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Learning to Teach (English): Questions and Reflection in Student Teaching

Brian White

The Problem of Gauging Reflection

Reflection has certainly been a buzz word for teacher educators in the last fifteen years or so. Zeichner and Tabachnick (1991) argue that the term "reflection" has become a slogan around which teacher educators all over the world have rallied in the name of teacher education reform, but that the definition of the term is elusive. Just what does it mean to be a "reflective practitioner"?

That is an important question for all who teach, and it is especially important for those who work with future teachers. As a methods professor and a university supervisor, I want to help my students become reflective practitioners. In order to do so, I need to know what my students deem important, what they are thinking and wondering about while they are in the field, and how they are incorporating (or rejecting or neglecting) what they have learned in methods courses. If I can discover and describe the nature of some of their reflections on teaching, and on the teaching of English in particular, perhaps I will be able to enhance their reflections by adjusting my methods courses and my supervisory approaches.

But it is not easy to gauge students' reflections. Should I just ask them what they are reflecting on? That is a problem because student teachers become adept at telling cooperating teachers and university supervisors what they want to hear (Canning, 1991; White & Smith, 1994). Directly stated assertions can mask inner conflict and doubt, especially when a student teacher disagrees with a more powerful person's views. How about a less direct method, like asking the students to create and analyze personal teaching metaphors? An earlier study (White & Smith, 1994) demonstrated the ways in which personal teaching metaphors can uncover students' beliefs about and reflections upon teaching. But the study also revealed that some students resented and resisted this less direct method and that others used their analyses to accommodate what they assumed were their profes-

sors' biases (even when the metaphors seemed not to fit those biases).

Gauging Reflection by Analyzing Questions

The work of Donald Schon (1983, 1987, 1988) has led me to experiment with an additional tool. Schon (1987) writes that the critical function of reflection is "questioning the assumptional structure" that undergirds our "strategies, understandings of phenomena, and ways of framing a task or problem appropriate to the situation" (28). To be a reflective teacher from Schon's perspective, then, is both to take careful note of and to question the assumptions and purposes behind what is done in the classroom and in the school. It is not merely to focus upon **what** we do and **how** best to do it; it is also to ask ourselves **why** we do what we do.

This functional definition of reflection seems especially promising in light of what others have written about the centrality of questioning to teaching, learning to teach, and reflecting on teaching (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Kutz, 1992). For example, Canning (1991) illuminates the importance of questions to reflection by noting that one feature of NON-reflective teaching is the avoidance of questions that make teachers feel vulnerable (21).

In order to gauge my students' reflections, then, I decided to analyze the questions they asked throughout an extensive, full-semester field experience. Eight students participated in the study. Each student was required to keep a journal in which they were to record their experiences and their reactions to those experiences. At the end of the semester, I read all of the entries (36 entries per student), identified all of the questions the students had written, and categorized the questions according to focus. I identified seven categories: self questions, student questions, pedagogical questions, critical questions, management questions, subject matter questions, and teaching and

student-teaching questions. (See Appendix A for a description of each category.)

The students asked a total of 119 questions in their journals. An independent rater and I assigned the questions to the categories; we agreed on over 95% of the questions. Disputed questions were submitted to a third rater and were placed in the categories on which two of the three raters agreed. Table 1 presents the breakdown by category.

Table 1

QUESTION CATEGORY	FREQUENCY
Self	37
Students	28
Management	26
Pedagogy	13
Teaching	9
Criticism	5
Subject Matter	1

Space limitations prevent me from discussing the questions and categories in detail. For our purposes here, I would simply like to point out what, for me, was the most telling finding: that 84 per cent of these preservice teachers' questions focused upon self, students, management, and the logistical requirements of teaching. Of course, this is consistent with what we would expect from pre-service teachers who are constructing their own identities as student-teachers (Britzman, 1992) and who are concentrating on survival (Veenman, 1984; White, 1989; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987; Bullough & Gitlin, 1991).

In order to become a reflective practitioner in English, however, prospective teachers must learn to reflect not just on what happens or what works from day-to-day, but also on the bigger picture, the philosophies and theories which drive and direct practice in the discipline. For these preservice teachers, thinking about becoming a teacher seemed almost to preclude thinking about the subject matter of English and theories of teaching and learning in English. Only one question focused upon subject matter, and only 13 focused on pedagogy in the discipline. Four of the eight students asked no pedagogical questions. None of the pedagogical questions focused upon the teaching of literature; 11 of the 13 questions were about how to respond to student writing.

