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Mentoring the Mentor: Tales from Learning the Practice of Field-Based Teacher Education

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Introduction

While completing my doctorate at Michigan State University, I served as a university liaison in its five-year teacher certification program. Teacher candidates enter the program as juniors, take two years of courses combined with field experiences then complete a year-long internship with a single classroom teacher who accepts primary responsibility for guiding and assessing interns' learning. Interns are placed in small cohorts of six to eight per school. University liaisons -- typically MSU graduate students -- work with interns at a single school and help them set personal learning goals, confer with them and their mentors about their planning and teaching, offer feedback, and formally assess them at mid-term and end-of-semester conferences.

In my fourth year as a liaison I began to examine more closely how I facilitated post-observation conferences with the six interns under my supervision. I confronted many questions when deciding how to conduct such conferences. What sense did I make of the lesson I observed? What key ideas might I focus on or questions might I raise? What if the intern's own learning agenda does not match mine? Are there ideas I can draw on from previous conversations that might further the intern's learning? What do I know about the needs and attitudes of the intern that might shape not only what I say but also how I share it? How can I manage the tension between supporting an intern while simultaneously stretching her thinking?

That spring I had the opportunity to study such questions through a graduate seminar offered by Sharon Feiman-Nemser designed to help graduate students learn in and from their work with interns. This course enabled me to do what I had never done before -- formally design and conduct an inquiry around an emergent question of practice. After framing a question -- *How can I help interns learn from their teaching?* -- I videotaped all six interns teaching a lesson then tape-recorded each subsequent debriefing conference. From that data set, I narrowed my inquiry to focus on my mentoring work with Carole, an intern placed in a third grade classroom. Specifically, I transcribed her lesson as well as our subsequent multiple debriefing conferences before systematically analyzing these artifacts of practice with my classmates and Sharon.

The process of creating transcripts from my ongoing practice, studying them with colleagues then considering next steps based on what I was learning about myself, my practice and my intern became a powerful means of strengthening my practice over time. Carefully analyzing the discourse of my debriefing sessions with Carole helped me to identify a problematic feature of my practice. Unlike Schon (1987) who argues that the coach must draw on what the student says

to extend the teacher's agenda and the student's understanding, my responses to Carole's comments were completely disconnected from hers.

Once I determined that I needed to work on this aspect of my mentoring practice, I strengthened my capacity to respond to Carole's ideas and questions in ways that fostered her learning by carefully planning a final debriefing conference with Sharon's assistance. Being mentored by a more knowledgeable other while in a mentoring role myself suggests that in order for mentors to assist novices, their own performance must be assisted. In other words, mentors need to be mentored.

In the pages that follow, I provide a detailed account of the single observation and ensuing debriefing conferences I held with Carole before analyzing the conditions that enabled me to strengthen my practice as a field-based teacher educator.

Carole's Lesson

Early in the spring semester I observed Carole teach a lesson on adjectives as part of a unit on the novel, *Helen Keller*. Carole first asked the students to define the word "adjective." After verifying their ideas with the dictionary's definition, students offered a number of examples that led Carole to believe they understood what an adjective is. She then showed them a stuffed animal, asking them to brainstorm "how it makes you feel, what you think of. You want to describe it." Failing to recognize the connection between these directions and students' responses, Carole seemed flustered when the students suggested nouns, adverbs and phrases in addition to adjectives. She then went on to show them five objects and play three different pieces of music, each time giving the same directions to describe how it made them feel or what they thought of. When the students did not offer an adjective, she frequently implored them, "Give me something closer." Finally, the students worked in small groups to brainstorm "about Helen Keller, what she's like and what we think of when we hear her name." Unsurprisingly, the students used various parts of speech. Answers included blind, fat, Braille, Scarlet Fever, she eats like a pig, had chickens, horrifying and insane.

