

Becoming “Teacher”: A Narrative Journey from Undergraduate Education Student to University Instructor

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Abstract: Similar to their counterparts in K-12 education, novice university instructors often confront a unique set of challenges when teaching at the post-secondary level for the first time. This article narrates the formative experiences of a novice university instructor who also teaches English as an Additional Language (EAL). By sharing insights from my experience as an undergraduate education student, my work with EAL adults, and my first term as a university sessional instructor, this paper provides valuable lessons and reflections that emerging university educators can resonate with and learn from.

Keywords: Teacher becoming; novice teachers; university teaching, teaching to diversity; difficult moments in teaching

Introduction

Successful teaching often comes with missteps and difficult moments, especially for novice teachers (Çakmak et al., 2019; Caspersen & Raaen, 2014; Janzen, 2014). Unlike their experienced colleagues, novice teachers can rarely draw on their positive experiences as educators expect for practicum-related experience to assist them when they face these difficult moments (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014). According to Caspersen and Raaen (2014), novice teachers are vulnerable in the first few years of teaching as they are tasked with a variety of expectations, including effectively managing a classroom, setting timetables, grading, and meeting the needs of all learners. Novice teachers are expected to perform these duties often while lacking support from administrators and fellow teachers. Çakmak et al. (2019) refer to the initial teaching years as “bumpy moments” as novice teachers are typically faced with challenges they have never faced previously. Novice teachers do not often realize that difficult moments in teaching are necessary in the becoming of a successful educator. It is often because of these difficult moments that teachers grow and develop professionally (Çakmak et al., 2019; Janzen, 2014).

In 2019, I was hired as a sessional instructor by a mid-size university in Western Canada to teach an introductory second language teaching course in its Faculty of Education. This was my first time teaching a university-level course although I had some previous teaching experience at this same university as a sessional instructor for a preparatory college program for international students. I soon learned that this experience did not prepare me for teaching my first university course and that I too would face some difficult moments as a novice university instructor.

As I reflect back on my journey of becoming a teacher, I understand the importance of narrative inquiry. This approach, which involves interpreting one’s story, is necessary to understanding and relating to personal experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) note the importance of providing “a temporal picture of each transition” when narrating one’s life experiences (p. 480). In this article, I showcase how I gained resiliency through each transition of my teaching career from the early stages of becoming a teacher to working as an instructor at the post-secondary level. Yi (2011) points out narrative inquirers must often attend to a variety of emotions, ambitions, and reactions during their personal inquiry. As teachers, it is important to process and reflect on these emotions to better ourselves as educators. Novice teachers often assume that mistakes in teaching are a result of poor preparation and lack of skills; in reality, mistakes are a vital process to becoming a successful teacher (Janzen, 2014). By engaging in narrative inquiry, teachers learn to critically evaluate and reflect on their career progression, thus enhancing their professional development.

This reflective article is divided into two main sections. In the first part of the article, I discuss my experiences as an undergraduate education student in K-12 schools and then my experiences with teaching EAL adult learners. Each of these experiences helped shape me into the successful educator I am today. In the second part of the article, I focus on the sessional instructor position and share my experiences of teaching the principles and procedures course to pre-service teachers, some of whom may work as second language educators in the future. I feel my position as a novice university instructor offers unique insights into how new instructors can plan a manageable syllabus and teaching schedule, facilitate lessons that foster diversity, and foster a learner-centered model of instruction. As a new instructor, there was a considerable amount of research I had to engage in when planning the course and when learning how to develop teaching materials. This reflective article shares my experiences of teaching the university course during the 2019 winter semester and includes personal observations to support the research I engaged in and the insights I can offer.

