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TEACHER EDUCATION

This is Not Bootcamp: Radicalizing the Teacher Preparation Seminar

CASIE J. FEDUKOVICH

National discourse on education and, specifically, on the humanities and language arts, has taken a hostile tone grounded in neo-liberalism and corporate interest. In January 2013, Pat McCrory, newly elected governor of North Carolina, revealed a budget plan that seeks to gut the humanities in many publically funded North Carolina colleges and universities, stating that he is determined to defund programs which “have no chance of getting people jobs” (Stancill & Frank, 2013).

On April 6, 2013, the *Washington Post* featured a letter of resignation from Gerald Conti, the head of a social studies program at Westhill High School in Syracuse, New York. Conti writes, “STEM rules the day and ‘data driven’ education seeks only conformity, standardization, testing and a zombie-like adherence to the shallow and generic Common Core, along with a lockstep of oversimplified so-called Essential Learnings.” Doug Hesse’s piece, “Grading writing: The art and science—and why computers can’t do it,” leveled a charge against trends toward machine scoring of writing, a move supported by major testing bodies like Smarter Balanced and PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers).

In the context of these dramatic and detrimental curricular shifts in ELA education, it is no surprise that teacher attrition remains high. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that, in 2008-09, 9% of public school teachers left the profession before they reached their third year and close to 30% leave within five years. English/language arts teachers ranked second (10.5%) to special education (12.3%) in attrition (Keigher, 2010). English/language arts teachers thus become the visual representation, the known quantity, for public negativity toward the humanities.

Henry Giroux (2012) cites this “war on teachers” as waged “against those public spheres that provide a vocabulary for connecting values, desires, identities, social relations and institutions to the discourse of social responsibility,

ethics, and democracy, if not thinking itself.” These “forms of militarized discipline,” made evident through policies and outspoken, politically (and financially) powerful supporters necessarily influence the attitudes of future teachers and, thus, should inform teacher preparation methods. And while poor pay, increased oversight, and declining autonomy—all artifacts of national anti-intellectual, anti-teacher discourse—are cited as reasons teachers leave, Scherer (1999 & 2003) argues for more robust and prolonged attention to mentoring, specifically focused on the rapid and deep identity negotiations novice teachers experience, to promote persistence.

In my role as a teacher educator, I struggle with preparing novice teachers who wish to enter this intense conversation where they are so often negatively marked. In the seminars that I teach—Theories and Research in Composition and Teaching College Composition—I am struck by the metaphors through which these pre-service teachers frame their professional identities and preparation. Our one week summer pedagogy workshop circulated among students as a *bootcamp*. Some described their mentors as *veterans* who *strategized* to meet *objectives* and *outcomes*. A few saw our role in the humanities as *fighting the good fight* and *holding the thin, red line* in the *trenches*. These are not metaphors students have received through experience as classroom teachers; instead, they represent accepted and acceptable discourse about teachers and teaching. Giroux’s militarized framework for education is alive and well in the identity formation of our next generation of classroom teachers.

I wish to situate these national dialogues, Giroux’s not-understated war on teachers, within scholarship on teachers’ professional identity to frame three activities I have productively used in my teacher preparation courses. It is my belief that these kinds of activities, situated firmly in radical reflexivity (Pollner, 1991) as “an unsettling, an insecurity regarding basic assumptions, discourse, and practices used in describing reality,” can help teachers work against internalizing dominant negative attitudes.

Teaching is, itself, an enactment of a political stance; teaching language arts is further transgressive in its goal of critical inquiry and transformative learning. I argue here for transparency and openness in terms of describing public teaching in the language arts while offering reflective methods in the pre-service course to provide a space where struggle in identity formation is accepted as growth and where resilience is taught as a generative process.