The Initial Debriefing Conference

As I videotaped the lesson, I wondered why Carole had focused on adjectives and how adjectives deepened students' understanding of or connection to the novel. Carole herself had seemed unsure what she was trying to help students learn even though she gave them eight different activities in one hour for practice. I was reminded of Goodlad's (1984) damning description of classrooms where students, in the midst of mindless instruction, remain somehow passively content.

Immediately following the lesson we sat down to debrief it. Carole voiced frustration with several students who routinely left the classroom twice a week for language arts instruction with the reading specialist. When they rejoined Carole the remaining three days, they had often missed so much that they could not meaningfully jump back into the novel. In her opening comments she raised a critical question -- how to work with students pulled out for special services. Carole also expressed dissatisfaction with her current practice, suggesting a willingness

to question her teaching and examine alternatives. Moreover, she framed her concern as an indirect question to me, in essence asking my advice.

Instead of responding to her desire to make sense of this difficult situation, I was intent upon making her feel good about her lesson in an effort to be responsive to what I saw as her perennial need to know she was "on the right track." I referred to several students -- none of whom received resource services -- who understood what adjectives were. My response can be explained in part by my continued wariness in sharing concerns that might lead her to think I was criticizing her. However, she herself had raised a difficulty. My utter lack of responsiveness highlighted my own ambivalent feelings about taking such a risk.

Carole, however, was responsive to *me*. She acknowledged what I had said and shared her own sense of what students understood. In this way, Carole made a significant effort to work *with* me, not *against* me by abandoning the issue she raised in order to explore my own. However, my response demonstrates that *I* did not clearly follow through on my previous line of thought around the students' ideas.

I really want you to clue into the directions when you watch the videotape. When you said 'I'm going to show you these six things and you're going to describe them,' describing is different than saying 'Give me adjectives that describe them.' See the difference?

I moved from considering what the students did or did not understand to a monologue on what was problematic about her directions. Instead of allowing Carole the opportunity to consider how her directions influenced students' responses, I fell back on a teaching-as-telling model by simply stating what I thought was wrong. While I finally found a way to be explicit and direct, this move did not make sense given that I had videotaped the lesson and thus could let Carole draw her own insights from watching her teaching.

A Second Attempt

Although humbled and embarrassed at how poorly I had facilitated the conversation as my peers and I analyzed the transcript in our graduate seminar, I remained determined to help Carole learn from her lesson. I had suggested that Carole watch the video at home in order to talk about it later. When we met again, I came armed with pre-planned questions that were much more direct and clearly focused on my concerns about her purposes for teaching adjectives. In addition, the course instructor's advice to listen hard to Carole's responses echoed in my head as I opened the conversation by asking Carole to share what she thought of the video.

While the question was purposefully open-ended, I was not prepared for Carole's response. In the same way that Carole seemed to become increasingly derailed when the students offered unanticipated answers, I, too, became flustered by her responses to my questions.

Boy, I'm boring! No, I'm kidding. That wasn't a super-exciting lesson I saw things that I miss [when teaching]. John was eating something out of his desk! I'm going to show the class the video, and then I'm gonna bust him for it.

Instead of acting on the opening that she had created to explore why the *students* might have found the lesson boring, I commiserated, "It's really impossible to see all the things that go on." At this point I still had a limited understanding of Schon's idea of the coach using the student's answers to move the conversation forward productively. I equated this with active listening.

Still hoping to move the conversation beyond catching a boy who ate his lunch in class, I asked Carole what she had noticed about her teaching but was again nonplused by her answer.

I noticed that I didn't reprimand anybody, but I was trying to use the positive. I walked around a lot. That's good instead of just standing. I noticed [while watching the tape] that you were just going all over. I'm like, I probably shouldn't be walking around so much because you probably got dizzy with the camera.

I had found the students to be incredibly complacent and good-natured. Therefore, I did not understand Carole's focus on "management." Nor could I believe that this far into her internship she was still zeroed in on her general performance without connecting it to student learning. Instead of raising this tension or offering my own observations since I, too, had watched the video of her lesson, I fell into the trap of keeping my dilemma to myself, saying, "You probably got dizzy watching the video. I apologize if the quality wasn't so great."

