

THE '13,000-HOUR APPRENTICESHIP OF OBSERVATION' OR SELF-AWARENESS FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH IN TEACHER EDUCATION?

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Abstract

The article revisits, refines, expands, and updates some of the issues first explored in Synergy volume 6, number 1 of 2010 and further on in volume 7, number 1 of 2011. The core issue is teacher training and development: does this occur through imitation of the teaching patterns one has been exposed to throughout the schooling process or can self awareness, by integrating reflection and introspection, liberate teachers and turn the blueprint of the past teaching practices into just one of the many teaching options they can choose from?

Keywords: teacher-in-training, '13,000-hour apprenticeship of observation', cycle, self awareness, reflection, introspection.

1. Introduction, Inspiration and Always Dewey

Effective teacher education integrates research, practice and policy (Knight et al, 2014: 86) and language teacher education is no exception. Of these three dimensions of teacher education, this article will highlight the former two, emphasizing their contribution to teacher professional development, thereby to the quality of the teaching act.

The inspiration for this paper came, among others, from a recent article in the U.S. online publication "Inside Higher Education" issued on July 17 this year entitled "The Liberal Arts Role in Teacher Education". Some of the foundational questions the article raises are: "Can teaching be taught? Or are some teachers just born with the 'gift' – an inherent ability to connect with young people and inspire learning? Should we devote resources to training teachers? Or should we simply encourage public policies that identify undergraduates who already possess the knack for teaching?" (Mucher, 2014: 1).

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In order to answer the complex questions above, we may find it productive to revisit one of Dewey's seminal statements and integrate it with the contemporary research and practice, thus exploring the implications it holds for the education of language teachers. Here is the core statement that bears upon our questions. "Students cannot be taught what they need to know, but they can be coached":

They have to see on their own behalf and in their own way the relations between means and methods employed and results achieved. Nobody else can see for them, and they can't see just by being 'told', although the right kind of telling may guide their seeing and thus help them see what they need to see. (Schon, 1987:17)

This quotation touches upon several fundamental concepts of teacher development and outlines a range of key issues of Teacher Education programs, as listed below:

- the conversion of the input provided during Teacher Education programs into intake, where and when applicable, with a view to effecting lasting change in the teaching practice;
- the individually personalized paradigm of teaching each member of the teaching profession, the teacher-in-training included, has developed in time through exposure to diverse teaching styles and practices, as well as through implicit observation conducted throughout their own schooling process;
- the limited effectiveness, if at all, of prescriptive approaches and imposition;
- the professionally-induced need to help develop reflective practitioners;
- the role of Teacher Education programs in meeting the above end.

2. The Inescapable '13,000-Hour Apprenticeship of Observation' and the Self-Renewing Cycle in Teacher Education

Empirical evidence and research indicate that teachers-in-training are likely to take in the methodological theory and practice that echoes and harmonizes with the professional beliefs and values they hold. Apparently, of the extensive input provided by Teacher Education programs, only that input becomes intake that resonates with the teaching models developed by the teacher-in-training as a result of their own previous learning experiences. The powerful impact of the massive observation occasioned by each individual's schooling – what is commonly referred to as the "13,000-hour apprenticeship of observation" (Bailey, 1996: 11) – has been extensively acknowledged: by the time language teachers finish their training and come to teach, the long time they have spent in school acquiring pedagogical skills and the theoretical foundations of learning and teaching, as well as implicitly observing the teaching process, has significantly impacted their vision of language teaching and learning. As such, the language teachers' earlier learning

experiences contribute to internalizing a number of the teaching behaviors they have been exposed to, as evidenced both by empirical evidence and research. To provide just a sample research-founded statement to this effect, I will pick Bailey again and her core article included in Freeman and Richards' landmark volume of 1996: "teachers acquire seemingly indelible imprints from their own experiences as students and these imprints are tremendously difficult to shake" (Bailey, 1996: 11).

Consequently, each of us, teachers included, will inescapably build on our own individual "apprenticeship of observation" and thereby develop our own sets of expectations and beliefs about teaching. The influence of the language teacher's own experience as a learning subject will certainly impact their teaching vision and practice; as such, the pre-existing conceptions on teaching held by the teachers-in-training may run against the learning content put forth during Teacher Education programs. Freeman and Richards capture the complexity of the teachers-in-training condition in their research when they state that "research on teacher learning suggests that the foundations of an individual's ideas about teaching are well established through the experience of being a student, which Lortie refers to as 'the apprenticeship of observation'" (Freeman and Richards, 1996: 210).

Questions like "What is it that second language teachers need to know in order to do the work of this profession? And how is this knowledge best learned by individuals who wish to become members of this profession?" (Johnson and Freeman, 2001: 53) continue to focus the interest of the research community, bringing to the fore the fundamental – and intermingled – dimensions of Teacher Education. "Much of this research recognizes that learning to teach is shaped by teachers' experiences, some figuring more prominently than others." (idem, 2001: 55). Or as more recent research concludes, "...teachers' general experiences as learners may, indeed, assert a tremendous influence on who they become as teachers" (Mewborn and Tyminski, 2006: 32).

The overall conclusion that the above quotes help to outline is that each individual appears to develop his/her own perception of what constitutes good and bad teaching by internalizing specific teaching behaviors they have been repeatedly exposed to. And in the process, they also implicitly internalize values. Once we look upon teachers as summative products of their previous learning experiences, it becomes evident that the effectiveness of Teacher Education programs will be impacted by the treasure or burden, as the case may be, of the participants' massive "apprenticeship of observation" to the extent to which they are likely to internalize only the information that they find compatible with their professional background knowledge and with the pedagogical values they have derived from their past learning experiences.

