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Engaging Pre-service Teacher Candidates in Academic Coursework: Using a Practice to Theory Approach

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Abstract

Though traditional teacher preparation programs teach educational theory and ask teacher candidates to put that theory into practice, a practice-to-theory (PtT) approach can more effectively engage preservice teachers. The rationale for such an approach is grounded in research of preservice teachers' perceptions of their preparation programs, theories of situated learning and self-determination in adult learners, and similar innovative teacher preparation approaches. The author dissects two vignettes of successful PtT approaches at a microscale within the classroom,

and shares tips for successfully integrating such an approach in preservice teachers' coursework.

Overview

Using a practice-to-theory (PtT) approach to teacher education can effectively engage preservice teachers in their academic coursework. Improving the cognitive engagement of teacher candidates with educational theory is of great importance, as many perceive their coursework to be irrelevant and disconnected from their classroom contexts. For non-traditional adult learners who enter teacher preparation programs, the theory-to-practice approach is even more problematic from an engagement perspective. These learners often bring a wealth of informal and/or formal experiences with education by way of being a parent, volunteer, or paraeducator. By teaching about instructional theory and then asking candidates to put the theory into practice, we ignore or even devalue their rich educational experiences. A practice-to-theory approach honors the experiences that preservice teachers have in their field placements and prior experiences.

Teacher candidates naturally take a "practice-to-theory" approach when sense making about their classroom experiences. For example, a candidate may share an experience in which he or she brusquely asked a student to sit down, and the student refused to comply. That candidate might draw a conclusion that it is best not to be too brusque in classroom management, based on that classroom experience. Though this initial claim about best practice is naïve and needs development, the salient point is that the creation of theory from practice occurs naturally. Teachers can leverage this intuitive tendency in a PtT approach.

Review of the Literature

Working to better engage preservice teachers in their academic coursework is important, as there is a consistent body of research suggesting teacher candidates have negative perceptions of this portion of teacher preparation. Some preservice teachers expressed that coursework was irrelevant, or that too much emphasis was placed on the theory of teaching at the expense of more practical concerns (Ashby et al., 2008; Lampert, 2010). Others admitted that they were not sure of the value of their academic coursework (Younger, Brindley, Pedder, & Hagger, 2004), or that there was a disconnect between coursework and what they observed in their field placements (Allen, 2009). As effective teaching requires more than technical "how-to" knowledge, engaging preservice teachers in reflecting on their teaching practice through the lens of educational theories is an important goal.

Traditional Approaches to Teacher Education

Negative teacher perceptions of academic coursework draw attention to a well-known divide between theory and practice in teacher preparation programs—the "sacred theory-practice story" (Schön, 1983, p. 21). Traditionally, teacher preparation programs adopt a theory-to-practice approach in which teacher candidates learn about theory, and then are expected to put those theories to practice in their coursework. In such an approach, theory precedes practice; teachers are expected to first learn about theory and best practice, and second, to take the best practice and implement it within the classroom.

There are a number of problems with the theory-to-practice approach that contribute to preservice teachers' disengagement with theory in their preparation programs. First, because teacher candidates often see practices within their field placements that conflict with theory, they conclude either that theory is irrelevant or that teaching is idiosyncratic (Allen, 2009). Another problem lies in the conflicting roles of the teacher candidate as both a worker and a learner within their classrooms (Allen, 2009). Being in a high-pressure situation to accomplish a job (the worker role), is in conflict with thoughtful, critical reflection on the experience (the learner role). Faced with a choice of accomplishing the teaching task or slowing down to reflect and analyze, the teacher candidate logically will prioritize the worker role over the learner role.

The worker-learner conflict elucidates a more fundamental readiness mismatch in a theory- to practice approach. This traditional approach presents teacher candidates with theory early in their field experience, when they are focused on basic survival in the classroom (Hutchings, Maylor, Mendick, Mentor, & Smart, 2006). At this stage, the teacher candidate has

no need or desire to learn and apply theory. The need for theory emerges only when teacher candidates collect concrete classroom experiences that generate critical reflection and concern (Korthagen, 2011).

Lastly, theory-to-practice approaches adopt an implicit stance that teacher candidates are, or should be, blank slates with respect to educational theory. A broad body of research literature confirms that preservice teachers not only have beliefs about best practices vis-à-vis their own experiences as a student but also these beliefs are resistant to change (Ashby et al., 2008; Raffo & Hall, 2006). Not only is the blank slate approach to teacher education misinformed, but it also disengages teacher candidates by implicitly devaluing the educational experiences they bring to their preparation programs. This problem is particularly pronounced for alternative certification programs that enroll paraeducators with extensive classroom experience.