While I cared little about the video's quality, Carole again demonstrated uptake. She liked how I "zoomed into one group;" it gave her the chance to hear what students really talked about during small group work. Rather than ask Carole to share what she had noticed as the small group generated adjectives to describe Helen Keller, I just sat there feeling like the conversation was going nowhere. I simply waited for Carole to state what had seemed so obvious to me while watching her teach. Therefore I should not have been so surprised and unhappy when Carole, continuing to share what she noticed while viewing the video, noted her embarrassment about how she looked in the jumper she had worn that day.

Ignoring this comment, I stuck to my internal script and raised a different question around her purposes for teaching the adjectives lesson. I asked, "I'm curious how teaching adjectives helps kids get inside the book." Carole responded,

Now they seem to be excited about reading. One of the kids wanted to take the book home and reread it. It's like, 'you're kidding me.' Not that it was the descriptive words or adjectives that did it, but maybe he's starting to look at the words more than just reading it to get through the book. You know, instead of just saying Helen Keller was mad, you know, she was *furious*. Hopefully they are starting to find that 'furious' is a much more impressive word and makes you feel something more than 'mad.'

Her response felt so alarming to me that I dropped the issue. I had no idea how to probe or use her ideas to get to my own agenda. Instead, I sat there feeling dumbfounded, wondering how Carole could equate the adjectives lesson with students' interest in reading. I could only view her answer as a roadblock, not as an invitation or window into her thinking.

I continued to feel bewildered when Carole explained that while she watched the video with her mother, her fiancé quickly lost interest and left the room. While she raised the issue of boredom again, I remained unwilling to address this topic. Humbled and confused, I retreated again. It had yet to dawn on me that the concern I wanted to raise with Carole around her responses to students' ideas was the very issue I was struggling with in my own practice as a field-based teacher educator. That is, like Carole, I seemed to have anticipated certain "right" answers in response to my questions, and again like Carole, I seemed completely unable to respond to answers that did not fall into these predetermined "correct" categories.

Stepping Back: Sharon's Mentored Assistance

It was not until I analyzed this second conference with Sharon and my classmates that I finally began to realize I lacked ideas about *how* I could have moved the dialogue forward. I knew what my goals were -- to help Carole consider why a lesson is worth teaching and to understand the importance of clear, concise directions. Even though I had fundamental questions about her purposes, I knew that I could not start there; this would feel too threatening to Carole. It made sense to begin with her unclear directions, but I lacked a strategy for meeting these goals. With Sharon's assistance, I developed a plan for a third conference that took place a month after Carole had taught the lesson.

Because so much time had passed, I thought we should view the videotape together. Borrowing a strategy I had read about, I planned to watch a twenty-minute clip then hand Carole the remote so that during the second viewing, she could stop the tape anytime she noticed something or felt surprised. Sharon suggested an alternative procedure. Knowing that there was way too much to talk about in such a lengthy video segment, she proposed that I focus our attention on a much shorter clip. It made sense to both of us that I choose a clip where Carole gave unclear directions.

After watching the clip, Sharon suggested that I ask Carole what she noticed about the directions. If she did not pick up on how confusing they were, I should bring this up directly. Sharon offered me actual language to use, suggesting that I refer to the lesson transcript I planned to share: "Let me tell you something I was struck by. Let's go to the text and actually look at what you said." After jointly analyzing the actual words Carole had used, we then could each write a new set of directions for the task. Once these were shared, Sharon suggested that I ask Carole what specifically she had learned then share my own feelings about the importance of paying careful attention to the clarity of one's language when giving directions.