If this is the case, then Kennedy quoted by Bailey makes a very pertinent statement:

(...) often, despite their intentions to do otherwise, new teachers teach as they were taught. The power of their 'apprenticeship of observation' and of the conventional images of teaching that derive from childhood experiences, makes it very difficult to alter teaching practices and explains in part why teaching has remained so constant over so many decades of reform efforts. (Bailey, 1996: 16)

3. Breaking the Teaching Mold through Self Awareness

The disturbing nature of the above conclusion and the apparently inhibiting effect of the overwhelming teaching models of our own schooling invite an obvious question: how can Teacher Education programs help teachers-in-training and teachers in general overcome their natural tendency to follow in the footsteps of their own teachers and imitate unawaresly the teaching approaches they were exposed to in school? Given the magnitude and impact of this question, the answers will certainly be complex, varied and comprehensive, locally and internationally, from large-scale efforts aimed at reforming Teacher Education (Epstein, 2010), to individually-accessed and relatively humble solutions.

In what follows I will focus on the latter ones, as more feasible, more practical, low cost and generating faster end results. And also easily available. One of the most productive answers appears to be self-awareness, to the extent to which it furthers a critical approach to the beliefs and perceptions established during one's schooling years. Therefore awareness raising has the potential to help teachers "confront their own routine practice and the values it is intended to serve" (Lamb, 1996: 148). In addition, awareness raising can provide teachers ample opportunities for exploring their own mental constructs of the teaching process, and ultimately their core beliefs.

This emphasis on developing the teachers' professional self-awareness is critical to their professional growth, with self-awareness lying at the foundation of all change, be it initially attitudinal and ultimately behavioral. Bailey underscores this critical role of awareness when she states that "the first step towards changing out teaching practice is awareness. Such awareness may encompass what we currently do, the factors that have shaped us, and our options for change" (Bailey, 1996: 26).

The teachers' beliefs need to be revisited as they become the focus of short INSET courses. According to Lamb, the teachers' beliefs

need first to be articulated, and then analysed for potential contradictions with each other, the teaching circumstances, and the beliefs of learners. Only then will teachers be able to accommodate new ideas - to appreciate the theory underlying them, understand their practical realization, and evaluate their usefulness. (Lamb, 1996: 148)

The importance attached to self-awareness and, implicitly, to teachers' beliefs, carries over to the intertwined processes of reflection and introspection which thus become valuable tools that help teachers-in-training clarify the values inspiring and infusing their work, and also develop and hone their critical thinking skills. By engaging in the analysis of their own teaching and learning experiences, the teachers will identify and further clarify – this time to themselves – the theories of learning underpinning their own teaching practice. Once the teachers are able to reflect and introspect so as to become aware of the teaching philosophy driving their classroom practice, they are ready for the next stage in their professional growth: now that they are capable to examine the guiding principles of their own work, they will be in a position to alter them in response to their teaching context and institutional requirements.

The heartening conclusion is that good teaching "is the result of participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching" (Johnson and Freeman, 2001: 56). What is more, teaching has been documented to intermingle "teachers' personal experiences as students, teachers, and language learners with knowledge of abstract theories and guiding principles from professional training, and teachers' personal values and beliefs." (idem)

It is thus safe to conclude that teachers are not doomed to follow in the footsteps of their own teachers, in spite of the massive 'apprenticeship of observation' and the teaching patterns they have been exposed to throughout their own learning process. The crucial role reflection and introspection play in breaking this cycle is highlighted also by cross-disciplinary research, with Mewborn and Tyminski explicitly stating it in a Canadian publication for furthering the teaching, thereby the learning of maths, appropriately called "For the Learning of Mathematics": "While teachers' general experiences as learners may, indeed, assert a tremendous influence on who they become as teachers, we believe that this cycle can be broken by specific, vividly remembered incidents from their own schooling" (Mewborn and Tyminski, 2006: 32). This is precisely what reflective practitioners do when focusing on their own learning experience and teaching practice in an effort to render explicit the underlying beliefs of their classroom activity, with the benefit that once they have reached this stage, they will lend themselves to being reviewed and adapted, in line with the practical requirements of the respective teaching environment.

Teachers can certainly escape from the vicious cycle of teaching as they were taught. As further evidence in support of this optimistic approach, Feimen-Nemsen's authoritative views quoted by Mewborn and Tyminski provide also a summative vision and a powerful concluding statement: "If we acknowledge that the images and beliefs about teaching and learning that pre-service teachers bring to their teacher preparation programs act as filters for new learning, we must give them opportunities to analyze 'critically their taken-for-granted, often deeply

entrenched beliefs so that these beliefs can be developed and amended' (p. 1017). This examination of beliefs should be coupled with the formation of new 'visions of what is possible and desirable in teaching to inspire and guide their professional learning and practice' (p. 1017)" (Mewborn and Tyminski, 2006: 32).

In this way, Lortie's 13,000 hour long apprenticeship of observation (idem, 2006: 30) each teacher-in-training has experienced throughout the schooling process can turn from an inescapable repetition-inducing mechanism into a productive foundation for an enriching teacher education. Provided reflection and introspection are allowed in.

Teachers can develop new teaching patterns and they can break the old mold, if their teaching context and their own personality welcome an innovative approach. Bailey also offers a powerful conclusive statement that rings a positive bell: "By becoming aware of our beliefs with regard to those teachers we have witnessed, we can begin to develop teaching philosophies based on choice: we realize that we do have control over our own actions and beliefs. We may model our behavior after that of others, but it will be because we have made conscious, informed decisions to do so. Our 'apprenticeship of observation', like our childhood, will affect us to the degree and in the manner that we allow" (Bailey, 1996: 16). In short, this is what self-awareness aided by reflection and introspection can do for teachers-in-training and for the teaching profession in general.

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