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## **Implementing Theory and Practice: The Right Blend**

The theory-practice blend is an issue which must be addressed by Faculties and Schools of Education in the conceptualization and implementation of their "initial" teacher preparation programs. In this paper I will elaborate on some of the problems encountered in attempting to obtain the "right blend" in the theory-practice issue followed by some suggestions of what might be done to improve the situation. I will end by sharing with you some "hunches" I hold regarding the issues which surround questions related to theory and practice. My comments and observations are based on experiences gleaned in the implementation of the Extended Practicum and Core Undergraduate Programs at the University of Calgary.

### **I. Some Problems Encountered**

An 'ideal' teacher preparation program must address the theory-practice blend from various perspectives. Those I have selected for discussion include the following:

1. The faculty members responsible for teaching, supervising and assessing student/novice teachers need relevant and up-to-date experience in the type of schools and educational institutions for which their students are being prepared. Such faculty also need to be respected scholars in their own fields with an active research involvement.
2. Faculties of education need to have close and positive relationships with other academic and professional departments or faculties and with the schools in which students undertake their practicum and subsequently are employed.
3. The content and organization of the programs need to reflect the most recent and well-founded knowledge in the disciplines of educational study and be based upon a coherent plan for the induction and training of neophyte teachers.
4. A wide variety of resources (print, non-print materials and learning facilities) on- and off-campus must be readily accessible to participants in the initial teacher-preparation programs.

A fuller elaboration of each theory-practice linkage follows:

#### *Faculty*

Faculty are frequently criticized for their lack of recent classroom experiences. It is a facile criticism, which ignores the differences between being an excellent teacher and being able to communicate teaching skills to others. Seldom are solutions offered which recognize the way in which status distinctions, differing career aspirations and time constraints make it hard for a faculty member to enhance professional rank and research standing in the university and at the same time maintain regular involvement in the schools.

More recently there have been a spate of school-based, alternative teacher education courses which attempt to bring university and school staff into closer and more positive relations (Examples are EDTS 451, 453 and 455, as described in notes). Another suggestion has been to appoint "clinical professors" alongside disciplinary specialists in order to increase the relevance of teacher preparation programs. At the three institutions in Alberta, such school-based persons have been seconded to assist in the "initial" teacher preparation programs since 1976.

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However, the fact remains that Education faculty members are forced to live their professional lives in what might be described as a no-man's land between the schools on one side and their discipline-based, research and scholarship-oriented university colleagues on the other side. They are left with the dilemma of having to please too many "masters."

### *Relationships*

One of the major criticisms directed toward the graduates of initial teacher preparation programs is their inadequate or lack of preparation in *subject* knowledge. There is a definite shift, in teacher preparation programs, away from the concurrent content/professional training to the consecutive model of teacher preparation programs where professional training does not begin until the aspirant has obtained an appropriate Bachelors degree in Arts or Science. The shift reflects the recent move to add more content (subject) matter to teacher preparation programs.

Such program shifts demand new and different working relationships with members of the content-based faculties in physical education, sciences, humanities and fine arts. In turn, the faculties outside of education must cooperate in providing the kind of content which remotely resembles what is the mandated curriculum in the schools.

Relationships with school-based personnel must also be addressed. Some practicing teachers regard the teacher education work of universities with profound skepticism. They communicate this either crudely ("forget what they taught you at the university") or subtly, and often effectively, to the student teachers and new teachers with whom they work. Many principals and teachers would like to be more supportive and helpful, but do not know what is expected of them. In particular, they are not sufficiently familiar with the philosophy and content of students' programs to enable them to encourage the development of the necessary blend between theory and practice in the minds of student teachers.

### *Coherence/Sequence within Programs*

Another unresolved problem is that of achieving coherence in teacher preparation programs. Despite the statements found in catalogues, and despite the patterns of prerequisite and compulsory courses, the cafeteria style programs continue to dominate the scene in many universities. Seldom is the matter of deletions given serious consideration to make way for "new" areas of preparation needed by teachers in the 1980's.

The virtue of student choice is also touted as an important consideration in initial teacher preparation programs. The options are more often a reflection of faculty specializations and research interests than meeting the needs of the future teachers and the schools. Many faculty have difficulty with the notion of a core curriculum of basic knowledge and skills which all teachers need to possess.

### *Resources*

One of the features of a quality program is the provision of print and non-print materials and learning facilities in quantity and quality consistent with the improvement of teaching. Developments in computer technology provides students with access to information stores and allows them to classify and reorder research findings. The use of AV equipment allows for the video- and audio-taping of lessons during practicums with a view to review and evaluation.

Although the possibilities exist, it is more difficult to ensure that faculty members and classroom teachers actually make use of the means to the improvement of learning available to them. Visit a university lecture hall or a high school classroom and what do you find? Student teachers

are urged to use a variety of resources and strategies in their own teaching but find few models to follow.

## **II. What Might be Done to Improve the Theory-Practice Blend**

### *Faculty*

The professional and personal costs to faculty directly involved in the implementation of the theory-practice blend are high. In the past, many such efforts have floundered because the academic, professional and career infrastructure within which such work takes place remains essentially unchanged and continues to favour and reward activities such as attracting external research funds, scholarly publication and theoretical elaboration.