Discussing the Results: Questioning the Questions

For these prospective teachers in the early stages of their practical training, becoming an English teacher seemed to mean imagining themselves first as teachers and only secondarily as teachers of English. The vast majority of questions asked, including the few questions about pedagogy in the disci-

pline, focused upon day-to-day activities and responsibilities; in short, the focus was almost exclusively upon "how" and very little upon "why." The students seemed neither to question the assumptions and theories which underlay their instruction, nor to wonder about the likely results of the teaching they were engaging in and observing. They focused largely on themselves, on their students, and on their duties as teachers.

"Management" as Primary Goal

As noted above, the prospective English teachers' focus upon self and students through management and teaching duties is to be expected. We certainly can't blame them for wanting to survive and for wishing they could relate to and "control" their classes better. Indeed, preservice teachers are often made to feel that their role is strictly managerial, and that their performance as preservice teachers will be judged largely or even entirely on the basis of their ability to manage time and students. A preservice teacher recently told me a very disturbing story. Her students were well-behaved and her relationship with them was good, but early in the semester she noticed that the students seemed not to be very interested in the literature they were studying. She was worried that her discussion questions might be too difficult for them, so she approached her university supervisor to ask for some help, to see if he had any ideas that might help her to enhance her students' understanding of the subject matter. The university supervisor replied, "You shouldn't even be **thinking** of content right now" and informed her that her job as a student teacher was simply to learn to manage the kids and the classroom.

When university supervisors and cooperating teachers focus so narrowly on control, and when student teachers are made to understand that their primary purpose is to learn to handle clerical and managerial tasks (either because the cooperating teacher wants a break from them or because of a philosophical orientation—"Management first; teaching later"), student teachers, in order to survive, learn to focus on self, students, and management.

The Importance of Discipline-Specific Concerns

But why should there be such a dearth of questions about discipline specific theory and pedagogy? Teachers' theoretical approaches to literature, for example, greatly determine their (and their students') roles in discussions, their responses to students during discussion, and their choices of texts (Applebee, 1989; Marshall, 1989; Hillocks, 1989; Zancanella, 1991; Hines, 1995; White, 1995; Wilhelm, 1997; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998). Theoretical underpinnings of a teacher's literary instruction can exert tremendous influence upon the nature and success of "class management" and instructional moves. And

teachers' theoretical approaches to composition instruction are similarly powerful, determining to a great extent the amount and kinds of writing to be done, the ways in which students will practice and respond to writing, and the manner in which instructors will respond to and mark papers (Hillocks, 1986; Smagorinsky, 1991; North, 1987). But the students in my study seemed to focus on management and instructional moves as though theory in the discipline were unimportant. They wanted to know "how" but thought little about "what" they were being asked to teach and "why." This can be a dangerous orientation because, as Gere, Fairbanks, Howes, Roop, and Schaafsma (1992) explain, "Preparing for teaching involves more than merely gaining technical expertise. . . . **What** and **why** things take place in classrooms should take precedence over **how** ends can be most efficiently accomplished" (59).

Because reflection upon **what** and **why** seemed to play such a small role in my students' ruminations, I went back into the students' journals to try to ferret out at least some of the reasons for their survival orientation, for their focus on **how**. What sorts of things might have kept them from reflecting upon important theoretical concerns in their teaching of English? As I reread the journals, trying to understand the non-theoretical focus of the questions, I noticed several possible impediments to reflection associated with the field experience itself.

Impediments to Reflection

Inadequate Subject Matter Background.

Unlike the student-teachers in Grossman's (1990) study, and despite their having asked only one question about subject matter, these preservice teachers of English were not confident of their subject matter preparation. The following excerpt, written during the first full week of the field experience, might summarize their feelings in this regard:

"[My cooperating teacher] told me that whenever I feel ready to teach something to the class to just let her know. I was feeling pretty depressed or maybe just overwhelmed. Her students are reading *MacBeth* which I have to read, and her honors class is going to be starting *Hamlet* which I also haven't read yet. There is tons to do!—let alone keeping up with my other classes [at the university]! She also told me to start thinking of something I wanted to do with the students after they finish *MacBeth*, some kind of speech activity or something to do with Renaissance literature. I've got to start thinking about that" (Marie, Jan. 13).

"Such uneasiness about one's own academic preparation certainly contributes to a focus upon self and survival, especially when coupled with the **time** it takes to read *MacBeth*, *Hamlet*, and the as yet unidentified Renaissance literature.

Fatigue and Time Pressure.