The Early Difficulties of Becoming a Teacher

As I began to plan to set up a course syllabus and was brainstorming what topics of instruction for the principles and procedures course I would offer, I reflected on the journey that brought me to this point in my teaching career. Clandinin and Caine (2013) hypothesized that some educators may have to reach back as far as childhood to reveal the true nature of their narrative beginnings or personal stories. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) note that daily life is often shaped by the stories that people tell, and it is through the sharing of personal narratives that meaning can be constructed and people can interpret their past and present experiences. Narrative inquiry, therefore, is a useful means of studying experience as a story and reflecting upon those experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Autobiographical narratives provide readers with a rich description of insights that otherwise might not be revealed in a typical qualitative interview and can bring voices to the forefront that would have otherwise remained silenced (Trahar, 2013; Wang & Geale, 2015).

I would like to share my story of becoming an educator and revisit the place in which my ‘teacher becoming’ unfolded (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Like Dubnewick who was pulled back to his narrative beginnings as he reflected on his early research engagements (see Dubnewick et al., 2018), I also recall the previous experiences that had led me to the position of teaching a university course for the first time. Drawing back upon these experiences, I can say I first decided to become a teacher in my final year of completing a Bachelor of Arts degree in history in 2005. I was unsure what career to choose after my first degree but decided to become an educator because I valued the possibility of connecting with learners and assisting them in their educational journeys. My mother is also a teacher, and she encouraged me on this career path which she said I was well-suited for because of my strong study habits and work ethic. I had high hopes of making a difference in the lives of the K-12 students as a teacher; my goal was to specialize in the subjects of social studies and English language arts for the middle years (Grades 5-8). With this goal in mind, I entered a Bachelor of Education program with much anticipation and eagerness in the fall of 2006. I was confident I would be a successful teacher and was excited for the two-year journey that awaited me.

Academically, I performed well in the Bachelor of Education courses I took but was perplexed as I realized I was not fit to be a K-12 classroom teacher. I struggled during both of my practicums when connecting with middle years’ learners and managing a classroom. My strong study habits and work ethic helped me to excel in my academics but did little to help me perform in the real classroom. I was capable of planning meaningful and engaging lessons but lacked the skills and discipline to deliver these lessons and manage a classroom of young learners effectively. In hindsight, I should have sought the advice of my cooperating teachers and faculty advisors about these challenges. I naively assumed I could teach the class with very little guidance and became overwhelmed and even doubtful of my career choice as a result.

My cooperating teachers and my faculty advisors confirmed my doubts by communicating to me that teaching was perhaps not a suitable career choice. They suggested that becoming a teacher did not seem to suit me and that my lack of initiative in seeking assistance when I was struggling was problematic. That advice was hurtful, and I still think back on those painful words today. Although I graduated from the Faculty of Education in the spring of 2008, I began to question whether a career in teaching was in my future interests and was left disappointed with my choice to pursue a degree in education. I now wonder if I was too hard on myself as a pre-service teacher, for the skills needed to become an effective educator come with professional development and practice (Janzen, 2014). According to Janzen (2014), becoming a successful educator also depends on actively reflecting upon previous failures. Regrettably, active reflection was not something I engaged in as a novice teacher as I did not see its relevance at the time.

The fact that I experienced several difficulties during my Bachelor of Education degree is not easy to admit and remains one of my most painful life memories. Winkler (2018) states that revealing painful memories and insights makes one vulnerable to the outside world. I am aware that revealing my early struggles as a teacher strips away my level of self-protection and increases my vulnerability (Winkler, 2018). Nevertheless, this is a risk I am willing to take so readers can understand the progress I have made as a professional educator over the past ten years. I also hope readers can see the courage and strength I once possessed as a pre-service teacher like the desire to not give up on myself and to press forward with my teaching career. I now realize that my past failures as a teacher were necessary for my future successes (Janzen, 2014). As painful as they were to experience, those failures taught me to be resilient, and it is my resiliency that pushed me to become the experienced and successful educator I am today.

