Three Fanciful Recommendations for Teacher Education

By Alan R. Tom

In *Redesigning Teacher Education*, I outline an approach to regenerating preservice teacher education. Central to my book are 11 conceptual and structural principles which a faculty might discuss while rethinking its preservice programming. I view these design principles as an agenda for a long-term conversation among the members of a teacher education faculty.

These principles include: employing student cohorts, adopting a shared view of multiculturalism, modeling by the faculty of a program's core ideas, integrating theory and practice during professional study, and focusing the attention of novices on pedagogical thinking. For the most part, my conceptual and structural principles capture commonsense ideas, although a number of the principles embody age-old problems and dilemmas in our field.

While crafting the 11 principles, I entertained— but did not include—several considerations which seem to underlie my design principles and help explain why these principles are so seldom realized. These basic considerations concern the detrimental effects of large size on program quality, the ways in which courses insulate faculty members from one another, and the harmful consequences of detaching pedagogy from subject matter. On the surface, these ideas do not appear amenable to

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change. With this prelude, I introduce three "fanciful" recommendations for improving teacher education.

Close Big Teacher Education Programs

Imagine a map for each of our 50 states. After locating the university with the largest teacher education program in each state, I wave a wand and erase that program. Of course, this fanciful act would leave the state of Wyoming without any teacher education programming! Many other states would have substantially reduced capacity to prepare teachers. Why do I even entertain such a fantasy?

In my formative years, I worked in a modest-sized program, and this program steadily decreased in size during the 1970s. As the student body and faculty became smaller, we were able to make interesting changes in the elementary program (Tom, 1988) and later in the secondary program (Cohn, Gellman, & Tom, 1987). In retrospect, I have come to believe that the key contextual factor which facilitated our creative thinking was our small size.

When we wanted to consider a change in the secondary program, the three of us who taught and supervised in that program's professional semester sat down and talked. While Marilyn, Vivian, and I could not necessarily make a decision about parts of the program outside the professional semester, we certainly could frame the issue and bring it to the attention of the handful of faculty in the secondary program.

Subsequently, I taught at two public institutions. Although neither institution has massive programs, the idea that three faculty members could meaningfully address program-wide issues is unthinkable. In the elementary program in which I currently work, 17 to 18 faculty members and graduate assistants teach courses and supervise student teachers. These faculty members and graduate assistants, plus undergraduates and teacher representatives from our cooperating schools, compose the 25-person elementary planning committee, the decision-making body for our program. Getting half of us to a common meeting is difficult enough, let alone engaging the group in a reflective and sustained dialogue about program-wide issues.

In addition to inhibiting programmatic discussion, large faculty size also seems to dampen the ability of a faculty to raise program issues. In general, the larger the faculty, the narrower the responsibility of each faculty member. When I worked in the three-person professional semester, I taught the socio-cultural strand, shared the instruction about general methods, and supervised a third of the student teachers. Now, as part of a 17-to-18 person faculty, I teach one of two sections of a social studies/social foundations course offered in the second semester of the junior year. Since a faculty member tends to identify with the portion of a program for which that person is responsible, a big program staffed by teacher educators with narrow instructional roles easily drifts into a static state. Near superhuman effort can be required to move a large faculty to address program-wide issues.

Eliminate Courses

As an entry-level teacher educator, I was happy to have some success in the courses/experiences for which I was personally responsible, i.e., teaching secondary social studies methods and supervising student teachers. I neither worried about the content taught by others nor expected them to have notions about what I should be doing. Only gradually did I become aware of the fragmentation which results from allowing each faculty member to go her/his own way.

Once I appreciated the deeply segmented nature of the typical teacher education program, I probed for the basis of this phenomenon. A central cause is our unquestioned belief in the value of specialized knowledge. Specialized knowledge embodies the expertise possessed by each professor, and therefore is largely protected from being examined or questioned by professors who have other forms of pedagogical expertise.

In addition, each body of specialized knowledge is encapsulated by being offered as a "course." Course titles represent areas of expertise, for instance, developmental psychology, language arts, or science methods. These bodies of specialized knowledge are both studied at different points in a program and offered by different professors. In this way, the course-based organization of teacher education inserts high barriers among the education professors who teach in a program.