Sharon then helped me consider how to establish a positive tone for the conversation. Recalling that Carole had stated how frustrated she was while teaching the lesson, I could demonstrate how concerned I was for Carole and her learning by stating that I had been thinking about what might have caused her frustration which would lead us into viewing the chosen video clip. Armed with such a clear and reasonable plan to open the conference, I felt confident enough to plan the remainder of the conversation, which I hoped would address Carole's purposes for teaching the lesson.

After opening the conversation per Sharon's suggestions, Carole and I watched the video segment where she showed the students a stuffed animal then asked them to describe how "Wrinkles the Dog" made them feel or what they thought of when they saw him. The students offered the following responses: fat, chubby, extraordinary design, cute, careful, cuddly, snugly, nice, fuzzy, Wrinkles, sleep, comfortable, and hairy. When students gave answers that were not adjectives, Carole asked them to either "think of something closer" or "give me another one."

After watching the clip together, I asked Carole if she noticed anything about her directions. Immediately she picked up on the relationship between what she asked her students to do and how they responded.

I said 'write down how you think you feel or what it makes you think of.' Rachel's answer 'comfortable' totally fit into that even though you wouldn't say Wrinkles himself is comfortable. But I asked how she felt I think they were getting mixed messages.

I encouraged this analysis and suggested that we look at the lesson transcript to locate the directions and students' responses. After discussing what we noticed, I then proposed that we each write a new set of directions for the Wrinkles activity that were clearer, explaining that giving concise directions is a real skill teachers need to develop. Carole enthusiastically engaged in this activity.

Carole then noticed that when a student said the stuffed animal was "careful," she replied, "You think he's careful?" which led Ryan to change his answer. When Carole realized that this response was not helpful, I casually asked Carole, "So what could you have said to him?" In her attempt to answer my question, she covered her mouth with her hand and spoke in much choppier, hesitant and softer tones. It took her three different tries to develop a response that she was comfortable with -- "Ryan, I hadn't thought of that. How do you think he's careful?" As we looked through the transcript and came across the next strange answer, Carole tried to think of a different response on her own but still struggled. You could actually see her working through the challenge of finding new language to address students' responses in much the same way I had struggled to phrase questions for and response to Carole in our earlier debriefing sessions.

During our conversation, I had no sense of the enormous challenge that my question presented Carole. While she had quickly recognized the problematic nature of her replies to students' "wrong" answers, this knowledge in and of itself did not provide her with an alternative approach for responding. When I asked, "What could you have said to him?" I was doing more than asking her to think on her feet to offer a different reply; I was asking her to move away from viewing student responses as only right or wrong and instead to accept their answers as windows into their thinking which she could further probe for understanding. Given this huge shift, it was no wonder she hesitated as she searched for a less evaluative response to students' answers.

What was happening during the conversation that created space for Carole to willingly risk trying on a different voice and perspective on what learning entailed? Part of the answer lies in our *joint efforts* (Vygotsky, 1978) to make sense of and learn from Carole's teaching. For example, I, too, completed the task of re-writing the directions. I even commented while drafting my own, "This is harder than I thought!" which drew a laugh from us both. In this respect we were on equal footing. I was not her liaison so much as I was a fellow teacher jointly engaged in an authentic teaching task. In addition, as we puzzled about how Carole could have responded differently to students' unanticipated answers, I offered my own ideas about different language to use. I believe it was this feeling of success that enabled Carole and me to willingly pursue the conversation when later on it became less structured and covered more threatening territory around her purposes.

What positioned me to engage in this joint work with Carole? First, carefully analyzing previous conference transcripts with colleagues helped me learn *that* I needed to strengthen my capacity to respond to Carole in educative ways. Second, through Sharon's assistance in planning the final conference, I learned *how* to create an educative learning opportunity for Carole. Each is discussed in turn.

As a university liaison, I initially found myself doing the work out of sight of other adults with few chances to engage in sustained conversation with peers about the work. The graduate seminar created a professional community where novice teacher educators could discuss our images of thoughtful mentoring and how we might act on those images. The course instructor, Sharon, played an instrumental role in making sure that we developed into a professional learning community rather than just a support group where educators swap stories and offer moral support. Rather, she pushed us to engage in "critical colleagueship," an inquiry-oriented, practice-based, self-disclosing form of conversation that creates opportunities for teachers to raise questions about and carefully examine their practice and students' learning (Lord, 1994).