In order to gain the support and motivation of the ablest faculty to the theory-practice implementation projects, there must be fundamental changes in the patterns of motivation, incentive and rewards that characterize academic and professional employment. Universities, as a whole, will need to accept theory-practice implementation activities as a type of scholarly activity and as being meritorious. Concrete and valid rewards will need to be provided to those faculty involved in the time-consuming tasks of both enhancing their research standing in the university while at the same time maintaining credibility with the school-based personnel.

### *Relationships*

The working relationships between education faculties and members of other faculties need to be initiated, nurtured and enhanced. Content or subject disciplines taught divorced from instruction in curriculum content and methodology leave much to be desired. Ideally, the teaching of content should be closely associated with work in curriculum subjects and with other professional studies — not just in the sense of being pursued alongside such work in a separate program and with different instructors, but as part of the process whereby students acquire their knowledge and understanding of how children learn and teachers teach.

What might be done to improve these relationships is difficult to answer. For one, there must be an attitude change on part of both groups. The specialists need to perceive the world through more broadly-based spectacles than their own highly specialized area of study (e.g., four years in the life of Alexander Hamilton) or skill (professional musician). Education faculty must be prepared to state clearly the philosophical underpinnings and assumptions underlying the concepts of teaching, learning, schools and education.

The relationships and credibility with school-based personnel comes about only by interaction with them. Education faculties can employ a variety of approaches: the secondment of classroom teachers to program components; team planning of courses within programs; and the constitution of collaborative research groups of students and teachers, who pursue small-scale studies of children's learning and of the effectiveness of various teaching methods. What really matters is the quality of the blend which comes into being as a result of practice by student teachers and teachers with children in classrooms in light of the content and methodology proffered in their professional education. It is also of utmost importance to continually maintain and nurture these relationships — they are fragile. Faculty relationships too must be fostered through continued exchange and sharing of ideas, values, skills. Opportunities for faculty to work together through issues, projects etc., must be formally structured as tasks so they come to learn from each other. This does (hopefully) lead to a sense of worth and respect for one another.

### *Program Coherence*

Any proposal for program coherence and changes must recognize the organizational and conceptual limitations on integration, coherence, relevance and all the other desired characteristics that feature in the rhetoric of teacher-preparation programs. Such a proposal must also respect the academic integrity and independence of the institutions (university and school) within which professional preparation is provided.

Program coherence and sequence of courses on-campus can take place only through candid and thorough discussion of questions, "What is teaching? learning? core? necessary skills for beginning teacher?", and a commitment to the notion of a core program. I think it is fair to say that the most effective initial teacher education programs are those in which the faculty concerned collaborate closely in the design and implementation of courses, where a variety of disciplinary perspectives are brought to bear on issues, where the analysis of practice is systematically conducted in terms of concepts and skills which feature in other components of the professional program and where 'practice' is obtained not only through 'block' practicums of the traditional kinds, but by means of a variety of supervised and independent activities in which faculty and students and classroom teachers work together with children as individuals and in groups (EDTS 451, 453, 455 as described in NOTES).

### *Resources*

In order to improve the theory-practice blend in the area of resources and facilities, the matter of cooperative sharing should be pursued with more rigor. Classroom teachers are urged to use the Materials Center and the University Library through the issuance of library cards as part of the recognition given to their role as cooperating teachers. In turn, faculty should have access to school system-based services. The possibility of setting up laboratories, media labs, computer centers on a cost-shared basis might be pursued.

As courses and programs are collaboratively planned, each body should be encouraged to contribute to the program whatever resources and facilities are readily available.

In summarizing the discussion to this point, I wish to state that the preceding paragraphs have done no more than scratch the surface of the issues in relation to the theory-practice blend in the implementation of programs. I also wish to emphasize that the need for theory-practice relationships in training programs does not end when a student teacher achieves initial certification. There is need for structured and systematic forms of post-qualification induction and further training in which efforts to blend theory and practice continue.

### **III. Some "Hunches" About the Nature of the Theory-Practice Blend**

From personal experience and observation, I have come to certain "hunches" regarding the nature of and possibilities for the blend of theory and practice. Some of the hunches are supported by research in related areas, others come as a result of commonsense and some may have a bit of intuition as a basis for their emergence.

First, I would suggest that the understanding and ability to blend theory and practice is directly related to the professional maturity of the individual. Although all teachers and faculty have some understanding of the theory-practice linkages, the understanding and capability for blending the two concepts differs for novice teachers or faculty and experienced teachers or faculty. The beginning teacher functions in the world of the concrete ("What do I do?") with heavy emphasis on the practical side of the linkages. With experience, the teacher gradually moves to a more

balanced theory-practice blend and begins to ask questions ("Why do I do? Should I do?"). The movement along the continuum is not easy. It calls for the individual to consider both his/her values and abilities. It calls for her/him to think about ideal teaching, beliefs about the nature of learning and students, the nature of knowledge and what the goals of education ought to be. The theory-practice blend is a very individual, idiosyncratic understanding.

