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The Impact of Experiential Learning on Student Teachers

JEANNE M. McGLINN

Reflection is an essential element in learning, as an experience in itself does not automatically lead to the formation of new ideas. Students engaged in immediate, real, and concrete experiences need to use their experiences to formulate and test abstract concepts. This idea is at the heart of the learning theories of Dewey (1933) and Kolb (1984), who contend that the cycle of learning is composed of these essential components: concrete experiences, reflection, formation of concepts and generalizations, and testing concepts in new situations.

Student teaching is one of the most common “real world” learning experiences implemented in schools of education across the United States. Student teachers design and implement lessons, manage the behaviors that support learning in their classrooms, and assess student learning. They are also expected to reflect on their practice, think about its impact on student learning, and implement changes to meet the needs of their students. The role of both university and school-based supervisors is to coach students in this process, helping them reflect on their strategies to develop their teaching abilities. In short, student teaching is supposed to use all the elements of the learning cycle.

Realities of Student Teaching

What often happens in the student teaching semester is that real learning is short-circuited. Rather than reflecting on their experience, student teachers rely on cooperating teachers and university supervisors to assess their teaching. In their minds they believe that cooperating teacher knows what works from experience and the university supervisor holds up standards based

on theory. They expect to be told if their teaching is successful, and if it's not, what they need to do to improve. And supervisors generally do assume this role of evaluator. As a supervisor over the last sixteen years, I have followed common practice. During observation, I take extensive notes, make summary comments, and confer with the cooperating teacher and student teacher. This pattern of observation, which really resembles a critique, concludes with recommendations for the student teacher to implement by the next observation.

However, I had long recognized signs that this model was not working effectively. Student teachers did not try recommended strategies or take control of their teaching. In conferences, supervisors were often doing too much of the talking and making most of the recommendations. Students displayed different types of resistance. For example, rather than solving problems, conferences would degenerate into arguments about why the recommendations would not work. Some student teachers seemed more intent on defending their practices than considering the validity of observations. I began to question how much student teachers were learning in this process. I also began to think that they might be right. When I stepped out of my role as evaluator, I realized that as an outside observer, I often failed to see classroom situations through the eyes of student teachers. They were in a better position to respond to the complexities in the classroom because they knew the context and their students. So we often “wasted” time while I commented on problems that the student had already figured out. On the other hand, I also realized that student teachers often did not face the hard work of reflecting on their teaching. If they got negative

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comments, they might try to do what the cooperating teacher or supervisor required, or simply defend themselves; if they got positive comments, they were satisfied with their teaching. I wanted to coach my students to examine their teaching practices more effectively.

Models of Student Teaching

Cochran-Smith (1991) describes two general models of student teaching programs, critical dissonance and collaborative resonance. Programs based on critical dissonance encourage the student teacher to question the standard practices in the schools by emphasizing alternative teaching strategies, school-based research projects, and critical reflection during student teaching. Collaborative resonance programs seek to link what students learn in education classes with their school experiences. Both types of programs recognize the power of experience and reflection on experience. However, dissonance-provoking programs are often unsuccessful because cooperating teachers who underplay reflection may "co-opt" the efforts of the students and also because the "intentions of programs are not necessarily implemented in practice, particularly in the interactions of students and their university and school-based supervisors" (282). Resonance programs may fail if cooperating teachers are not "actively engaged in efforts to reform, research, or transform teaching" (283). Cochran-Smith concludes that in general student teachers have little opportunity for reflection or "thoughtful inquiry" (285).

Tom Russell (1998) questions the general design of teacher education programs that reserve extended experiences in the schools for the last year or semester of students' preparatory program. Current models that start with classes on theory followed by a practical experience give students the impression "that we have no faith in new teachers' ability to learn from experience, and they do hear that implicit message" (53). Russell believes that teacher training should begin and end with practical experiences. In this model, the university becomes a place to build "on experiences in a broad range of ways, from swapping experiences to reinterpreting them and assembling resources to meet goals identified through experience" (53).

