

## Why Doesn't Teacher Education Begin with Experience?

By Tom Russell

### Introduction

The penny finally dropped when I heard a cooperating teacher describe a student teacher, placed in his classroom on the first day of school, as someone who had "never been in a classroom." The individual in question may never have stood at the front of a classroom in the role of teacher, but 16 or more years of listening and watching *must* count for something. I am pleased to teach, for the first time this year, in a nine-month post-degree preservice program that *begins* by placing student teachers in a school for 14 of the first 16 weeks of the school year.

Join me, please, in exploring the epistemological shift embedded in a program structure that puts *extended experience first* in the process of learning to teach. Consider the contradiction embedded in the familiar assertion that someone who has spent 16 years in school has "never been in a classroom." Teachers and teacher educators alike, as successful graduates of schools and universities, possess a broad array of reflexes suggesting that people who have been *told* how to teach will be able

to *do* teaching in accordance with what they have been told. Similarly, we assume that someone who has watched teachers for many years but *not* been told how to teach *cannot* teach. We readily assume that experience involves practicing what has previously been learned, rather than seeing it as the most powerful and efficient learning possible, given appropriate support.

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*Why not begin with experience?* For most of the 20th century, teacher educators seem to have assumed that there are important efficiencies in telling people how to teach before letting them *feel* what it is like to teach. We have assigned them to relatively short periods of practice (there is important talk now about longer placements) before turning them over to their own classroom for that unforgettable "first year of experience." Small wonder that preservice teacher education has, at best, a dubious reputation. Theory (often extensive) followed by practice (usually in snippets) has a questionable track record, yet it persists on a grand scale.

### **Recent Literature**

Consider the following paragraph from a recent and important paper on improving professional development and teacher education in the United States:

Our ability to help teachers learn how to teach more productively has been greatly enhanced by recent research on learning: We know that students learn best when new ideas are connected to what they already know and have experienced, when they are actively engaged in applying and testing their knowledge to real-world problems, when their learning is organized around clear goals with lots of practice in reaching them, and when they can use their own interests and strengths as springboard for learning. (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 7)

Fabulous! But who are "we"? In what sense do we "know"? And how do those who *don't* know *come to know*? Even more importantly, can anyone name a teacher education program in which new teachers might describe their professional learning in those terms? I am fortunate to have personal experience from which to reply that I can name one such program. We are in its early stages and the reviews are understandably mixed, largely because the structure challenges so many familiar assumptions. The new teachers are very enthusiastic about this approach to learning to teach.

If teacher educators in preservice and inservice program cannot "walk the talk" expressed in the preceding quotation, then they *cannot* teach that talk or help others come to know it. Propositions count for little in teacher development, where actions *always* speak louder than words (Russell, 1997). To suggest that new teachers need to "acquire a firm grounding in teaching skills" (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 8) still misses the point that *teachers learn as students learn*. We must provide experiences from which new teachers can build clear goals to guide further practice. We must offer experiences that reveal and refine personal interests and strengths. And then we must help new teachers understand that this is what they have done.

### **Personal Experiences of "Experience First"**

At Queen's University, we are nearing the close of our first full year (1997-98) of a structure that begins with extended experience. Such a dramatic change has

naturally produced many growing pains and it would be inappropriate to suggest that my colleagues are "convinced" of anything yet. I adapted quickly to the new structure because I worked for three years (1993-96) with cohorts that did come to their preservice courses with four months of teaching experience (Chin & Russell, 1996; Featherstone, Munby, & Russell, 1997). I was also involved in our 1996-97 "pilot" project testing the experience-first structure with 60 candidates before we extended it to all 600 candidates in 1997-98. The new teachers I am now working with impress me and challenge me as never before, and "*learn first from experience*" seems to be the essential difference.

While I was enthusiastic about the potential of the new program structure, nothing could have prepared me for the *freedom* that came with leaving behind the old program structure and its embedded assumptions. In the first half of the program year, I was faculty liaison to three schools hosting 18 candidates. For the first time in 20 years, I could work closely over an extended period with new teachers and their cooperating teachers, sharing the joys and the frustrations of the rapid progress made by the three cohorts. Midway through that term of experience, I met for 10 hours over two weeks with individuals assigned to me for secondary science methods. They had completed eight weeks of teaching in schools to which they would return for six more weeks, and these new teachers had *more and better questions* than any group I have ever taught. My confidence in the "power of experience" has also been sustained by continuing work in science methods in the second half of the program year.

I hasten to assure those who might read these words as epistemological anarchy that I have not abandoned my confidence in people's ability to learn by reading, writing, listening, and discussing. I have even greater confidence in those processes now that they are *informed by a sustained period of personal experience*. I have long shared with many other science educators an interest in alternatives to the familiar classroom patterns criticized as "chalk and talk," "ask and answer," or "tell 'em and test 'em." I am working for the first time with individuals who can understand the possibilities of *teaching science by building on experience* because they already understand how "experience first" has influenced their own learning to teach.

This paper has opened with an account of my personal experiences in order to follow the guiding principle of "experience first." I turn now to the ten issues identified by Alan H. Jones to indicate how an epistemological shift that recognizes the power of experience in learning to teach speaks to the future of teacher education.