Thinking about why one might teach *Hamlet* in the first place and about the theoretical implications of various strategies in the teaching of *Hamlet* is impossible for the person who hasn't **read** *Hamlet* yet and who is under a great deal of pressure to do so quickly. Reading *Hamlet* takes time; thinking about the teaching of *Hamlet* takes even more time. And time is something the preservice teachers seemed to have little of:

"My [cooperating] teacher has given me the opportunity to do much of his paper work. . . . It takes a fair deal of time to complete the routine work, let alone the exams and papers. . . . Time is limited. Organization is essential. Squeezing every moment of the day into a productive schedule will help me adapt to this ever present evil. If this reality is not dealt with it could become a serious problem in my attempts to learn to teach effectively " (Sam, Jan. 28).

"I love school. I love the kids, but I just get so darned **tired!** Does it get better? I feel like I'm spreading myself too thin, that I can't give 100% to **anything**" (Danae, April 8).

Fatigue and time pressure seem to have weighed heavily upon these English teachers-in-training, exacerbating the problem of "gaps" in their subject matter knowledge. Reading, studying, preparing, correcting—all of this must be done while learning what the teaching job entails and how to evaluate one's own teaching performance:

"I am being bombarded with information. There is so much to learn. Teaching is a much more complicated task than I realized" (Sam, Feb. 2).

"I'm new here, I've been doing this for a month, and yet no one (repeat: **no one**) has come in to watch me yet from the school. . . . I have **no** idea how things are going" (Amber, Jan. 30).

These brief excerpts from the students' journals (and many others like them) helped me to understand better the students' focus upon self and survival. They felt overwhelmed and inadequate; they were exhausted by the competing demands of the field experience and university coursework; they worried about their performance and about their supervisors' evaluations (Tighe, 1991). Identifying and questioning the theories behind the teaching they were observing and doing seemed not to be a priority; surviving the field experience with their wits, dignity and goals intact was a priority. As Bullough and Gitlin (1991) argue, "the short duration and extreme intensity of student teaching are important culprits in preventing novices from thinking about their practice in reflective ways. . . . [S]urvival becomes the main concern of the novice teacher" (44).

Perhaps one of the best ways, then, to enhance our student teachers' reflections would be to lengthen the duration and decrease the intensity of their field experiences. But this is a programmatic issue about which most of us, especially cooperating teachers, can have little to say. We don't have the power to keep student teachers in the field longer or to shield them from the competing demands of concomitant university coursework. And of course, there is always the argument that teaching **is** incredibly complex and intense—we shouldn't shield preservice teachers from the realities of the job.

So, what can cooperating teachers and university supervisors do to help student teachers see that reflecting carefully on discipline specific concerns will actually help them both to survive and to grow throughout the preservice field experience? How can we help them to focus more carefully on **what** they're doing and **why** they're doing it while also helping them to learn how to teach?

Sharing Our Own Reflections

First, both cooperating teachers and university supervisors should "come clean" about why they do what **they** do and should help student teachers to see the theoretical bases and likely ramifications of their advice (Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1982; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1988). From personal experience as both a cooperating teacher and a university supervisor, I know that it is usually most expedient simply to tell student teachers what to do; it takes time to unearth and explain the theoretical background and the expected results of a particular teaching decision. Student teachers aren't the only people who experience fatigue and time pressure; cooperating teachers and university supervisors are busy people, too. But we can't expect novice teachers who are focusing on survival to comprehend the theoretical underpinnings of our teaching or our advice simply by observing, imitating and obeying us. Cooperating teachers and university supervisors have to **make** the time for these crucial interchanges with student teachers (Wood, 1991; Handal & Lauvas, 1987).

It is perhaps especially important (and excruciatingly difficult) to discuss our decisions and advice when we don't know **what** to expect, when something in our teacher-heart leads us to a decision or a course of action. Schon (1983, 25) argues that practitioners often have trouble articulating the reasons behind their actions and advice. The tacit nature of the practitioners' knowledge can be particularly frustrating for preservice teachers. Grossman and Shulman (1992) discuss reflection's problematic tacitness, and they cite Wells (1990) who writes that "it is difficult to see how . . . essential mental activities could be acquired by simply observing an expert's overt behavior. Equally, it is of little value to guide the novice's action if he or she has no understanding of the significance of the action to the overall goal" (Wells, 1990, 380). If cooperating teachers and university supervi-

sors who are reflective practitioners fail to share their reflections, their assumptions, and their goals with preservice teachers, and unless they provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to do the same (White & Smith, 1994), their suggestions and requirements regarding teaching might seem entirely "practical," based solely on "what works," focusing solely on the "how" and ignoring the "why." EXPERIENCE can come to be seen as the reason behind all actions and the only important goal for the novice: "I just need more experience."