Metaphors Matter

What is happening to language arts teachers is no less than a move to strip critical thinking and professional expertise from their teaching. From pre-packaged modules to machine-scored writing, English/language arts teachers are reminded that many educational outsiders locate our utility in fully instrumental approaches with clear metrics. The process excerpts the humans from our humanistic paradigm, and so the use of these common militaristic metaphors is at least logical. *War* is an abstract concept with material effects, always beholden to policy statements and other performative (via J. L. Austin, where words cue action) utterances, while *fighting* represents the on-the-ground, embodied action. Likewise, *education* is an abstraction, while *teaching* is lived.

Starting from this distinction, we can begin to explore the ways in which teachers build and revise their professional identities through metaphor play, by first explicating educational policies which render material consequences and then focusing complex negotiations demanded by the embodied act of teaching. To give body to the act is to purposefully work to replace metaphors of violence with more positive images.

Attention to teacher identity has begun to receive the same close scholarly attention as student identity, and literature on developing professional identity suggests that many teachers frame their teaching roles in terms of survivalism and protection (Thomas and Beauchamp, 2011; Tobin, 1990). Alsup (2006), citing Weber and Mitchell (1995), noted that pre-service teachers recreated their metaphorical professional identities out of popular images of teachers as “serious conservative disciplinarians,” even when the teacher’s own identification was at odds with this image (p. 151). This influence of publically accepted images of teachers—and of learning spaces—on individual teacher identity cues for Alsup (2006) a need to explore the metaphors teachers use to describe their professional identities, especially given that many of these images are unconstructive or even damaging.

Many other scholars have promoted the use of metaphor in teacher education (see, for example, Black & Halliwell, 2000; Dooley, 1998; Hunt, 2006; Knowles, 1994; Mahlios, 2002; Martinez, Sauleda, & Huber, 2001; Patchen & Crawford, 2011; Patton, 2002; Stofflett, 1996; Tobin, 1990; Weade & Ernst, 1990). They argue, from various perspectives, that the use of metaphor can assist new teachers in charting the complex identity negotiations they may face as they begin their teacher training. However, without the move to explicitly place teacher reflection within social and political conversations, these metaphors loop back on themselves.

Greves’s (2005) “butterfly project,” for example, asks pre-service teachers to create butterflies from self-chosen materials; in this way, the butterflies take on multiple forms, representing student diversity. The butterflies are intended to heighten sensitivity to student needs by asking teachers to then muse about “what it means to be an adolescent learner and possibly their own experiences as one” (p. 100), as they tear away parts of the butterfly in tandem with each educational trauma they recount. The focus is firmly on student experience, teacher memory, and how teachers can pivot from their histories as students to be more effective educators.

The use of metaphor here is powerful, and I agree with Alsup (2006) who argues that “metaphors as visual images are pathways to expression and increased understanding of the personal and professional self” (p. 148). With firmer attention to teachers’ conceptions of their future-selves (Lauriala & Kukkonen, 2005), teacher educators can harness creative engagement with metaphors to honor the personal as part of the professional. By focusing more closely on both developing and aspirational images of pre-service teachers teaching-selves, mentoring can better address the urgent, often violent, national discourse about the humanities and ELA teachers.

Practice

I will outline three assignments I have productively used with pre-service teachers, understanding that each cohort provides a different inflection to the prompts. The first two assignments—playacting and the peer mentoring research projects—are intended to reinforce the cohort’s trust and establish their baseline attitudes toward teaching. The third—a multimodal induction dossier—is more robust in its scaffolding and explicitly connects metaphors of teaching with future professional identities and practice.

Playacting: This assignment asked pre-service teachers to take a role in our fictional community and to describe

and enact their relationships with other community members. We engaged with this play for two weeks, even dressing for roles and preparing short scripts. Some students situated themselves as firefighters or police officers, identities which they connected doubly to crisis intervention and protection of their students. Others cast themselves as community organizers whose primary interests lay in activism and advocacy. Mayors and school board presidents defined their roles through authoritative decision making, and high school football and soccer coaches were most interested in developing replicable systems for action while also providing encouragement.

