
Preparing Teachers of Literacy

In a program that provides indispensable firsthand experience in classrooms, prospective teachers of literacy learn whole language strategies in authentic settings while videotaping one another conducting lessons.

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One way to attack literacy-related problems is to do a better job of preparing teachers of literacy. Faculty members of the University of Illinois's College of Education and teachers in the Urbana, Illinois (District #116), schools are collaborating to do just that.

Our joint effort to improve elementary teacher education evolved over two years of planning in the late 1980s. Our purposes were first, to remedy the limited connection between teacher preparation and the real world of schooling,¹ and second, to correct some of the weaknesses of traditional coursework and field experiences. In traditional education programs, coursework is often unconnected by common themes or philosophies, and field experiences offer only cursory opportunities for students to observe and practice teach in cooperating schools and to receive feedback and coaching.

In our program, prospective teachers spend their entire senior year in classrooms in the Urbana schools: approximately 18 hours per week, 30 hours per week during the last 10 weeks of the year. This is more than twice the time spent by students in traditional programs at the University of Illinois. And, by beginning their classroom experience the week before school begins in the fall, they are part of the "behind the scenes" action—an experi-

ence unavailable to most prospective teachers.

During the year, student teachers engage in a variety of field experiences. In the first semester, their time is split between primary and intermediate classrooms in one school. They spend the second semester in a different school and at a different grade level. Such a framework gives students a much broader perspective on schooling.

The Language and Literacy Block

The Language and Literacy (L and L) block, one of several elements in the program, is developed and taught by an instructional team made up of both university and school faculty.² In developing a plan for teaching it, we were guided by what the elementary school teachers thought were essential knowledge and skills.

A key feature of the curriculum is its integrated approach to teaching language. Recognizing that language—reading, writing, listening, speaking—is learned holistically in a social and cultural context, the L and L block combines coursework often taught separately in the traditional curriculum: reading methods, language arts methods, and children's literature. Sample topics include emerging literacy, beginning reading instruction, reading comprehension and reading-to-

learn, the process approach to writing, reading and writing across the curriculum, children's literature, and managing a literature-based classroom. Student teachers complete a number of projects requiring them to integrate literacy experiences: classroom observations, journal writing, and, most important, planning and teaching lessons.

An instructional philosophy also emerged as a result of our team's collaborative planning. One major tenet of that philosophy is that *learning is situated*: people learn from acting in authentic contexts. Therefore, practice in the actual situation of teaching is essential to becoming an expert teacher (Anderson et al. 1990).

Another principle that evolved is that instruction must move the learner toward independence (Pearson and Fielding 1991). This is accomplished through *scaffolding*, or the regulation of task difficulty and the lessening of teacher support as the learner's proficiency increases (Bruner 1978).

Modeling is an additional tenet of our instructional philosophy. At first, teachers do a great deal of explanation and modeling to help learners develop a conceptual model of the task before attempting it themselves. For example, early in the year, our students view videotapes of expert teaching in which the teachers not only model specific methods but also explain and reflect on their teaching (Anderson and Au 1991).

To help students gradually assume more responsibility for performing the task, our teachers also provide *coaching*. One member of our team regularly visits classrooms to coach students as they teach literacy lessons, giving specific suggestions in an immediate debriefing sessions.

Opportunities for *articulation* and *reflection* are important for student teachers to develop their independence. Articulation entails getting students to verbalize their knowledge, reasoning, or problem-solving strategies in order to gain consciousness and control over these developing cognitive processes. It also sets the stage for reflection, which involves comparing one's own understandings with those of an expert or another student and, eventually, internalizing the model of expertise. We encourage our students to articulate and reflect on their developing expertise by corresponding with us in dialogue journals about the relationship between what they are learning and what they are experiencing in their classrooms.

These six tenets of instruction are exemplified in one of the major elements of the L and L block: the use of videotaped student lessons.

The Videotape Project

During the videotape project, L and L students record each other conducting three literacy lessons — one in each of

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the classrooms to which they are assigned during the year. To complete the assignments, each student teacher:

- writes a fairly detailed lesson plan;
- teaches the lesson;
- views the videotaped lesson directly afterward and logs educationally significant events, targeting 15-20 minutes of instruction as the focus for discussion;
- writes a self-evaluation, including both high and low points of the lesson;
- views and discusses the videotape with his or her cooperating teacher;

- takes notes on the cooperating teacher's feedback;

- writes a summary of the interchange;

- submits the lesson plan, the log of significant events, the two evaluations, and the videotape itself.

Student teachers, along with the entire instructional team, spend at least two hours a week viewing and discussing the lessons. Over the program's two years, a successful format for conducting these discussions has evolved. The student teacher whose lesson is to be discussed first gives some background information: the school and grade he or she is teaching, a description of the students in the class or group, and an overview of the lesson itself. Then the target segment of the lesson is shown. After the viewing, each student in the class spends about five minutes writing a response to the lesson, focusing on strengths and suggestions (not "weaknesses"). Next, the student teacher comments on his or her own lesson, beginning with the strengths and then proceeding to other approaches that could have been used.