Front-loading the experience places emphasis on the student's role in learning how to learn. Darling-Hammond (1996), reflecting on the history of teacher education programs, sees these "efforts to develop teachers as managers of their own inquiry" as a new direction and sharp contrast to earlier ideas about how best to prepare new teachers (43). Mayer and Goldsberry (1993) likewise believe that real growth for student teachers depends on opportunities for them to consider their beliefs in light of the experiences they encounter in the schools. They must have the opportunity to "articulate . . . beliefs and the uni-

versity supervisor and the cooperating teacher must allow those beliefs to shape the focus of observations and conferencing" (24).

Using Dewey's and Kolb's Experiential Learning Model

Looking for a way to encourage reflection and structure a more useful observation cycle for my students, I turned to Dewey's ideas about the importance of experience to learning and Kolb's model of learning. Dewey (1933) believes that learning takes place when students have the opportunity to try out new behaviors and reflect on them. Kolb in *Experiential Learning* (1984) describes a learning model that is grounded in experience. Students actively reflect on their experience to develop concepts and plan action by setting new goals and strategies for teaching. The cycle then repeats itself. During this process, supervisors act as mentors, guides, and observers of the process to ensure that the student does engage in personal reflection and planning. However, learning is in the hands of student teachers. Using this model changes the university supervisor/student teacher relationship from authoritarian to a cooperative, exploratory interaction, guided by the student's reflections and aided by the supervisor's questioning and observations.

Studying the Reflection Cycle

I set out to study the effectiveness of reflection, and particularly Kolb's model, in promoting change or development in student teachers' self-knowledge about their teaching. Over four semesters, I used this reflection/action model while observing student teachers in several disciplines: English, drama, art, and social studies. I examined students' written reflections to see how their concept building developed over the semester of student teaching. I also wanted to see how the model affected the supervisor's role, so I enlisted two other faculty supervisors who agreed to use Kolb's reflection cycle with their students.

Student Teachers' Analysis of Their Teaching

The following profiles of student teachers are drawn from semester-long reflections (all names are changed). They show that students are at different levels in their ability to use the reflection cycle. Reflection did not come easily and some students needed time and practice to develop their self-reflection skills. Sample questions appear in the sidebar. Generally, I tried to ask open-ended questions about lesson goals, assessment of student learning, and alternative strategies.

Student Teacher #1

Frank was fearful and apprehensive when beginning student teaching, but he believed that his interpersonal skills would be a great asset that would get him through

Reflection Questions

- What was the goal of the class? Was this goal accomplished? How do you know?
- Was _____ (name a specific strategy) effective? Tell why/why not. Did student learning take place?
- What is your most effective management or teaching strategy?
- If you could restructure this lesson, what might you do differently?
- What was the most effective part of the class? Why?
- How have you changed in your teaching during this semester?
- What did you enjoy in the lesson today?

any difficulty. In several early reflections, Frank said students reacted positively to his sense of humor and his ability to show them that he cared about them. He believed that these personal traits made up for other weaknesses such as inadequate lesson planning. Not until one of his last reflections did he admit that not all the students "liked" him, including one who "told me that I had actually at times made the class a living hell for him." Eventually, reflection helped Frank realize that personality alone is not sufficient to manage a class, and that he needs to delineate clear classroom rules and procedures. Frank said, "At first, I operated under the general assumption [that] if you treat the students fairly they will reciprocate in kind. This is just not the case; there will always be a few who will cooperate completely, but these are the exception not the rule. Students will go as far as you allow them to; therefore, I learned to take a firm approach to maintaining order in the classroom." Once he developed this concept, Frank was able to work more effectively with his supervisor to plan and try more systematic management strategies/recommendations that he had previously dismissed.

Student Teacher #2

From the beginning of her teaching, Karen reflected on changes she could make in her lessons. For example, after teaching a lesson on World War II and the bombing of Hiroshima, she wrote: "I should have been more prepared for discussion after the book [*Hiroshima*] and brought out the feelings of the characters and the students. Also I should have had more guidelines for the presentations so the students would know what was expected of them." Karen had already realized that she should be self-reflecting to improve her teaching. The supervisor encouraged Karen to articulate her guidelines for judging the effectiveness

of a lesson and helped her see how she was implementing the reflection cycle and how she could use it even more effectively.