The accumulated knowledge of the practitioners is certainly crucial (North, 1987; Shulman, 1988), and student-teachers should continue to learn from the successes and failures of experienced teachers. Using the cooperating teacher's and the university supervisor's experiences as a backdrop against which to view and to evaluate theories is an essential aspect of learning to teach. But unquestioning adoption and acceptance of methods and strategies developed by others is surely to be discouraged. As Schon (1988) cogently argues, "historical precedence does not mean future mold, it means future consideration—something to keep in mind when trying out a new approach" (23).

Asking Them "Why?"

We can help student teachers to consider the "why's" of our experience and advice by taking the time to discuss our own reflections with them. And when we observe their teaching, we can help them further by asking **them** "Why?" After observing a teaching episode, many cooperating teachers and supervisors tend to focus on methods and techniques with an eye toward helping a student teachers to do better what they are required to do (Glickman, 1981; cf. Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1982). But this approach can serve to maintain and propagate an unexamined status quo—one which too often hinders the learning of a large segment of students (Shrofel, 1991). Instead of focusing merely on technique, supervisors and cooperating teachers (and, I might add, methods professors who require students to create but not to explain or justify lesson plans) can help student teachers to reflect on their assumptions, their planning, their expectations, and their performance by asking questions that focus attention on **why**. For example, after observing a teaching episode, we can ask, "Where did this idea come from? Which theoretical orientations might this approach be compatible with? What were you hoping to accomplish? Do you think you accomplished what you had hoped to accomplish? What do you think were the main effects on the students? Did students react as you had planned? Now that you've done this, would you do it again? Would you change anything? Do you wish you had chosen another option? And how do your choices square with what you believe to be important about students, about English, about teaching English?" (See Canning, 1991, for other questions).

Facilitating Discussion of Vision, Theory, and Practice

Handal and Lauvas (1987) argue that such questions are very important. They write that attempts to focus pre-service teachers' attention upon methods or techniques without giving sufficient attention to underlying theories and assumptions can be debilitating. Prospective teachers who master techniques and strategies apart from theoretical understanding will either cling steadfastly to one way of teaching that "works" for them, or they will engage in a mindless eclecticism, using any "neat idea" that comes along; in a field like education, it is important to have people working who are aware of the background of what they are doing, and who are able to change and adjust both their theory and their practice in the light of new evidence, and reflect upon what really happens around them in the classroom, the school and society. Teachers who have learned only to accept one model of teaching as the right one will more easily run the risk of either becoming rigid and static in their teaching or becoming passengers on any educational bandwagon that happens to pass by their school (22).

If we are to help our students avoid the extremes of mindless rigidity and mindless eclecticism, we must help them to reflect carefully upon their (and our) views of teaching and learning. However, the power relationships endemic to most teacher education programs often prevent students from articulating their own visions of learning, teaching, and teaching English (White & Smith, 1994; Canning, 1991); and articulation is prerequisite to reflection. One way to help students articulate and consider their own visions of teaching and learning in English is to ask them to create and explain personal metaphors for teaching (Gere, Fairbanks, Howes, Roop, & Schaafsma, 1992; White & Smith, 1994), a strategy I mentioned briefly earlier in this paper. Sharing **our own** metaphors for teaching can help them to understand our theoretical visions as well, and can serve as a useful checkpoint—my students know my metaphor (teacher as jungle safari guide) and can help me to see discrepancies between what I profess and what I do. And when **my** metaphor is on the table for analysis, students seem more willing to analyze their own.

Another approach is to assign focused journal entries like the ones suggested by Tighe (1991, 235), entries which encourage preservice teachers to place the theories and assumptions underlying their instructional choices on the table for critique and revision. We can also assign entries in which the preservice teachers discuss the relationships between their English methods classes and their field experiences, as well as entries in which the prospective teachers simply list and discuss their **questions** about the teaching **of English**. Such entries are intended to facilitate the dialogue between practice and theory, to encourage and to stimulate their questioning of their experiences, and to more sharply focus

their attention upon becoming teachers of English while they are learning the ropes of teaching.