My early struggles as a teacher are deemed important difficulties by Janzen (2014), who argues that difficulties are necessary to becoming a teacher. By experiencing such difficulties teachers learn how to become responsible educators, and it is because of difficult moments that teachers learn to make effective ethical responses and become good catalysts for judgment (Janzen, 2014). If a teacher's response to misbehaviour in the class proves ineffective, for example, it is up to the teacher to reflect on why the response failed and how to respond more effectively in the future. When I was experiencing difficulties during my practicum, such as managing student behaviour and planning engaging lessons, I was under the impression my failures were a result of poor individual skills, failed preparation, and lack of experience. It is rather the difficult moments in teaching that reveal the becoming of an educator (Janzen, 2014). Without difficult moments, teachers cannot reflect on their failings and better themselves as educators (Çakmak et al., 2019; Janzen, 2014). In hindsight, I should have reflected more on the challenges during my practicum, brought forward my concerns, and sought guidance from my cooperating teachers and faculty advisors instead of concealing those difficulties.

A Struggling Novice Teacher Finds Their Niche

While I was left disappointed by my Bachelor of Education experience, I did not want to give up on teaching so early in my career. I did not know it at the time, but upon reflection ten years later, I realize I still enjoyed teaching and needed to confront those painful memories (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013) and move forward in a new direction and a different educational environment. Following my graduation from the Bachelor of Education program, I did not pursue teaching jobs in K-12 schools as my fellow teacher graduates were busily doing. Instead, I scanned volunteer job postings in the local newspaper and came across an advertisement requesting volunteers to serve as classroom assistants in an English as an Additional Language (EAL) program for adults. The elective courses I had taken in my undergraduate education degree had been in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), so I thought this volunteer opportunity would be a relevant and meaningful experience.

I began volunteering in the EAL program in the summer of 2008 and was placed in a foundations level class, which I attended on Wednesday evenings. I was still hesitant about being placed in another classroom and with another cooperating teacher, but I was hopeful this experience in adult education would be more positive. The teacher whom I was placed with, Greta¹, was an experienced educator and was well-respected within the program and well-liked by her students. I developed a good rapport with Greta. Greta's kindness, positive demeanour, and enthusiasm for teaching resonated with me, and it was this kindness and shared rapport that was sorely missing from the relationships I had with my previous cooperating teachers. This shared rapport and Greta's enthusiasm and kindness reignited my passion for education.

One moment that resonates with me is Greta providing me with a portion of the evening to teach her class. Greta was busy assessing students, so she asked me if I could teach a short lesson with the remainder of the learners. Although I was nervous to take on this role for the evening, I happily agreed. It was an opportunity to practice my teaching skills in front of a group of adult students that I hoped to be teaching in the future. The lesson went well. Although I likely made a few errors, the students enjoyed the class. Greta also praised me for how well I did. I appreciated this compliment, which I never received from my collaborating teachers during my K-12 practicum. These positive remarks helped me to transform into the successful educator I am today.

My passion for teaching was further fuelled by the adult students who attended the class. Working with learners – from the looks on their faces to their words of thanks – can bring immense enjoyment and justify the efforts of a teacher (Dillon & Maguire, 2011). The students in Greta's class showed me a level of humility and respect I had never received before as a teacher and justified the time I spent volunteering as a classroom assistant. Greta's learners were true beginners of English and only had minimal oral language proficiency. Nevertheless, I tried to assist them as best I could by helping them with their computer skills, leading small group conversations, and circulating the classroom to help them with their lessons. I recall during my practicum experiences I could hardly wait until the bell rang to end classes for the day. Perhaps my negative disposition rubbed off on my middle years' students, which likely explains why we failed to develop a proper teacher-student rapport. During my volunteer placement with the adult learners, however, I was always disappointed when the class finished for the evening. It was at this point I realized I wanted to work in adult education, and more specifically in teaching the English language to adult immigrants and refugees. I did not feel ashamed of my decision to abandon my original goal of becoming a K-12 teacher as I never developed the passion needed

¹ A pseudonym

to work with young learners likely due to the strong classroom management skills needed to teach effectively in the middle years. This made me realize that some educators are best suited for working with young learners, and others are best suited for working with adults. The difficult moments I had experienced earlier as a teacher made me realize I was the latter.