Student Teacher #3

Self-reflection can often work most effectively with a student teacher like Alison, who had a hard time acknowledging her need to improve. From the beginning of her professional semester, Alison was anxious to be perceived as a good teacher. She worked hard to connect with students and to prepare interesting, interactive lessons. Given her level of commitment, it was difficult to get her to realize that certain strategies did not lead to the desired learning results.

Alison often began her reflection in a very positive way: "The students . . . went deeper into the literature when prompted by me, though that was mostly recalling facts on the literal level. Their points were springboards for discussion." As she continued to reflect, however, she realized that the discussion did not turn out as she had wished, that she had forgotten certain strategies for her lesson, and that she had not promoted the learning of all the students. These were assessments that Alison was unable to accept from the supervisor. Reflection and action, sometimes in the next period's class, enabled her to see results immediately in improved student attention and learning. This gave her confidence to continue to analyze her teaching. Where a traditional critique only led to resistance, the reflection cycle was an effective motivator for this student.

Student Teacher #4

Glenn started out in early reflections defending his choice of lecture as the main strategy for his social studies classes. He felt the pressure of the text and the standard course of study and believed that lecture was the only way to convey the quantity of material efficiently. He said, "It may not have been the best lesson generated using this content, but it accomplished my goals and seemed to be fun for the students. Who knows? One of them may have actually learned something today." In another reflection he observed, "Whereas the lecture is a good way to get information across, it also bores the students to tears The main question and problem I'm facing at this point is how to effectively get this massive amount of information across to the students without pushing them or myself over the edge." He continued to assess his teaching effectiveness and eventually moved away from dependence on lecture to small group work. He noted, "It is important in history for each student to be able to create and defend their own version of an event." Through reflections on his strategies and his students' involvement and learning, Glenn developed an important concept about teaching social studies.

Student Teachers' Reactions

All student teachers in this study were positive about the reflection cycle and its influence on their development as teachers. They most often listed the following benefits of reflection:

- "[provided an] opportunity to look back at my goals for the day and see that they were met."
- "opened the door for constructive criticism and growth"
- "helped me to form more concrete impressions of my teaching"
- "didn't make me feel as 'on the spot' as talking about teaching right after I'm done"

They generally liked the process of first completing a written reflection and then discussing their insights with the supervisor. One student thought it was important to "complete the reflection immediately so we don't forget what happened," whereas another student said, "Giving time before discussion allows me to collect my thoughts before talking with you." Given the hectic pace of teaching, one student suggested that the supervisor cut back on the number of questions (which was usually limited to three open-ended questions) or that students answer only one in detail and brainstorm or make a list of ideas for other questions. Another student was frustrated with the meeting schedule; students were required to confer with the supervisor by the end of the following day. This student said, "Sometimes it was difficult for me to produce a response immediately and call about it in a short time. I had many demands, and I wasn't always able to fit them into today."

In general the students reacted favorably to the reflective questions. One said, "The questions . . . helped to focus my thoughts." Another commented, "It's important to consider options and consequences, if even in hindsight, to weigh advantages and disadvantages of various methods or strategies. The reflective questions accomplished this consideration." However, the neutral wording of the questions also made the students uneasy. Wanting affirmation of their teaching, they often interpreted the questions as criticism. One student felt that the reflection process at times distracted from the "simple celebration or recognition of what had gone well in the classroom." Another student said, "I did like the more open-ended questions, such as, What worked well in this lesson? more than the directed ones" such as a specific assessment of a strategy.

Supervisors' Reactions to the Reflection Cycle

The three supervisors who were interviewed during this study changed their approach to observation as a result of encouraging reflection. One supervisor

changed the use of evaluation instruments. Previously, she had used a detailed criterion-based observation instrument that analyzes teaching according to specific, assessable skills. When she saw how students struggle to understand what is happening in their teaching, she began to use a narrative format for her observations that included a brief summary or supervisor reflection. She felt that this narrative gave students a better view of their classes as perceived by an outsider.

