

**From practice to practice:  
What novice teachers and teacher educators can learn from one another**

**Abstract**

This symposium examines what and how teachers and teacher educators learn from practice. The symposium compares what pre-service teachers and their instructors learned when they studied a website documenting the practice of an accomplished teacher and then reflected on that learning three years later. Data include curriculum materials, student work, classroom videos and reflections drawn from a course taught by the teacher educators and from the classrooms of two participants in that course three years into their careers. This symposium addresses what the participants learned from their initial examination, how their initial understanding has evolved, and what implications their experiences have for teacher education coursework and for the use of web-based representations of teaching in teacher education.

## **From practice to practice: What novice teachers and teacher educators can learn from one another**

This symposium examines what and how teachers and teacher educators learn from practice. Learning from practice is a central challenge for many professions that seek to bridge the gap between general, abstract bodies of professional knowledge and the situated and contextualized “craft knowledge” of individual experts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Shön, 1990; Shulman, 2004). Many have called for a greater emphasis on practice in teacher education (see for example, Ball & Cohen, 1998; Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Shulman, 1987) and teacher education programs have developed a wide range of arrangements including observations, internships, and field experiences to make learning from practice a key part of teacher education.

While these arrangements often focus on the learning of pre-service teachers, they also depend on teacher educators, supervisors or others to study and respond to the practice of these students as well. Teacher educators and other “experts” can help to guide the observations of novices to important phenomenon as well as provide feedback as the novices attempt to build on their observations in their own practice. This arrangement reflects a conception that as teachers and teacher educators gain experience, what they “see” in practice should change and develop, as they develop “professional vision” (Goodwin, 1994). Yet we rarely have opportunities to explore the connections between the learning of teachers and teacher educators or to examine how that learning unfolds over time. What aspects of practice do novice teachers and more experienced teacher educators focus on? How do they build on what they see in the practice of others in their own classrooms? How does what they see and learn unfold and change over time?

In this symposium, we explore what pre-service teachers and the teacher educators who worked with them learned when they studied the practice of an accomplished teacher and then reflected on that learning three years later. Participants include two high school English/Humanities teachers in New York City public schools currently in their fourth year of teaching, the two teacher educators (one with extensive experience as a teacher and teacher educator and one an experienced teacher but a novice teacher educator) who co-taught their English content methods course four years ago, and a researcher who has helped to document both the practice of teachers and teacher educators.

### *Conceptual framework*

In this research, we view learning from practice as a long-term engagement that involves a series of opportunities to learn from one’s own practice and the practice of others (Nonaka, 1994). In learning from practice, teachers need to identify significant aspects of teaching and learning, examine those aspects, apply what they are learning in their own classrooms, and reflect on that practice (Hatch, 2004). We argue that teacher education could be significantly enhanced if novice teachers and teacher educators had systematic opportunities to study the practice of teachers in different contexts and then to reflect on their own practice over time.

Unfortunately, however, the challenges of finding suitable field placements, internships and mentors often means that there is relatively little control over what novice teachers observe and learn in the classrooms of others; in turn, teacher educators have limited opportunities to see and study the same practice that their pre-service students do. Furthermore, most novice teachers have little if any support for reflecting on their practice once they graduate from their teacher education programs, and teacher educators rarely have a chance to glimpse much less study what their students have taken away from their pre-service experiences and are applying in their own practice. As a consequence, learning from practice remains a relatively individual and idiosyncratic endeavor for both novice teachers and teacher educators. Novice teachers have to “make do” largely on the basis of trial and error without much expert guidance, and teacher educators are “flying blind,” left to wonder what if any effect their practice has had on their students.

The use of video and other forms of documentation, however, has opened up possibilities to develop representations of practice that novices and teacher educators can study together; in addition, these forms of documentation create numerous opportunities for both novices and teacher educators to study their own practice independently or in collaboration with others. Teacher educators and their students can now study common representations of teaching in their own classes; students can document their practice and share it with their classmates and their instructors; and teacher educators can collect samples of the practice of their graduates. Yet numerous questions remain about how to organize and connect these new opportunities and what impact they might have (Hatch & Pointer Mace, 2007).

This symposium seeks to make several contributions to the study of learning from practice. First, we will illuminate differences in the perspectives and learning processes of teachers at different stages of their careers by presenting a comparison of what novice teachers and teacher educators see in a representation of the practice of an accomplished teacher. Second, we will highlight how the perspective on practice and what teachers learn from it changes over time by reporting on reflections on the novice teachers’ practice at two different points in time: as student teachers and as teachers in their own classrooms several years later. Third, we will look at what the practice of novices three years into their careers suggests for the practice of teacher educators.

