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Under Construction: A Model of Best (Next Step) Practice

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While a literacy coach in the Boston area public schools, I facilitated literacy improvement efforts organized around best practices. Practices culled from research, named by the state or individual school systems, were the focus of on-site professional development provided by me for teachers at the building level. We learned and explored best practices through observation, modeled lessons, co-teaching, looking at student work as well as through study groups and professional development programs. I saw the approach work: Many teachers thought deeply about best practices and integrated them into their reading and writing programs.

But then, I saw the approach "not work," too. In the schools, I saw some teachers reject outright what was essentially top-down mandated change. I saw some teachers make rote the very ideas aimed to enliven student learning. These things happened for the many good and not-so-good reasons that often hamper efforts toward improvement in teaching and learning literacy skills—too much work, too little time, too many mandates, too many needy students, constraints of assessment and testing, discontinuity in curriculum, lack of funds, poor administration and teacher inertia, anger and frustration. What struck me then, and stays with me now, though, was not how much change did *not* happen but just how many teachers embraced the process and implemented best practices in spite of the tired and tiring laundry list of real impediments just listed above.

Best-Next-Step Practice

What did the "changers" have that kept them moving, exploring, adopting and adapting? I observed that the changers had developed their own best practice, in an area outside research-based strategies or theoretically-sound curriculum models. They had cultivated best practices for thinking about their children and their own teaching.

In addition to incorporating the best practices identified by their school systems, the teachers who changed also practiced listening, artful response and flexibility in decision making—qualities that Graves posits are more important to high quality writing instruction (90) than regularizing practice and instruction. They also understood, as Edge and Richards describe, that

> the essence of good teaching . . . [lies] in its continuingly emergent nature: never completely formalised or normalised, always responding to another cycle of action and observation, reflection, planning, and further action . (572)

They were the teachers who end each year, each semester, each lesson with—"next time, I'll do it this way, I'll change this, I'll watch out for that."

Their best practice was most often really "best-next-step practice" (Edge and Richards 571)—a practice that incorporates extant knowledge of the field, knowledge of particular situations (McKeon 498) *and* reflective, responsive habits of mind. Each judgment they made became the catalyst for another round through a cycle of learning from experience. The teachers who changed their practice moved from their experience, to reflection on that experience, to thinking about their experience abstractly and conceptually, and, finally, to application of the reflections and abstractions—bringing them full circle, back to experience (Edge and Richards, Schon, Kolb).

Smith's notion of personal best practice affirms my insights about teachers' habits of mind as an area of best practice She groups current definitions of best practice into three separate domains: 1) models or programs; 2) research-based strategies; and 3) teacher attitude and beliefs (26).

Presenting each as a distinct category, she emphasizes best practice in the third domain—teacher attitudes and beliefs—for her own university teaching. The details of her discussion of her guiding framework show, however, that she integrates all three domains within the course of study. Her preservice teachers learn about research-based strategies and theory through the lens of reflection as she seeks to cultivate teachers who, like the changers I observed in Boston area schools, "[align] practice with philosophy and [rely] on personal knowledge, attitudes and beliefs rather than on specific programs or models (27)."

Building on Smith's implicit recognition of the importance of all three domains and on her picture of *The Domains of Best Practice*, I propose a model of *Best-Next-Step Practice* that reflects my own observations and the ideas of Graves, Edge and Richards, Kolb and Schon. This model incorporates the domains presented by Smith but also represents the convergence of the domains, recognizes the all-encompassing cycle of learning from experience and reflects the emergent nature of teaching (see Figure 2 on page 29).

Through the Lens of Best-Next-Step Practice

"Writing in the Elementary School"—the English Education course I now teach at Central Michigan University—draws from all three of Smith's domains of best practice. Theoretical models for teaching writing to children in classrooms underpin my own pedagogy and form the basis of readings and discussions. Peers and I videotaped master teachers demonstrate research-based strategies throughout our time together. Students keep portfolios of their own writing. Each student also completes a twenty-hour practicum devoted exclusively to working with children as they learn to write in elementary or middle school classrooms.

Field note requirements for the practicum call for students to record their observations with detailed description, then make sense of what happened through questioning and reflection. The guidelines suggest using any one of a number of points of focus—an individual child's work, the physical environment, or relationships among teacher and students, for example. This gives some direction to their work, yet allows choice in approach and individuality in making sense of students' behavior and their own actions.

Reflecting on my own teaching with the idea of best-next-step practice in mind, I now see clearly how the practicum supports the validity of the concept of best-next-step practice. Student field notes attest to it: here, the three domains converge, pushing students to expand the limits of their expertise and experience. Here, students engage in a cycle of learning (Edge and Richards, Kolb) like the one used by the "changer teachers" I worked with in Boston. Here, they reflect about action (Schon) using the lens of course readings and discussions to measure and make sense of their experiences. And, here, they experiment with the listening, artful response and flexibility in decision making which constitute the wellspring of effective teaching (Graves). A close reading of a set of student field notes illustrates this.