The EAL program that I am employed in currently, which is located in the heart of a mid-size Western Canadian city, exemplifies cultural and linguistic diversity. The program hosts mostly refugee learners from less privileged backgrounds, including many who come from refugee camps in less developed countries such as Afghanistan, Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. These learners arrive in Canada at a disadvantage and must work hard to gain equal footing to native-born Canadians, including having to learn a new language, having to upgrade education and certifications to find employment, and having to deal with a more implicit form of discrimination (Garang, 2012). Working in this program has piqued my interest in refugee learners and the challenges and successes they experience in their new homeland. Over time, I was motivated to complete a Master of Arts degree in Peace and Conflict Studies in 2017, with my thesis exploring the stories of a group of 10 resilient Bhutanese refugees – from their expulsion from Bhutan, to their lives in refugee camps in Nepal, and to their final journeys to Canada.

After ten years of teaching experience, I realize my narrative is not a fixed entity but rather an endless story open to possibilities (Dubnewick et al., 2018). My teaching career as an adult EAL educator has informed me about the struggles and successes that newcomers experience. My experiences have also versed me in the numerous success stories of newcomers, including many of my immigrant students who have gained fluency in English and found employment in their chosen fields and refugee students of mine who have overcome traumatic experiences because of their resiliency and learned English despite limited formal schooling. It was a result of these experiences that I decided to explore employment possibilities at the university level to share my knowledge of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and pursue Ph.D. studies in second language education.

To summarize the first part of this article, I shared my teacher becoming – a becoming that included both difficult moments and moments of rich learning and experiences. I believe my experiences will serve me well as I continue to work as a sessional instructor and as I pursue a Ph.D. in Education. I wanted to share these difficult moments with teacher candidates who might be experiencing similar difficulties. Teachers like other professionals require training, mentoring, development, and support to become competent educators (Tucker, 2001). Unlike the cooperating teachers and the faculty advisors who advised me against pursuing a career in teaching, I now understand it is a sympathetic voice and counsel that novice teachers require instead of criticism so they can learn from past experiences and better themselves as educators. In the second part of the article, I share my experiences of teaching a university course for the first time, which was a principles and procedures course for pre-service teachers in a bachelor of education program during the 2019 semester. I hope these reflections and insights will assist and support novice instructors and professors who are also teaching a university course for the first time.

Reflections on Teaching a University Course for the First Time

The course I was hired to teach is a foundation course that examines principles and procedures for developing knowledge, skills, and critical reflection related to second/additional language teaching in various contexts. The course can be used to meet the diversity requirement and for completing a special certificate in TEAL in the bachelor of education program at the university where I taught. The learning outcomes of the course are various and include students being able to discuss, evaluate, and incorporate various principles, techniques, and methods of language teaching into their teaching. Another objective is having students reflect critically upon the issues surrounding language teaching and having them articulate a personal philosophy toward English language teaching and learning. One of the final course objectives is encouraging students to access and develop lessons within an integrated thematic unit plan and having them compile and create authentic instructional and original materials. In the following section of the article, I provide three takeaways worth sharing with novice sessional instructors and future professors.

Use Apprenticeship of Observation to Develop the Syllabus

Developing a course syllabus and teaching schedule is somewhat of a daunting task for a novice university instructor. Instructors often fight the urge to cover everything in a course and must consider the time they are allotted and the workload of their students (Filene, 2005). Fortunately, I had taken the principles and procedures

course in 2008 as a bachelor of education student, so I was familiar with the objectives and learning outcomes of the course. It also helped that I had completed several undergraduate courses before teaching the course and was familiar with a manageable student workload at the undergraduate level. Novice instructors, therefore, can draw from their previous experiences as students to determine how best to plan for a course they are about to teach.

Apprenticeship of observation as noted is the phenomenon whereby pre-service teachers undertake training courses and practicum requirements after having spent innumerable hours observing teachers during their own K-12 schooling (Borg, 2004; Crowe & McGarr, 2022). While pre-service teachers may glean useful information about the teaching profession from their time as students, the time spent observing represents only one aspect of a teacher's job. Crowe and McGarr (2022) argue that pre-service teachers must go beyond simply reflecting on past schooling experiences and analyze why certain memories of teaching are more salient than other moments. Apprenticeship of observation can provide novice teachers with useful strategies to employ in their teaching; nevertheless, these teachers should be mindful that traditional observations are only one facet of the realm of teaching.