### *Study design and methods*

The research discussed in this symposium focuses on work in an English content methods teacher education course designed by Pam Grossman and Christa Compton that included the collaborative examination of web-based representations of practice. These representations bring together curriculum materials, student work, teachers’ reflections, and classroom video that document the teaching of high school English in several different contexts. This symposium will focus particularly on a series of activities in which the pre-service teachers studied the representation of the practice of a teacher with thirty years of experience that centered on her use of large and small group discussions to support the development of her 9<sup>th</sup> grade students’ reading comprehension and literary

analysis. The activities involved group studies of the web-based representation, individual studies of particular strategies used by the “expert,” and reflections and presentation of the strategy in their student teaching placements. Web-based representations were also produced that document the teaching in the English content methods class itself four years ago, and the teaching in public high schools of one graduate from that class two years later and one graduate three years later. These representations were produced as part of larger projects begun initially at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that have explored the development of a wide range of representations of practice and their uses in teacher education.

Our inquiry into learning from practice among the students and instructors in this teacher education course has been guided by several questions:

- What aspects of practice do novices and teacher educators attend to? How does what they notice inform their practice?
- How does their understanding of “expert” practice and their own practice evolve over time?
- What kinds of representations facilitate learning from practice?

Sources of data for this inquiry include the student work, classroom discussions, and the student and instructor reflections from the English content methods class four years ago; collection of curriculum materials, student work, classroom videos and reflective interviews with the novice teachers two or three years into their careers; and the subsequent reflections of the teacher education instructors on the materials documenting the practice of the two novice teachers.

### *Structure of the symposium*

This symposium will combine features of an advanced paper session and a panel discussion. If they choose to, audience members will be able to view and explore the web-based representations of practice that form the core of this study and session. These websites are publicly available and the URL’s will be included in the session description. The websites will be introduced briefly at the session (and will be available for further illustration and examination in the session) but we hope that making the websites available in advance will allow us to focus most of the session on discussions among the panelists and exchanges with the audience.

To that end, following a brief overview of the study, the websites, and the plans for the panel, we will conduct a panel discussion designed to elicit and explore the perspectives of the novice teachers and the teacher educators on their efforts to learn from shared representations of practice. This symposium will focus on what the participants learned in that class about the teaching of group discussions from a veteran teacher, how their initial understanding about the teaching of group discussions has evolved over time, and what the implications are for teacher education in general and the use of web-based representations of teaching in education in particular.

As part of their participation in the panel, each participant will prepare a short commentary that addresses several common questions:

What did you see or notice in the efforts of the veteran teacher to organize group discussions?

How did you try to build on that in your own practice?

What did you learn from that initial experience?

What do you see or notice when you look at the efforts of the novice teachers to organize group discussions several years later?

What do you notice now that you did not recognize before?

How has your thinking about the teaching of group discussions changed?

Given what you've learned how would you organize the teaching of group discussions now?

How would you change the web-based representations of practice to take advantage of what you have learned?

Following initial reflections from each participant, the chair of the session – a researcher who participated in the documentation of the practice of all the participants – will moderate a discussion that touches upon some of the key aspects of each commentary. Following the discussion, the discussant will highlight commonalities and differences among the perspectives offered and invite comments and questions from the audience. The session is also designed to produce a digital exhibition that will bring together the websites that form the core of the study and the comments from the participants.

### *Educational significance*

While many educators have argued that learning from practice should take center stage in teacher education, empirical studies are just beginning to explore that possibility. This symposium will help to get the perspectives of both novice teachers and of teacher educators on how learning from practice may make a difference. In addition, it will provide an opportunity to reflect on and influence the development of a new generation of web-based representations of teaching and learning that could help to make learning from practice a more collaborative, systematic, and long-term endeavor. Finally, it will provide panelists and audience members with an opportunity to look critically at one example of practice-based teacher education and to explore arrangements and activities that can make learning from practice more effective. By highlighting the way that learning from practice unfolds over time, the session also offers a chance for session participants to think beyond the traditional boundaries of teacher education and to imagine ways in which expert and novice teachers and teacher educators can remain connected, learning from their own practice and learning together over the long term.

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