### **Learn First from Experience**

I offer one powerful framework to guide our future in teacher education: *Explore the role and power of experience in learning to teach*. You must *feel* it yourself to believe it. My confidence emerges from a sweeping transformation of

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the preservice teacher education program at Queen's University. From 1968, when the program was opened, through 1997, Queen's offered a traditional program structure in which short blocks of practice teaching (two or three weeks) were scattered between longer blocks of on-campus courses. By 1980, Queen's also offered a "concurrent" program that made it possible to teach for four months, *after* completing all education courses. (This was a well-intentioned attempt at the idea of extended experience, but it virtually read the university out of the action on learning from experience.) After a pilot project in 1997, Queen's now offers a remarkably different program structure that *begins* with 14 weeks of experience, interrupted in midpoint by two weeks of courses on campus. This transformation guides my responses to all of Jones' "ten significant points of debate that mark teacher education in the late 1990s."

#### ***Quality Versus Quantity***

High standards versus "enough warm bodies to fill a nation's classrooms." Our new program at Queen's is one month longer than the previous one—a marginal increase—yet it enables us to begin with extended experience and close with a block of experience that demonstrates to each candidate what has been learned over the program. To make my point provocatively, I predict that standards will rise simply as a result of putting experience first.

#### ***Majority Versus Minority***

What is the gap between cultures and communities if it is not an experience gap? Successful shared experiences build bridges between majority and minority. I learned quickly and effectively about minority-majority issues by beginning my teaching career in Nigeria with the Peace Corps. Teaching with no formal training must have started me down the road to my present confidence in learning from experience (supported by structures for interpreting and extending the experiences).

#### ***Preservice Versus Inservice***

Are teachers three different types of people as they pass through phases of professional development? Or are there key features of learning that apply across the three levels of education, first in a discipline, then in preservice professional education, and finally during inservice education? Perhaps the saddest feature of teacher education is that it has so long followed the pattern we see in schools themselves, where classrooms rarely address the power and authority of personal experience in the learning process. Sarason (1996) reminds us that he said a great deal back in 1971 about the importance of conditions for student learning *and* teacher learning. Are we ready now to take his perspectives into the structures of our programs?

### **Campus Versus School Site**

Here is where the “experience first” model provides clearest direction. The school site is the *only* location where a new teacher can experience teaching firsthand. The campus is the ideal location for *building* on experience in a broad range of ways, from swapping experiences to reinterpreting them and assembling resources to meet goals identified through experience.

### **Time Versus Money**

“Cramming” has never worked, in teaching or in learning to teach. We can “teach” (in some bizarre sense) the “knowledge base for teaching,” but can those learning to teach hear us when we do so? They will hear the words, but how can they hear the meaning without experience? And how can they adjust their future actions as teachers with no base of significant personal experience? (Teaching for 14 weeks quickly makes a three-week assignment seem far too short for significant professional learning.)

### **Specialization Versus Generalization**

The issue of generic versus subject-specific pedagogy intrigues me. At the elementary level, teaching has always had many generic features. Our “learn first from experience” approach places individual faculty members in the role of supporting new teachers placed in groups in secondary schools in a range of subjects. The PEEL project in Australia (Baird & Northfield, 1992) has drawn remarkable energy and momentum by working in *cross-curricular groups within schools*. There will always be features unique to each subject taught in school, but remarkable gains seem possible by encouraging strategies for learning that cross subject boundaries.

### **Theory Versus Practice**

“Understand[ing] the overarching theoretical backdrop” is simply impossible without experience, if the term “understand” is to retain any of its meaning. Our faith in experience-free “teaching” of theory has gone hand-in-hand with our determination to “tell new teachers everything we know.” The implicit message, tragically, is that we have no faith in new teachers’ ability to learn from experience, and they *do* hear that implicit message. Theory first has not transformed our schools, and experience first will not compel new teachers to repeat past “mistakes.”

### **Professional Versus Public**

Who is in charge? There is no obvious answer, and the real message is that each agency needs meaningful experience of the realities of other agencies. The province of Ontario has recently established the Ontario College of Teachers, and policies and practices for teacher certification and for accreditation of programs are still

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being developed. It remains to be seen whether the new organization defines its own world or listens to the experiences of others.

#### ***Information Versus Myth***

"Why do research results and reports of best practice not serve as the primary basis for educational reform?" *Because they lack the authority of personal experience* (Munby & Russell, 1994). Furthermore, they usually appear to be answers, yet those who read them may not yet have asked the corresponding questions. Teachers' professional learning begins and ends in practical experience.

#### ***Long-Range Versus Short-Range***

Governments tend not to make long-range investments. They are even less likely to do so until they can gain experiences that enable them to understand the role of experience in learning to teach. Perhaps we need a series of short-range steps that might add up to the long-range development that is needed.

#### **Summing Up**

Focus is something that teacher education has lacked for decades, as we—like schools—try to be all things to all people. I am grateful to Jones for the opportunity to place a single powerful idea before the *Teacher Education Quarterly* community. I recommend "learn first from experience," not as an answer but as a powerful overarching perspective for restructuring teacher education.

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