A Story of Best-Next-Step Practice

Jenni Jones, a "Writing in the Elementary School" student during the spring of 2005, faced a critical moment during her writing practicum. The moment pushed her beyond her expereince and called forth a need to listen carefully, to respond individually and to think flexibly. Reading her reflections on this moment sheds light on how the convergence of best practice domains can happen. They also show movement, especially in the area of attitudes and beliefs, a domain that grows exponentially when strategies and models are used with children themselves.

Field Notes by Jenni Jones

Week One

On Monday, I walked into my mid-t ier classroom with the expectation that I would share my mini-lesson idea with my host teacher and then continue on with whatever activities she had planned for the day. This, however, was far from the way the day went.

I arrived early and discussed the book *Fortunately*[1] with Mrs. Allen. She . . . asked me if I'd want to present the book before she went into her own lesson. She said that she liked to be spontaneous sometimes. We decided that we would present the book together, since I hadn't had much time to prepare.

The students began to arrive and once they were settled . . . it was time to read the story. The students sat attentively and listened as Mrs. Allen and I took turns reading from our note cards. Once we had finished, Sam raised his hand and asked us to read it again. Mrs. Allen asked the class to vote if it should be reread and the students unanimously voted to hear it again!

I suggested to Mrs. Allen that we hand out the cards to the students and let them read the story. After they successfully followed the sequence and read the story aloud, Alex asked if they could write a story like that themselves. Other students chimed in with that same suggestion.

Mrs. Allen agreed and then said that a few students needed to catch up on a missed lesson, but that the rest of the class could pair up and write their own stories. The students then attended to their stories for the rest of the period.

In my prior experiences in that classroom, I have never seen the students work so diligently to complete a task. [No one was] walking around and making excuses not to work. [No one was] distracting [anyone] from his work. And Sam didn't put his head down and refuse to write, as I've seen him do many times before.

I'm sure that many factors were associated with this success. The students *had* just returned from Spring Break. And maybe it was just the right combination of students that day (since some of the regulars were absent). But I can't help but give credit to the incorporation of a text that the students really connected with. It contained humor that they appreciated. And the text, although somewhat simple, was reflective of their own writing. My one regret is that they only had about 15-20 minutes to work on their piece. Although more time would have been ideal, it was gratifying in its own way just to hear Sam comment that he wished that he had more time to write. I can only hope that his desire to finish the piece lasts until the next writing workshop

Overall, this day was an extremely valuable learning experience. It showed me that being flexible in my plans is very important. If Mrs. Allen wouldn't have shown this characteristic of adaptability, then the students would have missed out on a great writing opportunity . . .

Week Two

. . . the students [had] some free time to write or otherwise work on other assignments for the class. When this time came, Sam excitedly showed me the additional work that he had done on his own *Fortunately/Unfortunately* story.

He left off at a part in the story where a pirate ship had rescued the main character (Billy Bob) from a deserted island. Sam said that he wanted his story to end with the pirates killing Billy Bob. I was very unsure of how to handle this because I felt that murder at the end of his story wasn't quite appropriate. I began to question why he wanted this ending and commented that the book had a happy ending. Sam then firmly stated that all of his stories have happy endings and that he wanted this story to have a sad ending.

We went to talk to Mrs. Allen to see what suggestions she had in regards to the ending. At first, Sam just told her *how* he wanted to end the story, not *why* he chose that type of ending. Therefore, Mrs. Allen's original response was one of uncertainty, just as mine was. I then explained the reasoning that Sam gave me, and Mrs. Allen changed her mind. She said that Sam was just using a different voice and choosing a unique ending to the story. She told him that he could have a sad ending, but to make it a death by natural causes, not by murder. Sam went back to his seat satisfied with the response and wrote his story's ending.

I think this relates back to a main theme throughout Calkins and Newman – when dealing with a student's writing, we need to look at what s/he does know about writing, instead of just looking [at] what s/he is doing wrong. Sam made a choice – he

wanted a sad ending. At first, I wasn't able to see past what the ending was. Only after speaking with Mrs. Allen did I realize that Sam was telling me that he knows an author should be control of his own piece and that the ending doesn't necessarily have to be a "happy" one. Sam was even showing his own unique approach to this story because the sad ending is different than the book. This taught me that I need to focus in on what my students are telling me through their writing, as well as ask questions regarding their choices. If I hadn't asked Sam why he wanted that ending, I would have missed out on learning how much he knew about the writing process, and in turn, missed out on a valuable lesson for myself.