In class, we were required to expose our practice publicly by making and sharing records of our field-based work so that when jointly analyzing them, we could ground our conversation in the particulars of what was said and done. We were expected to ask hard questions of each other, to support our assertions with evidence from the records of practice, to consider alternative interpretations, and to explore rather than avoid disagreement. We had to learn to separate the person from the practice, to move from a defensive stance to one of openness, important elements of critical colleagueship.

While studying my practice helped me identify problematic patterns in my interactions with Carole, it did not help me create new patterns because I lacked that critical know-how. Thus another important feature of my learning occurred through assisted performance. Vygotsky (1978) first wrote about assisted performance in relation to working in a child's zone of proximal development where a learner is able to accomplish with a teacher's help what she cannot accomplish alone. In other words, a learner engages in an activity to which she is committed. The teacher or mentor observes what the learner can do on her own then provides appropriate

guidance that helps the learner "to identify the nature of [her] problems and to find solutions that enable [her] to bring the activity to a satisfactory completion" (Wells, 1999, p. 159).

Sharon assisted my performance by helping me plan the final debriefing conference. Through that authentic joint mentoring work, she helped me recognize that I did not know how to launch the conversation and that exposing my uncertainty was okay. Sharon offered concrete language and strategies I could use to create opportunities for more productive conversation with Carole. For example, she helped me consider *how* I could use the videotape of Carole's lesson as a stimulus for reflection. Mining a video and crafting a conversation around it is a practice that teacher educators must develop (Denyer, 1997). Sharon's advice about how to use the video supported me in beginning to visualize and develop this practice which in turn better positioned me to assist Carole's performance.

Implications

The experience of collaboratively studying my practice while also being mentored by a more knowledgeable colleague influenced my subsequent work as a field-based teacher educator in several important ways. First, I became much more sensitized to the challenges interns face as learners of teaching. In order for the internship to be educative, novices must adopt a stance as learner in order to recognize that important ideas about teaching and learning can be gleaned from their own initial attempts to tackle the complex art of instruction (Schon, 1987). Many times, however, interns feel an internal press to demonstrate their competence, particularly when they are exposing their practice to those in a supervisory role. This need to "prove" that they already know how to do the work of teaching can diminish their ability to learn from their experiences.

As a learner of mentoring, I, too, confronted the internal press to "prove" that I already knew how to conduct a post-observation conference. After all, I had worked in the liaison position for four years -- surely I should have known how to carry on a conversation with an intern around a lesson by then! Admitting to my colleagues and myself that I lacked concrete ideas about how to do so with Carole was very difficult. Experiencing first-hand the challenge of "not knowing" helped me better understand and respond to moments when interns seemed defensive when jointly analyzing their practice.

Second, my experience in the graduate seminar helped me more fully appreciate the importance of attending not only to *what* interns need to learn but also to *how* they can learn. In hindsight, I realized that while some interns seemed adept at figuring out how to pursue their learning agenda, others required more sustained support in developing particular skills and dispositions. Over time, I better balanced my mentoring efforts to issues of "what" and "how," oftentimes assisting interns' performance by co-planning and co-teaching future lessons with them after determining what they needed to work on.

Finally, I became more aware of the power of using artifacts of practice such as videotapes and transcripts to help interns learn in and from their teaching. In my current work with interns, I routinely videotape them so that we can ground our post-observation conference around the particulars of what students and intern said and did in the lesson. In addition, I support interns in

experiencing for themselves the joy of self-study as they complete a semester-long action research project that grows out of an authentic problem of practice. Thus my enthusiasm for and commitment to systematic self-study continues to shape my work as a field-based teacher educator.

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