

by Jean Clandinin

You are free to reproduce, distribute and transmit this article, provided you attribute the author(s), Education Canada Vol. 40 (1), and a link to the Canadian Education Association (www.cea-ace.ca) 2010. You may not use this work for commercial purposes. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. Publication ISSN 0013-1253.

Learning to teach: A question of knowledge

As a teacher educator, I worked over three years alongside a group of student teachers as they undertook their teacher education. Today is the last day we will meet as a group. It is a celebration of our work together.¹



Our work as teacher educators grows from a belief that we need to imagine teacher education programs around a concept of 'teacher knowledge', which stands in tension with the more commonly accepted concept of 'knowledge for teaching'. This distinction is one that Michael Connelly and I find useful as we think about teacher education and what we mean by teacher knowledge and skills.²

Often, knowledge and skills are assumed to be possessions, held and performed by people in objective ways. According to a view of 'knowledge for teaching', commonly held in media and political contexts, knowledge needs continual updating, may be stripped away in a process sometimes called 'deskilling', or may be continually accumulated. This is the view behind the teacher testing movement, in which tests need frequent revision as new items are added, and, more importantly, in which knowledge is seen as political.

Many teacher education programs are designed around a concept of 'knowledge for teaching'. We teach how to plan a lesson, a unit, a theme; how to discipline a child; how to conduct oneself within the professional code of ethics; how to convey a particular

science concept. The list is endless and always under negotiation. In each course or part of a program, a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes is presented, and students are tested to see if they have acquired the set. Student teaching is the time for students to apply those bits of knowledge in practice. Teacher educators, at this point, assess whether or not students have been able to put those pieces together into defensible practices. This way of engaging in teacher education is based on a view of ‘knowledge for teaching.’

The plotline for our alternative argument, based on a view of ‘teacher knowledge’, is that teachers hold knowledge that comes from experience, is learned in context, and is expressed in practice. ‘Teacher knowledge’ drives how classrooms are constructed. This is neither knowledge as possession nor knowledge that can be tested; it is a form of knowledge embedded in teachers’ lives, acquired through living, and expressed in context.

We developed a language that is both commonplace and unusual, using everyday terms rarely used when talking about ‘knowledge for teachers’. We think of ‘teacher knowledge’ in narrative terms, and describe it in terms of narrative life constructions, built on stories that are both personal, reflecting a person’s life history, and social, reflecting the professional knowledge contexts in which teachers live. We view these contexts as narratively constructed — as having a history with moral, emotional and aesthetic dimensions.

While most teacher education programs are built around a view of ‘knowledge for teachers’, we began to imagine programs composed around a view of ‘teacher knowledge’ embodied in who we are as persons, knowledge that all teachers hold. Too often it is unacknowledged. Yet it is ‘teacher knowledge’, and a confidence that one can express that knowledge in practice, that we see as underlying our work as teacher educators. A teacher education program concerned with ‘teacher knowledge’ begins with what preservice teachers already know rather than what should be taught to them.³

The first year of the 3YPP experience has changed my views on life, it has made me become more aware of myself and it has given me something to strive for . . . to become a teacher.

As well, working from a perspective of ‘teacher knowledge’ means that teacher education focuses both on what we call personal practical knowledge and on context — the professional knowledge landscape as a whole, not just the classroom.

It was wonderful to get to know three school environments. To know their philosophies before entering the practicum is very important because it helps in your teaching.

Adopting a ‘teacher knowledge’ view affects what, and whom, teacher educators see as sources of expertise. Questions about preservice teacher education do not begin with what theoreticians, researchers, and policy makers know but, rather, with what preservice teachers know and have found in professional practice. This shifts the source of expertise from those in universities and policy-making bodies to preservice teachers and those who live in schools.

Being in the classroom will allow me to get a greater insight into what the children are thinking and experiencing so I will be able to understand them better when I teach.

The 3YPP provided us with a great deal of support if we needed it, from the staff from the university and also from our peers.

In teacher education designed around a view of ‘knowledge for teachers’, we ask: “What should a teacher be taught?” and “What have you learned about

teaching that can be taught to teachers?” In teacher education designed around a view of ‘teacher knowledge’, we ask, as Schon asks of the professions more generally, “What does it mean to be a practitioner?” and “What may we do to help you to improve your practice?”⁴ This shifts our thinking about the education of teachers from beginning with theory to beginning with practicing and preservice teachers’ knowledge. Furthermore, we begin with them in practice.

I love how we are viewed in this project as actual potential teachers . . . Being able to have some say in the program is good.

This shift of orientation from ‘knowledge for teachers’ to ‘teacher knowledge’ also represents a change in the learning/teaching process. Rather than being encouraged to ask, “What don’t I know that I need to learn?”, preservice teachers are encouraged to ask, “What do I know about learning and teaching and how can I use this in teaching?”