Supporting Collaborative Inquiry and Collegial Supervision

I will close with two further suggestions for university supervisors and cooperating teachers who wish to promote reflective preservice teaching of English. First, helping preservice teachers to conduct simple but important research on their own teaching seems to facilitate the asking of questions and the pursuit of sound answers. For example, I recently helped a student-teacher to plan, to carry out, and to reflect upon a study of the effectiveness of a particular literature unit. She formulated research questions, developed means of data collection (student journals and audio-tapes of class discussions), and analyzed the data. The student teacher reported that she learned a great deal about how to ask questions, how to "observe" her own teaching, and how to gauge her own effectiveness. Collaborative research of the type proposed by Smagorinsky and Jordahl (1991) and action research (Noffke & Brennan, 1991) seem especially promising in this regard.

My last suggestion is that university supervisors should see to it that their preservice teachers get a chance to "supervise" one another during the course of the semester. After analyzing the data reported in this study, I decided to ask the following semester's preservice teachers to respond to one another's journal entries and to visit a colleague at another school twice during the semester. The students and I were so pleased with the results that I have made collegial supervision an integral part of the field experience. In addition, we have also begun to place teams of preservice teachers in the same building and even in the same classroom (White, 1997). For example, in a local, urban partnership school, we regularly assign a teacher assistant **and** a student teacher to the same high school English teacher; they journey through their field experiences together. As a teacher of composition, I have been convinced of the importance of writing for an audience other than the teacher; as a university supervisor, I am convinced now of the importance of teaching and reflecting upon teaching with an audience other than the university supervisor or the cooperating teacher. The preservice teachers have proven to be excellent collegial "supervisors," and they report unanimously that being observed by a true colleague promotes rich discussion and reflection.

Conclusion

The prospective teachers of English whose journals supplied the data for this study seemed to be so concerned with surviving as teachers and with learning how to do what was required of them, that they reflected very little upon the "why's" of the teaching they were engaging in and observing. Teaching **English** seemed to be of only secondary importance to

them, as though one ought to learn “the basics” first—management, students, discipline—and worry about content and pedagogy later. But why is more important than how, and discipline specific theoretical issues are inextricably linked to “the basics” of teaching. “Survival” and “reflection” are not competitors, but are complementary.

Unless preservice teachers of English learn to question the assumptive bases of what they, their cooperating teachers, and their college professors do, and unless they learn that their experience is a beginning rather than a culmination, student-teaching cannot be teacher education (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987). If we can help prospective teachers to question and to evaluate underlying theories and assumptions, and if we can help them to examine the personal and political ramifications of their pedagogical choices, they will have a much better chance of selecting pedagogical approaches, subject matter, and management styles which will enhance both their survival and their success as teachers, as well as their students' opportunities for learning in the discipline (Handal and Lauvas, 1987; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987; Grossman, 1990).

Appendix A

Categories of Questions in Preservice Teachers' Journals

1. **SELF:** Questions in this category focus on the writer, her past, her present performance, her future experience. “Will I ever be able to learn all of this?” is a representative question. Questions like “What will my students think of me?” are questions about SELF and not about students, since the focus is really on the writer and her appearance/performance.
2. **STUDENTS:** Questions in this category focus on students (in general, in the writer's school or classroom, or the lives of students outside of school). “Why don't they try harder?” is a typical question.
3. **MANAGEMENT:** Questions in this category focus on discipline, order, and motivation in the writer's classroom and in schools in general. “What can be done about cheating?” and “Should I penalize students for absences?” are representative.
4. **TEACHING:** Questions in this category focus on the duties and responsibilities of teachers and of student-teachers which are not directly related to teaching and learning in the discipline. “How much freedom do I have to plan my own lessons?”, “Is it always this hectic?”, and “When do teachers usually have to report to school?” are representative.
5. **PEDAGOGY:** Questions in this category focus on teaching in the writer's discipline. The questions could address theoretical issues (“Are short-answer questions really so bad?”; “Why do they say that small-groups are more effective?”); or more day-to-day, “practical” issues (“How should I respond to students who give wrong answers?”; “I hate my marginal comments. Isn't there a better way to correct papers?”; “How should teachers communicate to students that their writing is really, really important?”).
6. **CRITICISM:** Questions in this category “criticize” aspects of the curriculum, of institutional structure, or of society as it relates to schooling. “Why do we spend so much money on useless traditional grammar texts?” and “When will society do something tangible to enhance education?” are representative.
7. **SUBJECT MATTER:** Questions in this category focus on specific aspects of subject matter. A question which results from a critical analysis of curricular materials (“Shouldn't we be doing more writing and less useless traditional grammar?”) belongs in the “criticism” category. Subject matter questions typically ask for definitions of terms or clarification of understanding (“What is the difference between ambic pentameter and dactylic hexameter?”; “What is a predicate?”).

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