Novice university instructors can also make use of apprenticeship of observation when tasked with teaching a post-secondary course for the first time to some extent. To plan for the university course I was about to teach, I sought out existing syllabi from instructors who had taught the course previously. I did not choose a single course syllabus as a model and discard the rest; rather, I gathered pertinent content from each syllabus when formulating my course outline. One course syllabus had a strong underpinning of core teaching topics in second language education, including topics such as organizing language instruction, second language acquisition, developing oral language proficiency, and assessing language learners (Coelho, 2016). As a result, I used that outline to determine relevant teaching topics. Another outline provided meaningful teaching objectives, so I used and modified those objectives as I saw fit. An additional outline provided relevant resources, including articles, videos, and websites, so I made note of those sources and added additional ones that I was familiar with. Throughout this process, I determined that a relevant and manageable syllabus provides instructors with the foundational basis needed to successfully teach a university course for the first time.

Include Lessons that Foster Diversity

In addition to the core topics of instruction, I included other topics in my course syllabus I thought to be meaningful and relevant to the group of pre-service teachers, including a lesson on teaching diversity. The teaching to diversity topic is an important one, especially in a culturally and linguistically diverse geographical area in which the university is located (Schmidt, 2015) and in an education faculty that overhauled its admissions policy in 2017 to admit an increased number of applicants from diverse criteria (Dunfield, 2016). The Canadian education system as a whole has undergone extensive educational reforms in recent years, and the current trend is to place students of diverse cultural, racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic statuses, and learning abilities together in regular classrooms (Katz, 2012). It is the responsibility of classroom teachers to create safe learning spaces for these children and develop lessons that allow all children to feel safe, welcome, and appreciated for what they have to offer (Katz, 2012).

To foster this current trend in education and encourage the pre-service teachers to incorporate lessons of diversity into their teachings, I devoted one class to the topic of diversity. To begin, I had the teacher candidates brainstorm terminology that came to mind when reflecting upon the word diversity. I asked each of them to come up to the classroom board and write down the first word their minds conjured up. Some responses written on the board included the terms positivity, inclusion, anti-racist pedagogy, and differences. Following this, we discussed the importance of teaching diversity and why educators should not refrain from broaching sensitive subject matters, and that a diverse range of perspectives provides a natural resource for learning (Moss et al., 2009).

As a class, we also discussed the reality that all educators have a responsibility to bring certain issues to the forefront in their future classrooms, such as discrimination, racism, homophobia, and sexism. It came up in discussion that we cannot let Indigenous educators alone introduce Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum or let only LGBTQ educators discuss issues of identity and belonging – all teachers have this responsibility. I let the students know that I was in favour of prefacing lessons beforehand by informing students of resources they can access concerning diverse issues brought up in the classroom. For example, students can be made aware of local organizations that cater to the needs of the LGBTQ community and programs that support youths who are dealing with mental health issues when broaching these subject matters. An additional consideration for educators is to decide whether their learners are mature and disciplined enough to discuss difficult but important

subject matters, such as prejudice, bigotry, tolerance, and acceptance. Younger learners can be taught the terms tolerance and acceptance while older, more mature students can be introduced to more sensitive topics such as prejudice and bigotry.

My advice to novice university instructors and professors is to incorporate teaching to diversity within their courses and not to refrain from subject matters that are sensitive and challenging to approach. Teachers need to create pedagogy responsive to heterogeneity and a curriculum that incorporates diverse perspectives that do not privilege learners who prescribe to “existing normative discourses and practices of schooling” (Edgeworth, 2015, p. 38). If educators cannot expand the worldviews of their students, then assumptions are left unchallenged and these assumptions become fences that filter out new and truthful ideas (Naested et al., 2004). It is important, therefore, for teachers to instill in learners the importance of having open-minded viewpoints and expanding the worldviews of their learners (Sleeter & Milner, 2011). This is the advice I wish to share with novice university instructors and professors so we can all engage in more positive and progressive discourse in our classrooms.