It is a chance to grow together and learn together. Ideas are shared, a support network is formed and most importantly our voice is heard. The 3YPP allowed us a voice in our learning. This is part of my philosophy with children that I was able to experience in my own learning.

Theory and ‘knowledge for teachers’ plays a role in teacher education designed around a ‘teacher knowledge’ view. However, instead of being forced to teachers, it is available as a resource as preservice teachers’ knowledge is lived out in practice. Thus, there is no necessary *apriori*, theoretical, preservice teacher education curriculum

Rather than being encouraged to ask, “What don’t I know that I need to learn?”, preservice teachers are encouraged to ask, “What do I know about learning and teaching and how can I use this in teaching?”



planned. The curriculum for teacher education grows out of preservice teachers' knowledge and the expression of that knowledge in practicum situations.

The insights and discussions have been very informative and helpful in developing my perspective as a teacher.

Learning to teach, from the point of view of 'teacher knowledge', is a process of expressing each individual preservice teacher's knowledge in practice, reflecting on the practice using personal and theoretical resources, and then trying out what we call re-storied possibilities.

I remember our first class at Minchau, and I was so uncomfortable and nervous.

I can't even imagine that feeling now. The school looks different than it did 2 1/2 years ago even though not much has changed.

There are also changes that I see in myself which for me are more apparent because I have had the same environment for 2 1/2 years.

This curriculum for 'teacher knowledge' contrasts sharply with a curriculum of 'knowledge for teachers', in which knowledge categories to be learned are known in advance. Composing teacher education around 'teacher knowledge' resonates with Bateson's notions of improvisation.⁵ Action and perception are creative acts that draw forward experiences from our pasts to let us deal with present situations in improvisatory ways. Thinking about teacher education as an improvisatory, creative act, in

which we learn to re-story ourselves as teachers, helps us understand teacher education from a 'teacher knowledge' view.

Through our meeting times we were able to get some of our fears out in the open, discussing them as a group and then returning with more confidence to our respective classrooms.

In the 3YPP we worked together, coming to understand how each student teacher re-storied himself/herself as a teacher. We engaged in conversations, in journal and notebook dialogues, in seminar discussions. Sometimes we asked them to tell of moments when they were attentive to a child, to describe their attentiveness, and to describe the improvisations that resulted from it. Bateson defines 'to attend' as "to be present, sometimes with companionship, sometimes with patience. It means to take care of."⁶

It is when student teachers become attentive to their 'teacher knowledge' that they can learn to attend to children, to themselves, and to what is happening in their classrooms. In this way, they learn to create educative experiences for children and themselves. Learning to attend, to be present, begins when teacher knowledge is central to teacher education.

I find that the focus is on teaching rather than being a student.

When we create programs of teacher education around a notion of 'knowledge for teachers', we "think the issue is the transmission of specifics, the meeting of specified goals, but these are illusory." Many teachers and student teachers are wise enough to know this.

It is, as Bateson writes, "a mistake to try to reform the educational system without revising our sense of ourselves as learning beings." As we learn "to reconstruct educational systems where teachers model learning rather than authority," schooling is set within the larger view of life learning.⁷

As teacher educators, working within a 'teacher knowledge' view, we work with student teachers in ways that help them see themselves not as people in need of learning an already specified set of knowledge, but as holders of knowledge — knowledge which can be reshaped through teacher education experiences. We work to create spaces where we engage with student teachers to help them see *themselves* as knowers, as learners, as people who will create spaces for children to see themselves as knowers, as learners.

1 The Three Year Partnership Program (3YPP) was designed by myself and Marni Pearce and Joy-Ruth Mickelson, research associates in the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta, and three school principals, Sue McKenzie-Robblee, Will Simpson, and Marie Whelan. Twenty-five students undertook three practicum experiences and one educational policy course in the three schools.

2 F.M. Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, *Shaping a Professional Identity: Stories of Educational Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

3 What follows draws on interview, questionnaire, and journal data from the three-year study of the just completed experimental program (3YPP).

4 D.A. Schon, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (London: Jossey-Bass, 1987).

5 Bateson, Mary Catherine, *Peripheral Visions: Learning Along the Way* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).

6 *Ibid.*, 109.

7 *Ibid.*, 212.

D. Jean Clandinin is an internationally recognized researcher in teacher education and teacher knowledge. She is the director of the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta. Her two most recent books, both co-authored with Michael Connelly, are *Shaping a Professional Identity: Stories of Educational Practice* (Teachers College Press, 1999) and *Narrative Inquiry* (Jossey-Bass, 2000). She is a past vice-president of the American Educational Research Association, and winner of the 1993 AERA Cattell Early Career Award and the 1999 CEA-Whitworth Award for Educational Research.
jean.clandinin@ualberta.ca