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Becoming Reflective Practitioners through Learning Labs



Illustration by Lisa R. Tennant

By Nancy DeFrance, Nancy Broadwell, and Teresa McDougall, GVSU Faculty

It has long been the practice in clinical professions such as medicine, law, ministry, social work, and education, to engage novices who are studying to enter the profession by involving them in an apprenticeship—a field-based opportunity to refine their skills with the support of a seasoned mentor. Authenticity is key. It is important that novices experience similar conditions to be encountered on the job, so that the understandings and skills developed in training are readily transferred to the workplace.

In response to the evolving and expanding roles of reading specialists, the faculty in the Reading/Language Arts Program at Grand Valley State University has recently reimagined the field-based experience for teachers seeking a master's degree with an endorsement as a reading specialist. Reading specialists now serve as literacy coaches who focus

1983). Reflective teachers are deliberate in making sense of their own interactions with learners by identifying the knowledge, assumptions, and decision-making processes behind their actions—and the outcomes of those actions. Teachers often rely on other teachers to supply perspectives and information that serve as a catalyst for reflection,

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as well as the opportunity for dialogue that transforms multiple perspectives into new understandings (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Moll, 2000; Wells, 2000).

Third, candidates would

focus their inquiry on student learning. We adopted a student-

on facilitating the professional growth of teachers in addition to working in their traditional role as interventionists who focus on struggling readers.

We asked, as have other programs that prepare reading professionals (Quatroche & Wepner, 2008; Wepner & Quatroche 2011): How can we develop and strengthen fieldwork to provide authentic, sustainable, and worthwhile experiences that prepare candidates to teach, coach, lead and grow? We pooled our own experiences and understandings of the literature to establish the following criteria for field experiences for reading specialist graduate candidates.

Criteria

First, candidates would ***form communities of peers*** who both challenge and support them. People tend to learn when they explore phenomena in environments that pique their interest (Cambourne, 2002; 2011; Hatano, 1993). Interactions with peers and experts provide additional information which, when integrated with current knowledge, fosters understanding. Interaction with peers, whose perspectives are valued, is more likely to facilitate a collaborative exchange of ideas; peers' ideas are less likely to be ignored than the ideas of experts.

Second, candidates would ***engage with their peers in frequent and extended opportunities for reflection.*** Reflection is deliberate inquiry into actions that we perform in our daily work with little conscious deliberation (Schön,

centered framework (Sweeney, 2011) for coaching in which the coach foregrounds student learning (rather than teacher actions), asking teachers to critically examine student talk, actions, and artifacts to discover qualities of student responses to instruction with respect to objectives for learning. The coach leads teachers in thinking about multiple factors that either facilitate or constrain learning. Only then does conversation lead to teacher actions that are relevant to specific decisions for supporting students to meet worthwhile objectives.

Approach

These criteria represent an updated approach to university fieldwork. The 'traditional' model for field experience called for faculty to make several visits to candidates at work in a K-12 setting to observe, evaluate, and provide feedback. This updated model is grounded in developing relationships among peers rather than between expert and novice. Setting direction for candidate reflection and growth is shifted from faculty to the candidates. This shift focuses their attention on student learning more than candidate performance.

The updated approach is the product of a K-12/university partnership. Authors Broadwell and McDougall brought experiences as K-12 literacy coaches and classroom teachers to the role of adjunct instructors for the GVSU reading specialist practicum. DeFrance brought experiences of teaching at the graduate level, conducting research, and

providing clinical instruction to the role of coordinating the practicum. This partnership allowed us to draw on the best of what each had to offer. Thus, we integrated the practices of the classroom learning lab, from the K-12 setting, with the affordances of video records of teaching, often used in university settings.

In the classroom learning lab (Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools, 2012; Houk, 2010; Ruskowski, Jackson & VanStratt, 2014), a host teacher with expertise invites guest teachers to observe a lesson in the host's classroom. Host and guests subsequently engage in a facilitated conversation about teaching and learning, featuring the content and context of the host's lesson. In the K-12 environment, small groups of teachers typically build collaborative relationships, becoming increasingly reflective, and growing in expertise.

In order to use, what is in K-12 contexts, a long-term, job-embedded professional development, we adopted review of video-recordings of lessons to facilitate reflection on teaching and learning. In their work with 'video clubs,' Sherin and vanEs (2009) (also vanEs & Sherin, 2010) demonstrated that with practice, teachers who studied video of their own and peers' instruction moved along a developmental trajectory of 'noticing' or discovering relationships between teaching and learning. It was this specific progress in teacher noticing that we sought to foster in the learning labs.

The Learning Labs

Reading specialist candidates each hosted a lab in his or her own classroom once and served as a guest in others' labs several times. Day one of each learning lab was a series of pre-brief, observation of lesson, and immediate de-brief—all facilitated by a coach. In the pre-brief the host prepared guests to observe the host's lesson by stating the objectives for instruction, describing the instructional activity, and offering an example of what learning would look like. Then, guests observed instruction with an eye to evaluating student progress toward the learning objectives. In the debrief that followed the lesson, host and guests

reflected on (1) evidence of student learning, (2) factors that likely interacted to affect student learning, and (3) perennial questions and 'tensions' that teachers often must balance when making instructional decisions.

On day two of each learning lab, host and guests met for a video-mediated conversation. The host nominated several, relatively brief segments of video, stating the purpose or question that should drive the discussion. The coach facilitated this discussion, prompting participants to (1) identify and grapple with issues 'at the heart' of the host's video segments and (2) apply their thinking around the content and context of the host's lesson to their *own* content and context.

In evaluating our updated approach to an apprenticeship for reading specialist candidates, we ask if we are meeting the criteria initially established. Are candidates forming communities of peers who support each other's professional growth, reflecting deliberately on their own and other's lessons, and keeping student learning as the focus of conversations about teaching? Our initial data analysis in

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the form of case studies and feedback from candidate focus groups following the fieldwork is most encouraging.

Case Studies

Case studies reveal communities of peers in which hosts have the full attention and support of guests. This may be attributed to a protocol that established some expectations for the language of learning lab conversations and directed the group's focus. However, an immediate consensus emerged among candidates: inviting others into their classroom was risky business. Indeed, in focus groups, candidates consistently reported that this initial worry dissipated once they experienced the learning lab environment.

Case studies also provide evidence of the candidates' reflective thinking. They began to ask themselves and

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others meaningful questions about their goals for the lesson, the outcome of the lesson, and the factors that contributed. Giving candidates the opportunity to nominate for discussion the video segments of their own lesson seemed to enable each host to ask reflective questions. The coach further facilitates reflection by asking the group to focus on the “heart” of the lesson by identifying issues faced by all teachers. In focus groups, candidates frequently referred to these discussions as their ‘take-aways’ from the learning labs.

Most encouraging of all is the evidence of candidates’ evolving focus on student learning. Initially, candidates foregrounded their own actions, perhaps in response to frequent emphasis on ‘best’ or ‘evidence-based’ practices in educational settings—developing examples of student learning that were specific

and well-aligned with objectives that articulated learning, rather than an activity, demanding work. By the end of the fieldwork, all candidates led their reflections with student learning and began to identify some of the factors in the instructional environment that likely interacted to affect learning. This perspective potentially gave candidates much more agency as many of these were factors within the teacher’s control.

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