Lecture Less and Teach More

Lecturing less and teaching more is another recommendation I provided to the pre-service teachers and is a philosophy that novice university instructors and professors should adopt. While lectures are common in post-secondary institutions, this type of instruction produces inactive learners who fail to take responsibility for their learning (Covill, 2011). Teaching by lecture encourages students to be passive in their learning and fails to instill the importance of interaction and collaboration. For meaningful learning to take place, students must be actively engaged and not passive recipients of instruction (Covill, 2011). Active post-secondary students take ownership of their learning, make personal connections to the course content, and can successfully apply what they learned (Lambert, 2012). Active learning is also linked to higher achievement and knowledge retention (Covill, 2011; Lambert, 2012). Students who experience this learner-centered model of teaching often outperform learners who are recipients of a lecture-style, teacher-centered model of instruction (Jungst et al., 2003). The research supports the implementation of active learning in the classroom, so it is sensible for instructors and professors to adopt this philosophy (Covill, 2011; Jungst et al., 2003; Lambert, 2012).

To foster this lecture less and teach more philosophy in my principles and procedures course, I incorporated more active learning techniques and less teacher-centered instruction. For example, I began class by occasionally conducting short icebreakers and discussing how important it is for the teacher candidates to incorporate such interactive activities in their future classes. Icebreakers provide students with an opportunity to get to know their peers and provide teachers with the chance to know their students, thus creating a more welcoming classroom environment (Clark-Gareca & Olsen, 2016). Creating this type of environment is crucial, especially when teaching English language learners (ELLs) who are not only adjusting to a new language but also to a new educational setting.

One icebreaker I conducted with the class was titled ‘Making Connections’. This is a diversity-type icebreaker that consists of students circulating the classroom to make personal connections and finding shareable interests with fellow students, such as a liking for the same sport, a passion for a genre of novel, or a love for the same type of cuisine (see Table 1). The teacher candidates responded well to the icebreaker and enjoyed conversing and making connections with their peers. The candidates also understood how important it is for ELLs to make similar connections with their peers. They reported the activity would help in ‘breaking the ice’ among ELLs and foster an environment in which common interests could be explored and relationships could be developed. Lacina and Griffith (2014) stress the importance of learners being able to develop cross-cultural friendships that foster peace and allow learners to understand points of view that differ from their own. Developing personal connections among one’s classmates is also essential in making sure diversity is respected and valued in the classroom.

Conclusion

In 2008, I was an inexperienced and demotivated teacher graduate, and I questioned whether a career in education was in my best interests. Today, I am an experienced and successful educator. Quality teaching did not come easily to me; it has taken several years for my skills to develop to a point where I feel comfortable and confident in front of a class, whether it be a class of adult English language learners, international students, or pre-service teachers. I wish I could have a conversation with my previous cooperating teachers and faculty advisors to let them know that they did not have patience with me as a teacher candidate and did not nurture or

provide me with the support I needed as a young and inexperienced pre-service educator. Teaching comes naturally for some, but for others, it takes a considerable amount of training, guidance, development, and support to become well-rounded educators (Tucker, 2001). As Janzen (2014) explains, quality teaching takes time and difficult moments, and it is the difficult moments that are “integral to the becoming of teacher” (p. 236).

To iterate, cooperating teachers, faculty advisors, and university instructors and professors play a vital role in assisting teacher candidates to deal with difficult moments, which “weigh on teachers” and are often “suppressed and negated” (Janzen, 2014, p. 244). As the article comes to a close, I hope the experiences I have shared and the suggestions I have provided will assist novice university instructors and professors who are teaching a post-secondary course for the first time. I also hope my words encourage inexperienced teachers who need a push forward as they begin their journeys in the challenging but rewarding field of education.

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Appendix: Making Classroom Connections – A Diversity Icebreaker

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