I would further suggest that the growth toward maturity and professionalism is truncated in the lives of some educators. Just as we have stunted growth in the physical, emotional, social and psychological realms of human activity so also it appears we have the problems of retardation in the realm of professional growth and some individuals never move beyond very limited understanding of the theory-practice blend. I am not prepared to say that I know exactly who these individuals are or how they came to a plateau in their professional lives. Most of those I would place into this category are individuals who are able to manage adequately in practice and have not been forced to change or to examine their practices as they manage to "get by" year after year.

Thirdly, the blend between theory and practice cannot be forced between and among individuals. A blend is produced out of linkages based on feelings of trust and respect; on professional habits of holding judgment on an issue until the information has been provided and weighed; on finding commonplaces for discussion related to the nature of teaching, the learner, the disciplines; and on developing a common language to talk about issues underlying the theory-practice continuum related to an education problem. In the theory-practice blend, the classroom practitioner must be treated as a professional and act as though she/he were a professional. The faculty member must set aside the "prima donna" complex and come out from behind the shield of "academic freedom" into full scrutiny by the practical.

Finally, the theory-practice blend is greater than its separate parts. Each is enhanced, explained, critiqued and given life in the light of the other. The mixture or hybrid which comes about as a result of the amalgamation and merging of theory and practice is stronger than either original concept.

In closing, let me share with you a poem entitled *Relationships*,\* a bit of verse by a young Canadian poet, Len Gasparini. In a fundamental sense, a relationship is a kind of blend. It almost seems trite to say, but the better the blend the better the relationship. Let us be careful that we do not do to the theory-practice blend what Gasparini suggests can happen to human relationships.

\*(from *Breaking and Entering* by Len Gasparini, Mosaic Press, 1980)

### *Relationships*

Everywhere they are talking about  
relationships, though they hate the word,  
though no one visibly vomits over it, and  
everyone sneaks it into the conversation, using  
the word for the sake of, you understand, convenience.  
Everyone is talking about it. Primary, secondary  
relationships, bad relationships, short-term  
ones, long-term, relationships that  
couldn't work out, unhealthy relationships,  
monogamous ones, a relationship lasting two or  
three years, two or three minutes, a sexual  
relationship, my favorite, phrase that is.  
Relationships they work at, comfortable relationships,  
the first big relationship, the relationship

I'm into now, the positive relationship, the negative, a relationship based on understanding, the relationship that's falling apart, the strong relationship, the superficial relationship, the relationship between two people, an honest relationship, the mature relationship, the dead relationship, the new relationship — though no one likes the word, everyone uses it, all on related ships, on ships with some relations, relative ships, relating, shipping some off to relatives, relishing tips on how to have better relations.

Everywhere

they are talking relationships  
and not having them, having them and not  
liking them. Everywhere they are using  
the dirty word. Relationship us all off  
to lonely places. In love — no one is in love;  
they're working at the thing, committing, cementing,  
forming attachments — it's all a bunch of  
brickwork, constructing a sound relationship,  
ironing out problems, breaking down barriers,  
making a firm foundation, picking up the pieces  
from a relationship. We are all frustrated masons.  
Let's all build a good relationship and  
crawl into it, let's all drag in ex-lovers  
and bore each other to death, discussing it.  
Let's discuss it and not do it, let's not and  
say we did — let's be really careful about it so  
a brick doesn't fall on our heads.

Let's look at a whole bunch of empty  
rooms and discuss it;  
let's get really old waiting  
for a relationship that's right; let's  
write more articles on relationships and  
feel liberal, bohemian, enlightened.  
Let's become the ministry of relationships,  
the high priests of it, let's really get  
down on our knees and bark at the moon,  
meaning love, meaning the oval, heavy syllable  
spilling out of our mouths and onto the  
grass; let's wonder why sixteen-year-olds are wary,  
conservative, going into law  
instead of english. Let's wonder how long  
before we're out there, pushing buttons,  
not knowing other ways to say I love you,  
wrapping up the foetus of fireballs.  
When did we start discussing? What's this relationship  
this one-night stand with the earth?

#### Notes

The Faculty of Education at The University of Calgary initiated changes in the Elementary Route teacher preparation program (B.Ed and B.Ed After degrees) effective September 1, 1984. The intention of the curriculum changes was to provide for better integration of theory and practice in the teaching of Science, Social Studies and Mathematics in the elementary school.



To accomplish the integration of theory and practice the following three "new" half-courses were proposed as part of the professional (Practicum) year:

EDTS 451 *Theory and Practice in Teaching Science in the Elementary School.*

EDTS 453 *Theory and Practice in Teaching Social Studies in the Elementary School.*

EDTS 455 *Theory and Practice in Teaching Mathematics in the Elementary School.*

In each half-course the student teachers are provided with essential background in content and techniques which should be used in teaching elementary school children interspersed with practical experiences in planning, teaching and evaluating learning in a practicum setting within an elementary classroom. The classroom teacher is a necessary and integral part of the newly conceptualized half-courses.