L and L students particularly value the contribution of the videotape project to their professional development.

Finally, the class is opened to general discussion. Because the students are quite supportive of each other, the tone is almost always gentle, positive, and constructive. As members of the instructional team, we try to hold our comments until the students' remarks have begun to wane. By then, we often find that our points have been covered anyway. Following the discussion, the student teacher receives written feedback from the other class members.

The videotape project captures the instructional tenets of the L and L block:

- The lessons are an occasion for *situated learning* because students are teaching real lessons to real students in real classrooms.

- *Scaffolding* occurs through limiting teaching to a single lesson and providing a structured assignment.

- Many opportunities for *modeling* are present in the project. Although the teacher on the tape is not experienced, good instruction occurs surprisingly often. Peers observe methods, materials, children, contexts, and situations that they do not have the opportunity to see in person. Both the strong and not-so-strong aspects of the teaching are made explicit during the discussion, with alternative approaches sometimes modeled on the spot.

- *Coaching* is available from a number of sources: from the cooperating teacher, who knows the most about the context, the lesson, and the student teacher; from peers, who offer feedback in written evaluations, during discussion, and often informally after class; and, finally, from the instructional team members, with their multiple perspectives on the lesson.

- The videotaped lessons also provide occasions for *articulation and reflection*. Student teachers must verbalize their thinking and ponder their thoughts and actions in writing up the lesson, discussing it with the cooperating teacher, and presenting it to the class. The other students must also articulate and reflect as they write their

feedback and discuss the lesson. The discussion itself, then, provides an occasion for each student to compare his or her own understandings and beliefs with those of other students and the instructional team members.

Reflections on L and L

In his study of teacher education, Goodlad argues that if teacher education is to improve, "the goal is to join theory and practice in every component of a future teacher's preparation" (1990, p. 300). We agree. In the yearlong teacher education program as a whole, and in the L and L block in particular, we try to do just that.

Our anecdotal evidence indicates that the prospective teachers recognize and value the strong theory-practice link. An article about the program in a local newspaper reported the following comments from students:

"It seems so much more effective to be able to try something in class the day after you learn it," said senior Kevin Skomer.

Senior Christy Cornell recalled watching teacher Gloria Rainer use a certain technique with students at Martin Luther King School:

"Everything she was doing was what I had read 12 to 15 hours earlier" (Wurth, 1991, p. A-3).

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Many of their comments on a survey asking for "specific experiences in your language and literacy course that were most useful" mentioned it. For example,

"Getting videotaped—you learn a lot seeing yourself teach and hearing constructive criticism. You have the chance to see other teaching situations and talk through situations that were giving you trouble."

And, from a dialogue journal,

"I appreciated every comment and suggestion. If anything, I've learned the importance of feedback from the video projects" (Wurth 1991, p. A-3).

Future Directions

What lies ahead? The program itself is continuing to expand. Each year the number of students who enroll has increased. During the 1991-92 school year, the program moved into a second school district, with other districts targeted for the future. We are also exploring creative ways to finance the program. With a high ratio of instructors to students, staffing the block is expensive. Further, there has been a relatively high turnover of teachers on the instructional team, apparently because of heavy time commitment without recompense.

To improve the program, we actively seek feedback from students, instructional team members, and colleagues through various means. We:

- obtain informal opinions from dialogue journals, class discussions, and conversations;

- have enrolled students complete a standard university course evaluation form;

- administer two surveys, one for all program participants and one for students only.

We are currently evaluating students who completed the first year of the program. We follow up on them during their first year of teaching and compare them to other first-year teachers in the

same school, or at least in the same district. Our interviews with them about their teaching and preparation for teaching and our talks with principals about their performance give us further information. We also videotape them teaching a literacy lesson and have them discuss the lesson.

The evaluations have been encouraging. L and L students rated their preparation in reading, language arts, and children's literature significantly higher than did students in the traditional teacher education program at the University of Illinois. On the down side, they complain about the demanding work load and the lack of coordination with the other methods blocks. Initially, they are intimidated by being videotaped and by being "on stage" during discussion.

We have used, and will continue to

use, evaluation results as the basis for revising and improving the course. Together with our colleagues in the schools, we are confident that we can prepare better teachers of literacy for our nation's schools. □

¹ For more information, see Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy 1990; Goodlad 1990; and Holmes Group 1986, 1990.

² The current program blocks are Language and Literacy; Inquiry (math, science, and social studies); and Curriculum and Instruction (classroom management, instructional methods, and other general instructional issues).

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Authors' note: The work on which this article was based was supported in part by the Mellon Foundation and in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement under Cooperative Agreement No. G0087-C1001-90 with the Reading Research and Education Center. The article does not necessarily reflect the views of the agencies supporting the research.

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