I identified three purposes for the community playacting assignment: 1) These common tropes—the courageous

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firefighter, the nosy neighbor, the reliable mail carrier—allowed novice teachers to talk about their relational attitudes toward students and teaching scenes in non-confrontational and apolitical ways; 2) it allowed them to act as creative practitioners to solve community problems and build trust; and 3) it started the process of metaphor replacement, as we worked against common negative images of teachers. Even those metaphors framed through overt surveillance, like the police officer, were productively critiqued because of their relative distance to the teachers' past and current selves.

Peer mentoring research projects: It is impossible to separate formalized mentoring relationships from teacher assessment.

While the primary role of these kinds of relationships is to share knowledge and support novice teachers' growth, mentoring assignments, situated as they are in the organizational culture of teacher education, can potentially stifle deep emotional engagement and disclosure of struggle. This occluded genre (Swales, 1996) of assessment is made even more apparent when initiatives like Race to the Top and CCSS are considered, since these programs are firmly regimented and grounded in the discourse of data-driven standardized testing. One work-around I've used takes up peer mentoring based in a collaborative research model.

Using action research as our backdrop, novice teachers worked in pairs and trios to collect and code classroom data.

The project included three components: peer observations of teaching, peer reviews of assessed papers/projects and other course materials, and a collaborative research proposal inductively derived from these corpora. Presentation of data included use of a localized metaphor as a heuristic, as such personally-held, situated images may "claim authority for the processes and from the texts that are produced in terms of the principles, processes, and practices that govern such events in their literal sense" (Bishop, 2005, p. 129). That is, instead of being held to common notions of the images they chose to represent the data sets, the pre-service teachers were encouraged to choose a metaphor with personal significance and to describe the relationship between the images and the teaching actions to their research partners.

One student, also a weekend soccer coach, described his research partner's class using the images and language of his team, identifying the coach's objective as making himself obsolete. A trio of students worked together to create an extensive data-supported project which framed their classrooms as factories, not because of a sense of replicability or depersonalization but because of the relationship among material production, faceless corporate decision makers, and *ad hoc*, community-based leadership with the potential to lead to revolution.

The expressed purposes for this assignment were tripartite: to get these new teachers more comfortable with observation, to provide a record of useful feedback on their teaching, and to practice research methods and analysis. However, the dual tacit purposes included building peer mentoring networks apart from traditional surveillance-bound approaches and promotions of insight and deep engagement through metaphor.

Pre-Teaching or Induction Dossier: As the most robust assignment in the sequence, the multimodal induction dossier offered a richly detailed and politically situated version of the teaching philosophy we drafted in our summer pedagogy workshop. Beyond situating their practices in discipline-specific theories, I first asked the pre-service teachers to provide a shifting presupposition statement detailing the many assumptions and critiques they held of educational systems writ large and teaching language arts in particular. Informed by practices in qualitative research, the presupposition statement, also called a reflexivity statement (Watt, 2007), was informed by daily writing in praxis journals, where the teachers recounted a "personal tale of what went on in the backstage" of their preparation process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741; cited in Watt, 2007, p. 83). The presupposition

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statement worked to frame humanistic inquiry and practices in human experience, as students queried the influence of race, class, gender, sexual identity, and ability on day-to-day teaching moments and broader curricular design.

Alsop (2006) supports this move to call attention to “the embodiment of a teacher identity,” as physical performance is both inescapable and crucial (p. 105), and yet it remains significantly under-supported. A young female student who wished to have children wrote extensively about the potential problems—and generative conversations—a pregnancy might create, from discussions of biology to potential traumatic medical events. An African-American student worried about encountering racism from students, parents, colleagues, and administrators alike, while an openly gay male student became so concerned about his digital footprint affecting both his job prospects and his personal safety that he chose a different career path. However, not every embodied narrative cued crisis: A bilingual Latina student sought a placement in a primarily bilingual school so she could advocate for other Latina/Latino students, and a number of working-class students—also those who had cast themselves as community organizers—sought administrative appointments so that they could effect change on a broader scale.