Fragmentation is not the only by-product of course-based organization; a particular idea often is repeated in several courses but interpreted in discordant ways. Especially across methods courses, several professors may introduce personalized versions of a strategy such as lesson planning or cooperative learning. The outcome of such repetition is not so much a spiral and cumulative presentation of a strategy as a mishmash of ideas.

Refuse to Detach Pedagogy from Content

No distinction in teacher preparation is more widely accepted than the belief that subject matter embodies the "what" of teaching while professional study entails the "how." Content and process is another way to construe the division of work between arts and sciences' professors and professors of education. Under this bifurcation of responsibility, the task of professional study becomes instructing novices in how to "get across" subject matter to K-12 students.

Professors of education have willingly embraced this technical view of their work, especially during the first two-thirds of this century. However, the search for the "magic bullet" of effective teaching strategies has been disappointing (Schrag, 1995). In addition, acceptance of an instrumental view of pedagogy has resulted in education professors adopting a narrow definition of pedagogy, a view which has little overlap with how faculties of arts and sciences conceive of pedagogy.

For arts and sciences faculties, questions of substance and process are sepa-

rated only at great peril. Not until Lee Shulman formulated the concept of "pedagogical content knowledge" was there a meaningful attempt by professors of education to bridge the gap between pedagogy and content. By pedagogical content knowledge, Shulman (1986, p. 9) means the "particular form of content most germane to its teachability." Unfortunately, the idea of pedagogical content knowledge has not aroused the interest and passion of arts and sciences' faculties, and the terrain of this idea is largely restricted to professional study.

Nevertheless, broadening the term *pedagogy* to embrace the dimension of subject matter has removed one impediment to dialogue about the nature of pedagogy among professors of education and professors of arts and sciences. Are there other ways in which professors of education can reduce the sense in which pedagogy and content are separate and unrelated domains? This query also raises parallel questions about how to address the termination of big programs and the elimination of courses, two recommendations whose feasibility is questionable.

What Can We Do?

How does one eliminate courses? Does the entire program become a single course? That would reverse the adulation of specialized knowledge to the point that teacher educators would become complete generalists, able to teach any and every part of the professional curriculum. There is, however, an intermediate position: the blocking of courses. By *blocking* I mean something more than a cohort of students concurrently working with a set of instructors while these instructors maintain careful boundaries among themselves. That arrangement is the reality of many so-called "methods blocks."

Blocking which merits this label often results in a single syllabus containing the objectives and content for the entire experience. Even more convincing is team teaching which extends beyond turn-taking to be so integrated that students cannot do a course evaluation which distinguishes among the efforts of individual professors. I engaged in this level of integration while working in the secondary professional semester and more recently when merging the content formerly offered as courses in social foundations and elementary social studies. In both cases, my expertise was open to review and program fragmentation was reduced.

Closing big teacher education programs does not necessarily mean that large institutions must drop teacher education. In the mid-1980s, Michigan State University developed multiple program options, each staffed by a small cluster of faculty (Book, 1983). Medium-sized institutions have also formed cohorts of students into distinctive programs (Tom, 1988). Enormous faculty energy can be released by such a flexible structure, and quite creative programming often results. Yet the bias within schools of education in favor of large-scale programming is so great that small program options are frequently referred to as "boutique" efforts. Rarely are problems with massive teacher education programs acknowledged, even though

there is a growing literature on the potential for small faculties in K-12 schools (e.g., Meier, 1995) and for small teacher education faculties (Tom, 1997).

Enriching the idea of pedagogy is perhaps the greatest challenge of all. I have already highlighted how the idea of pedagogical content knowledge expands the concept of pedagogy by incorporating subject matter. By employing a "pedagogy seminar" (Stengel, 1991), a faculty can transport the idea of pedagogical content knowledge into academic programming. Attached to an arts and sciences' course, the pedagogy seminar focuses on how prospective teachers learn the subject matter in that course and how they might transform this subject matter to facilitate its being studied by another audience. The pedagogy seminar is team taught by an education professor and the instructor of the arts and sciences course to which the seminar is attached. Few organizational attempts to connect pedagogy and subject matter are as integrated as the pedagogy seminar.

Conclusion

While redesign principles are important, teacher educators must pry beneath these principles to examine several taken-for-granted perspectives. In need of reconsideration are assumptions about the value of big programs, the course as a building block, and the separation of pedagogy from subject matter. Revisiting these assumptions is the first step toward formulating recommendations which, for now, do seem fanciful.

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