Another supervisor changed the entire pattern of her observation. Previously, she had either given the student written comments or reviewed the teaching in detail immediately after the class. Now she talked with students after they had written their reflections and used their responses to guide the conversation. Goals or guidelines to improve teaching were drawn from the students' reflections. She came to realize that students need time to reflect without input so that they will "own" their insights about teaching. This worked with students who were more self-reflective or wanted to think critically about their behaviors. Other students were more anxious and less comfortable engaging in reflection and wanted an evaluative comment. Some of these students retreated into a defensive mode when faced with reflection questions that they assumed pointed to negative aspects of their teaching, such as, What would you change about this lesson? To ameliorate this reaction, the supervisor learned to give students' reassurance by thanking them for their effort and reminding them that the questions were open-ended and meant to be exploratory.

All the supervisors reported positive benefits from using the reflection model. A third supervisor described the change in his relationship with a student teacher from authoritative to collaborative. The supervisor was working with a highly confident student teacher who resisted recommendations. When they conferenced, the student appeared accepting, but in subsequent lessons made no changes. The student teacher modeled himself after the cooperating teacher, taking on her teacher-centered management style, whereas the supervisor pushed the student to use the active learning strategies that were taught in university methods courses. There appeared to be an impasse with the student caught in the middle.

At this time, the university supervisor began to use the reflection cycle after observations rather than assess the student's teaching. The student teacher had to evaluate the effectiveness of his choices and teaching strategies. The student was enabled to admit both positive and negative aspects of his teaching style. He reflected on the dissonance between what he believed about teaching, what he had been taught in methods courses, and how he was structuring his teaching. His use of the reflection cycle with the responsibility to analyze his teaching led to a changed relationship between the stu-

dent and supervisor. Trust was built along with a sense that they were both working together for the same goals. The student now looked to the supervisor as a sounding board for his reflections and was willing to engage in problem solving with the supervisor to improve his teaching.

All the supervisors reported being energized by this approach in which they viewed the student teacher as a partner in the process of analyzing teaching. There was much less anxiety on the part of students and clearer ownership in their own development. Overall communication improved when students were more responsible for evaluating themselves. Professional behaviors developed that set a pattern for continued learning.

Guiding Principles for the Reflection Cycle

These profiles of student teachers, students' assessment of the reflection cycle, and interviews with supervisors suggest strongly that reflection has a profound impact on learning during student teaching. Through reflection, with the guidance of the supervisor, student teachers were often able to independently analyze their teaching and problem solve about ways to improve. Students who were more reluctant to reflect or less insightful developed over time in their ability to analyze their teaching. Even those who were frustrated by not having quick assurances came to see the importance of reflecting on their teaching. All students who used the reflection cycle felt empowered by their role in their own development as teachers.

The following principles will make the reflection cycle more effective: First, student teachers should use what they have learned in their reflections to plan future lessons. After reflection and discussion, the supervisor should ask student teachers to set up a goal for teaching that they will use in their lesson planning for the next week. The supervisor should then request an assessment of the goal in the next round of observation and reflection. In this way students are encouraged to take a concept they have learned about teaching and test it in future classes. The cycle becomes recursive and there is an increased sense of development and growth.

Second, cooperating teachers can support the reflection cycle by providing time for reflection. Students need time to reflect privately after the observa-

tion. Even ten minutes immediately following the lesson gives students time to jot down immediate impressions. Then they can write more detailed reflections when they have had time to digest their experience. Cooperating teachers can also provide time for reflection in their observations and discussion with the student teacher. For example, using this model, one teacher kept a journal of observations; these she shared with the student teacher without comment, so that the student would have time to reflect on them before they talked. Another model would be a double-entry journal in which the teacher and student teacher could jot down impressions to use in conversations.

Third, students need to feel secure, to have a safe place, to reflect. Supervisors can create a relationship of trust by getting to know students and their goals, both professionally and personally, and asking the type of questions that students can address. As the student becomes more secure in reflecting on teaching, the relationship between university supervisor and student teacher will become more collaborative; they will both become problem solvers working to promote the learning of all students.

In the "real world" of student teaching, students can use their experiences to learn about and improve their teaching. These behaviors don't come when someone else tells the student teacher what is needed; rather they come from the struggle to understand teaching and students' learning. They come from reflection.

Key words: experiential learning, reflection, student teaching, collaboration, observation

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