Alternate Practice-to-Theory Approach to Teacher Education

An alternative practice-to-theory (PtT) approach offers a solution to the readiness and blank slate issues with traditional teacher education. In a PtT approach, problems of practice from teacher candidates' classrooms serve as the starting point from which candidates generate nascent ideas about educational theory. In other words, rather than putting theory into practice, teachers generate tentative theories from their own classroom practices in a PtT approach. This reverse strategy in teacher education is effective because it foregrounds authentic classroom needs of the preservice teachers. Further, the strategy honors the existing classroom experiences of the preservice teacher by positioning those experiences as relevant data in the discussion. Evaluations of teacher preparation programs show that educational theory is best appreciated and integrated into a teacher's schema when a teacher has classroom experiences to which theory can be compared (Hutchings et al., 2006). Thus, PtT approaches can better engage preservice teachers in the theoretical components of their preparation program.

A PtT approach is grounded in a number of theoretical constructs, including situated learning (SL) and self-determination (SDT) theories. SL posits that knowledge must be situated in a real-life context, and that learning is a social process within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Merriam, 2008). Thus, learning about teaching must be situated or grounded in classroom contexts, and meaning making about teaching is a social process within cohorts or classes of fellow teacher candidates. SDT posits that learners are most motivated when they feel autonomous, competent, and related to others (Deci & Ryan, 1985). A PtT approach enhances all three components: autonomy through the use and valuing of relevant personal experiences, competence through the satisfaction of generating theory that matches existing theory, and relatedness via sharing and interpreting common experiences collaboratively with peers.

Integration into the Student Experience

Methods to incorporate PtT into preservice teachers' coursework include problem-based learning and other constructivist approaches. Problem-based learning approaches to teacher education involve teachers generating problems of practice from their own experiences, and generating and testing solutions to those problems (McPhee, 2009). Though this approach is similar in ways to the incorporation of case studies in teacher education, it also differs in fundamental ways. Traditionally, case studies have been used as examples of theory, rather than situations from which theory could be generated. Though instructors can empower teacher candidates to make meaning from exemplar case studies, a far more engaging approach would be to generate case studies from problems of practice that originate within the candidates' own field experiences. In this way, teacher candidates are engaged in solving a problem of authentic and immediate concern. Problem-based learning approaches thus situate learning in meaningful context, and support adult learners' self-determination needs.

Rather than beginning with problems of practice, other PtT approaches encourage candidates to categorize personal classroom experiences, generate tentative theories, and then actively test those theories in the classroom. Teacher candidates using the "realistic approach" to teacher education complete a reflective cycle made up of five steps: action, looking back on the action, awareness of essential aspects, creating alternative methods of action, and trial (Korthagen, 2011). The perspective of teacher candidates' peers can be invaluable in terms of increasing awareness and

creating alternative methods of action. Similarly, the experiential curriculum project (ECP) promotes teacher candidates' verification of theory generated from both personal experiences and academic theory (Kahne & Westheimer, 2011). Though the active testing of generated theory may seem indistinguishable from putting theory into practice, there are two main differences. In a theory-to-practice approach, students have no personal investment in the theory, and they are also being implicitly or explicitly discouraged to test or question the theory. PtT approaches that encourage active testing of generated theory are also supported by situated learning and self-determination theories.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

Two vignettes are presented here as case studies of successful PtT approaches. Each represents an informal moment confined to a single class session with teacher candidates, although observations about candidates' changing knowledge and approach to self-reflection subsequent to the class meeting were noted. By exploring these brief exchanges, teacher educators can begin to envision a feasible starting point for implementing a PtT approach with their teacher candidates.

Vignette #1: Rebellious but Highly Capable Student

A teacher candidate expressed that she was having trouble with a student who was judged to be highly capable from testing, but actively misbehaving and distracting others in class. Based on their own experiences with challenging students, the candidate's peers were eager to provide possible solutions including time-outs, choice of work area, or earned computer time rewards. Through the process of sharing, candidates naturally evaluated suggestions, as in the case when one candidate agreed that earned computer time kept one of his students from distracting others, but did not serve to improve the student's academic achievement.

These natural evaluation moments—or "yes, but" moments—in the conversation are pivotal ones in a PtT approach, as they indicate critical thinking that moves beyond the realm of a candidate's personal "gestalt" theories (Korthagen, 2011). At this point, the instructor observed: "You are

all proposing solutions that worked in your context . . . let's define 'worked' more carefully . . . What does it mean for a classroom management strategy to 'work'?" Candidates began to thoughtfully reflect on what it means for something to "work" in the classroom. Without much guidance by the instructor, the candidates differentiated between students' passive compliance, obedience, and engagement.

In many PtT exchanges, teacher candidates share personal theories, experience divergent thinking when listening to peers, and then become overwhelmed with the variables that can influence the outcomes. This is another pivotal moment, in which candidates either conclude that teaching is idiosyncratic, or attempt to assimilate diverse experiences into a tentative claim or theory. In this particular vignette, candidates explicitly asked the instructor: "What does the research say about engaging rebellious yet highly capable students?" Because this was an impromptu exchange, the instructor had not preselected theories or scholarly articles to explore. However, two articles were selected for the next class that reflected the tensions among the candidates during the discussion: the use of extrinsic rewards and the selection of classroom tasks with an appropriate level of challenge.

