classroom leadership while reflection upon experience enhances their clinical orientation.¹³

Another example: The journal exchange led us to realize how much we could learn from analyzing our own pedagogical methods and teaching experiences. One of us had videotaped student microteaching episodes for years. That author turned the camera on herself and now shares her self-critiques with her students. By reflecting upon our expectations for prospective teachers, we decided to expect no more than what we expect from ourselves.

We asked ourselves, “Who should become a teacher?” and we encouraged our students to do likewise by giving them a realistic perspective on teaching. Teaching, whether in a suburban or an urban setting, is difficult and intense work that requires energy and dedication. Survival in a challenging urban school requires extraordinary flexibility, understanding, and a sense of humor. Learning to teach takes place over the long haul, and we share this lifelong perspective with our students.

Teacher educators should epitomize this process of continuous renewal and exploration. “No practitioner can survive in the

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complex and demanding field of teacher education,” one observer cautions, “without giving some attention to his/her own professional care and feeding.”¹⁴ Assuming this challenge, teacher educators must recognize their responsibility to model risk-taking and reflective practice. To do otherwise is to be unprofessional.

The experience at Walden Pond gave Thoreau time for reflection and renewal. Our experiences allowed us to acquire fresh perspectives on our own teaching, to overcome the isolation we felt as teacher educators, and to benefit from the common bond of similar experiences. We adjourned our “real” experience with more questions than answers, but consider this a benefit, not a liability.

All teacher educators need equally significant experiences.

Traditional teacher preparation programs neither encourage nor model praxis—instructors as reflective practitioners.¹⁵ Until teacher educators engage in praxis, however risky, prospective and practicing teachers will not change how they teach nor how they think about teaching.

Deans of education and other college and university administrators must involve teacher educators in professional development exercises that encourage reflective thinking, including classroom experience, team teaching, reflective journals, and videotaping.

Here are some ways that deans and other educational leaders can demonstrate their commitment to praxis:

Provide exemptions for innovations.

Grant faculty members the freedom to fail.

Create an expectation of “best practices.”

Nurture a culture that equates teaching with scholarly activity.

Encourage faculty to “personalize” theory.

Empower faculty to enhance their own professional development.

Remove the status barriers.

Recognize and reward faculty’s “field work.”

Support for these activities will greatly enhance the credibility, vitality, and impact of our teacher education programs. All college faculty members will, in turn, reap the benefits when the students, taught by teachers who engage in praxis, arrive at college. And, of course, professors of teacher education have no monopoly on praxis at the postsecondary level.

Endnotes

- ¹ Ginsburg and Clift, 1990, 454.
- ² Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993.
- ³ The report of the Commission on the Education of Teachers Into the 21st Century (Association of Teacher Educators, 1991) recommends continuing professional development of college-based teacher-educators. See also Bruneau, 1992.
- ⁴ Gideonse, 1987.
- ⁵ Thoreau, 1854, 66.
- ⁶ Midkiff, 1991.
- ⁷ McEachern, 1990, 475.
- ⁸ One author, who is on the faculty of a middle-sized state university in the South, recently spent a semester as a suburban high school teacher in a large Southwestern city. The other author, a faculty member at a small liberal arts college in the Great Lakes area, taught in a middle school in a large urban school system.
- ⁹ Gideonse, 1987.
- ¹⁰ Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993, 37.
- ¹¹ Palmer, 1993.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹³ Raths, Katz, and McAninch, 1989.
- ¹⁴ Berquist, 1978, 24.
- ¹⁵ Ginsberg and Clift, 1990, 454.

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