Reflection on Jenni's Best-Next-Step Practice

Jenni's valuable lessons for herself spring directly from engaging in the "cycle of action, observation, reflection, planning and further action. . ." that Edge and Richards define as the "essence of good teaching" (572). Drawing from a research-supported strategy—using children's literature as a model and motivator for writing—she introduces *Fortunately* to the students, observes what happens, reflects in writing and comes back the next week, ready to follow through on what she has set in motion. She does the same when Sam presents her with a situation she is not quite prepared for: acts and observes, later reflects through her field notes, and draws conclusions that will inform action in her future classroom.

Jenni exemplifies the qualities Graves notes as the foundation of writing instruction. She improvises with artful response, when, on impulse, she conducts the second reading of *Fortunately* as a group reading. She listens to Sam carefully enough to realize she needs a second point of view, then listens to him carefully enough again to know that she needs to tell Mrs. Allen *why* he wants to write his ending because he has only told her *what* he wants to write. And, she takes direction from Mrs. Allen's spontaneity in going ahead with the *Fortunately* lesson and models her flexibility in decision making when she changes her own thinking about what is important in her interaction with Sam.

In framing her reflection with theory, Jenni shifts from "not being able to see past what [Sam's] ending was" to realizing that Sam was "telling me that he knows an author should be in control of his own piece and that the ending doesn't' necessarily have to be a "happy" one." With the addition of this piece, she solidifies her learning. Research-based strategies, theoretical models and teacher attitudes and beliefs converge to create a series of best-next-step practices.

Implications for Teaching

Jenni's field notes illuminate the power of the practicum and field notes to deepen the valuable lessons students can gain through the cycle of learning from experience. Truly, she has done as change agents from the business world describe: "People are much more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting (Pascale and Sternin 81)."

. . . it is essential that preservice teachers act, observe, reflect, and plan their ways into knowing the power of drawing from themselves, research-based strategies and theory in the teaching of writing.

In "Writing in the Elementary School," students do act, observe and reflect themselves into new ways of thinking about the teaching of writing. Some do this more often and more naturally than others. I want all to do it every time they go into a classroom because it is essential that preservice teachers act, observe, reflect, and plan their ways into knowing the power of drawing from themselves, research-based strategies and theory in the teaching of writing.

Placing students' field notes in perspective of a model of best-next-step practice could push students to act their ways into new thinking. Introducing ideas about development to learners

helps them to develop (Levine 74). It offers two tools: first, a theoretical framework for examining experiences and second, language with which to articulate self discoveries (Marienau 42). These tools bolster and extend the reflective process which, of itself, places inherent value on experience (Rogers).

Explicitly framing the writing practicum and student field notes with a model of best-next-step practice could make the components *and* the dynamic of good teaching visible to preservice teachers. Doing so would validate listening, artful response and flexibility in decision making as part of excellent teaching while stressing the necessity of understanding theory and research-based strategies. It would foster development by heightening self-awareness. It would encourage self-reliance. And, it would affirm that good teaching emerges from the intersection of theory and experience.

For all these reasons and those I hope yet to discover, introducing the Best-Next-Step Model to students in "Writing in the Elementary School" is certainly my next best step.

Footnotes)

[1] *Fortunately* by Remy Charlip, a story of a boy and his birthday party that builds its plot through alternating and connected fortunate and unfortunate incidents. Jenni had broken the text into fortunate and unfortunate segments. She had transferred each segment to an index card in preparation for a shared reading of the text aloud to the fifth and sixth grade resource room students.

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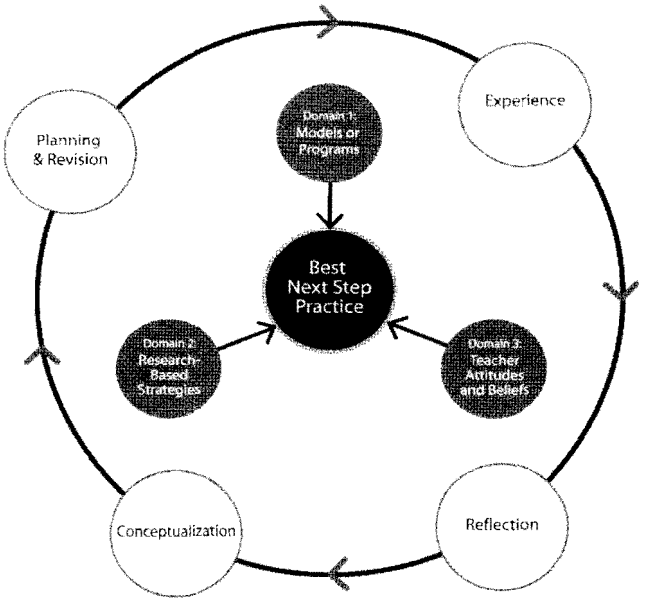
Figure 1: Best Practice

The Domains of Best Practice

Smith, Cynthia, "Assisting Preservice Teachers in the Development of Personal Best Practice." *Journal of Reading Education*, vol 28, no. 2, Winter 2003

Figure 2: Best Next-Step Practice



Best Next Step Practice