Though this vignette may seem to be a veiled theory-to-practice approach, in that the instructor suggested "correct" answers through the provision of articles, the salient component of this PtT approach is that the candidates expressed readiness and interest in the theory. Theory was introduced once candidates expressed confusion over the variety of peers' experiences and asked to be guided by an external source. Further, the provision of articles was utilized to extend the conversation, rather than to bring it to a close.

Vignette #2: Group Work Does Not Work for Me

The second vignette highlights a tension a teacher candidate experienced with her mentor teacher about the value and effectiveness of group work. The candidate had experienced multiple perceived failures with group work, and her mentor teacher had tried to explore the issue by explaining the importance and effectiveness of collaboration. Ironically, the mentor teacher's approach represented an exaggerated theory-to-practice-approach failure, in that the candidate's experiences were written off

as failures to effectively integrate theory. Subsequently, the candidate developed a persistent theory that group work only works for some teachers.

The facilitation of this PtT exchange was both similar to and different from the first vignette. The main similarities included the instructor clarifying what it meant for group work to be effective and allowing the conversation to develop among candidates. However, this particular vignette exposed personal belief and self-efficacy issues that were more personal than the issues in the first vignette. In this exchange, though the conversation progressed respectfully among the candidates, it was clear that there was a division between candidates who believed group work was best practice and those who believed that group work only worked with teachers who liked such an approach. Throughout the course of the exchange, the instructor made notations on the board about relevant topics (e.g., self-efficacy, personal beliefs, student perceptions of classroom environment, developmental appropriateness) without offering further explanation at that moment. At the conclusion of the class, the instructor explained the notations, and explained that she would provide an article or two for each topic. She suggested that students adopt a jigsaw approach to the issue, with each member exploring one topic in preparation to share with the group. This approach was selected to provide candidates choice and autonomy in what to explore further, as there was discord between candidates' personal theories.

The success of such a PtT approach with controversial topics is often revealed in long-term habit-of-mind changes. Over time, the instructor reported changes in candidates' willingness to question their perspectives and personal theories, and to compare the congruence of their beliefs with research. Additionally, candidates exhibited more vulnerability in their self-reflections, acknowledging that their beliefs could be flawed or biased.

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

The use of a practice-to-theory approach is most successful in classrooms that establish an effective culture of safety and collaboration. To obtain the variety of experiences necessary to generate comprehensive conversations about educational theories, teacher candidates need to feel comfortable sharing both successful and less successful classroom experiences. Instructors can help to establish that safe culture by sharing personal anecdotes about less successful experiences in their classrooms, expressing authentic interest in less successful experiences as learning experiences, modeling how to ask clarifying questions about experiences, allowing candidates the opportunity to share experiences anonymously, and sharing third-party case studies that have less emotional investment for the candidates within the course. Additionally, the instructor can ask if candidates are comfortable with the instructor sharing his or her own personal classroom experiences. In doing this, the instructor can establish a positive class culture by modeling vulnerability in sharing less successful classroom experiences.

Additionally, for an instructor to effectively incorporate a PtT approach, he or she must ensure the inclusion of varied experiences, and illustrative examples of specific conditions—what Mezirow calls the "disorienting dilemma" (1991, p. 168). For example, in a discussion about effective questioning and formative assessment, it would be important to ensure that teacher candidates have examples from both diverse and more homogeneous classrooms, elementary and high school classrooms, introverted and extroverted teachers, et cetera. Even with a variety of experiences available to the candidates—illustrative examples of a particular, critical phenomenon may be missing. For example, experiences with effective higher-order questioning may be absent from the pool of shared experiences. Thus, the instructor must be able to identify the critical issues in defining best practice and theory about a topic, be able to effectively probe candidates for those experiences, anticipate which experiences are less likely to be experienced by teacher candidates, and be prepared to share third-party case studies or personal anecdotes to supplement the pool of experiences. The caveat is to allow teacher candidates, rather than the instructor, to produce the bulk of the experiences. This affords an authentic PtT approach, rather than a veiled theory-to-practice agenda from the instructor.

Conclusion

A practice-to-theory approach to teacher education can solve a decades-old problem of teacher candidates' perception that academic coursework has no relevance to their practical classroom contexts. Not only does such an approach leverage an intuitive sense-making process

candidates use to assimilate classroom experiences, but it also honors and foregrounds the authentic classroom experiences of the candidates. Teacher educators can begin to incorporate such an approach at the course level by adopting the role of facilitator as candidates grapple with complex issues. The facilitator role includes both ensuring a complete range of experiences from which candidates can generate theory, and also selecting appropriate research to generate an appropriate amount of reflection and discord. The defining characteristic of a PtT approach is leveraging candidates' authentic experiences and their collaborative reflections on those experiences prior to theory generation or introduction.

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