This presupposition statement led into a platform statement to aid “political and ideological clarity” (Bartolome, 2004, p. 119) and to encourage novice teachers to think about the complex relationships among histories of education, theories of teaching, and practice. PARCC, Smarter Balanced, CCSS, and other initiatives can excerpt agency from classroom teachers, leaving them to wonder how their expertise can be made relevant.

We began the platform statement by reviewing these major initiatives and their many political affiliations, supported by recent research like Linda Adler-Kassner’s “Strategies and tactics in trying times” (2012). It’s safe to assume that many pre-service teachers have informally queried their stances on topics like standardized testing and technology integration; however, by scaffolding this statement between the presupposition statement and the visual metaphor component outlined next, the platform statement serves as a bridge between lived experience and future professional identity. Scaffolded by Schön’s (1984) definition of reflection-in-action and Pollner’s (1991) radical reflexivity, this statement encouraged pre-service teachers to practice responsiveness to hedge against reactivity.

The third component of the dossier asked the pre-service teachers to visually capture metaphors for their

current and future teaching identities at four points during the semester, to supplement and give body to their presupposition and platform statements. The visual metaphors were, in the early stages of the project, surprisingly divergent from the presupposition statements, as students took up images of the artifacts of teaching as representative of their future professional identities. Books, computers, chalkboards—for self-identified “traditionally minded” teachers—and pencils were all represented during the first iteration of the visual metaphor, completed before the presupposition statements but after the teaching philosophies. By the end of the semester, these visual metaphors had become more personal, local, situated, and partial, including rosaries, a favorite walking path, and well-worn copies of Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* and the collected works of Shakespeare.

The final portion of the dossier, presented at the end of the seminar, was intended to scaffold the entire piece, as I asked students to bring together their shifting statements—both alphabetic and visual—into a genre of their choosing. Many choose a standard conference-style presentation, where they detailed personal growth, political shifts, and metaphors for their future-teaching-selves. Other artifacts included a digital video tracing the teacher’s path—represented by a narrated journey through a forest—and a series of evocative slam poems. Beyond presenting the complex and embodied demands of teaching, these presentations offered a closing practice for the community of pre-service teachers, who had shared one another’s journeys and who had offered reciprocal trust and support. The communities they created among themselves offered a counter to the more formalized—and thus exclusionary—mentoring relationships they developed in their placements.

Just as differentiated instruction and multiliteracies are recognized as important pedagogical paradigms in education, our teacher preparation programs must likewise meet pre-service teachers where they are in their professional development by offering multiple ways to think about, practice, revise, and represent teachers’ shifting professional and personal identities. The importance of authorship, of authority, comes to the fore in each assignment. As a member of our teaching community, I took part in each exercise, to share with students my own shifting teaching metaphors and to work in challenges to the pervasive lockstep, militaristic metaphors which were expressed in our first class meeting. McCann (2012) cautions mentors against presenting their own teaching experiences as free of struggle, as “[in] some instances, a mentor might consciously contribute to an impression of errorless mastery as a teacher” (p. 86).

Instead, he advocates an “empathetic stance,” akin to an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Teacher trainers can work against the assumption of the infallible expert by allowing themselves to act as vulnerable members of the class or mentoring experience, taking part in each assignment as they recognize their own always partial, always local, always dynamic teaching persona.

Teacher educators can effectively radicalize their seminars by directly addressing “the enactment of a militaristic culture of security, policing and containment” in public schools, considering the ramifications of these images on teacher identity, and actively supporting the creation of alternative metaphors for teaching and teachers (Giroux, 2012). By explicitly supporting teacher professional identity growth and its relationship to political and ideological structures, we can work against the “lockstep” (Conti), militarized version of public education held up in national discourse. In this way, we can energize the base through our teacher preparation programs in order to begin a slow process of retaining and empowering teachers and encouraging change from inside the system.

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