

Contextual Teaching and Learning PROJECT BRIEF

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Making Educational Psychology Meaningful Across Multiple Contexts

The Problem

All teacher education programs at the University of Georgia, like many throughout the country, include a required course in educational psychology, which, again typically, must be taken early in the students' programs, before they have actually been admitted to a specific teaching major or had any field experiences or practice teaching. Underlying this course timing is the assumption that prospective teachers can acquire a theoretical base in the concepts and principles of educational psychology, and then later apply this basic knowledge to the actual teaching situations they will encounter.

Yet criticism of traditional educational psychology courses, and skepticism about their usefulness in teacher education, has been increasingly heard. This criticism comes from nearly all quarters: from teachers who have taken such courses (Berliner, 1992), from teacher educators (Doyle, 1990; Kennedy, 1991), from educational psychologists themselves (Berliner, 1992; Peterson, Dickson, & Clark, 1990; Shulman, 1990), and even from an ad hoc committee commissioned by Division 15 of the American Psychological Association specifically to investigate and evaluate the effectiveness of current teaching in Educational Psychology (Anderson et al., 1995). Ironically, much of this criticism is based on the constructivist principles which lie at the heart of contemporary psychological thought. Thus, we in educational psychology have begun to teach that learners are active constructors of knowledge; that meaningful learning is built upon prior knowledge and experience and socially mediated through interaction within a community of teachers, peers, and others; and that such knowledge is situated and fluid, necessarily under constant revision. At the same time many of us have continued to teach these "new" principles in our old "decontextualized manner," failing to situate them in contexts meaningful to our students (Berliner, 1992, p.155).

The Strategy

By using the rich variety of learning experiences with which prospective teachers entered our classes and the shared classroom experience itself, I found that, even without official field placements, we had access to multiple authentic educational contexts for learning in the class. Currently we use all of the following "virtual" and actual contexts as sites for learning in my classes:

Students' own past educational experiences:

Through reflective writing assignments and structured classroom discussions, students share and critically examine their own experiences as students in elementary and high school. The diversity of experiences among the 35 students in a typical class serves as an important source of "real life" experiences in relation to which we can discuss the ideas we are studying. For example, when we study behaviorist theories of learning, students are asked to do a "quick-write" about "a time they were punished in school, how they felt about it, and how it affected their learning in that situation." Those who are willing (and most are) are invited to share their experiences. Here is part of what Amy¹ wrote in response to this question.

He was a pretty large man, and when he yelled, you were looking for a safe place to hide. . . . Once he made me write 500 times "I will not chew gum ever again in Mr. O's classroom." By the time I was done, I had about 30 pages filled and my hand felt like it was going to fall off. . . . He either scared you into

¹ All student names are pseudonyms.

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behaving, or you got so mad at him you began to resent him and want to misbehave. I started off as the former, but quickly graduated to the latter by the end of the year. And to be perfectly honest, if he came and taught one of my classes now, I would probably never go and certainly not strive for my best.

The collected experiences of the class then serve as a context for examining issues related to the immediate efficacy and potential long-term disadvantages of using punishment to motivate learning or change behavior in schools.

Vignettes of “typical” school problems:

In both small group work and on exams, students engage in problem solving around vignettes drawn from actual educational settings. They use the educational and psychological principles they are learning to develop supportable explanations of possible causes for the problem, types of information they might seek to help clarify these causes, potential solution strategies for the problem presented, and ways they would evaluate the success of their strategies. The answers they develop are not evaluated on the basis of whether they conform to some predetermined "best answer"--as in real life, there is no "best answer"--but rather on how well they can support the feasibility of their explanations and usefulness of their proposed actions based on ideas from class discussions and readings. Solution strategies are shared with other groups, and often compiled and returned as handouts to serve as resources in students' future teaching experiences.

These group vignette assignments vary from short paragraphs at the beginning of the course to full-blown, multiple-page "cases" toward the end and on the final exam. They serve a number of purposes, similar to those served by more extensive case-based instruction (Sudzina, 1999). The vignettes offer "virtual contexts" that students usually can enter into with ease, since they resemble common educational experiences. They allow me to control the elements of the situation more easily than I could in real life, thus permitting me to include all the factors I want students to consider. Most importantly, they invite my students to begin thinking like teachers. Because there are no single right answers, students typically focus less on figuring out

what "I want" and more on seeking authentic solutions to the problem. Working together to address the problem(s) posed by the vignettes, students share ideas, develop arguments, and otherwise engage in the kind of "knowledge worrying" that Ann Brown (Brown & Palincsar, 1989) has described as necessary to the eventual development of expertise in any complex field. The collected group responses serve as a written record of the knowledge students have socially constructed in their small groups, which can serve as a resource both for their continued class work and their work as teachers in the future. Taking the time to type up, edit and return these responses demonstrates to my students that I value their thinking, that they have something to contribute to the class knowledge base. It also gives me the chance to revisit a topic and make some final comments.

The educational psychology class itself:

This is the only educational context shared by all participants, and as such is a valuable site for examining and discussing the principles we are learning. For example, following a rather traditional lecture on ideas from information processing theories, students spend part of the following class period discussing how their own schemas (or lack thereof) for the topic affected their comprehension of the lecture, the effectiveness of the schema of the "computer" as an "advanced organizer" for different students with different levels of computer literacy, and the results of several deliberately introduced "strategic learning" elements. They then develop suggestions for making the lecture more effective for different types of students (see assignment in appendix, p. 4). This experience not only gives me some important feedback as a teacher, but allows me to exemplify in an authentic teaching/learning situation the ideas we are discussing, and to model the importance and riskiness of open reflective teaching practice.

I often also ask students to reflect on some aspect of the class in their journal entries. For example, we usually "cover" assessment issues the week after they take the mid-term exam. Many students do not do well on the exam, in part because of its nontraditional nature (for more information on this, see Knapp, in press) For their journals at the end of that week, I ask students to write about how they feel about the grade they got on the exam, and about the

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opportunity I give them to "recapture" points by answering the questions they missed, using a different scenario than those on the original (see journal assignment, appendix, p. 5). The comments are often poignant, and again I select at least one comment from every journal and share them anonymously with the class (see a sample collection, appendix, pp. 6-7). These comments give us a context to consider all the different meanings of grades and diverse ways in which students respond to them. It also, I hope helps my students to connect their own and their classmates' feelings as students with the feelings of their potential students in the future. This habit of connecting and reflecting, to usefully remember "what it's like to be a student," is, I believe, essential to good teaching.

A self-chosen outreach project:

Each student is required to engage in a self-chosen outreach experience, involving contact with real students in an actual educational setting. Projects range from volunteer tutoring to serving as aides in community education classes to observing in a local classroom and interviewing the teacher to "shadowing" a student for a day (see assignment, appendix, p. 8). Students arrange these experiences themselves, keep and turn in journals or field notes, and write a paper at the end, described what they learned from the experience in relation to (confirming, expanding or even contradicting) at least three "big ideas" from the course.

For many students, these outreach projects are the highlight of the class. They refer them again and again in class discussions and on their final exams. On the course evaluation I ask them to do at the end of the course, students comment on this assignment more than on any other. It gives them a real context in which to observe, even try out, some of the ideas we are studying, and then requires them to connect what they have seen or done with what we have studied in class. I cannot share with you even a whole paper, but here are some short excerpts from the paper of one student who served as a volunteer ESL student in her community.

My first night in an ESL class proved to be a humbling experience for me because I realized that I had stereotyped the students. As I began to discuss the work sheets, I noticed that I was talking very slowly, as if they had to read my lips to understand

what I was saying. . . . There I was, standing in front of adults older than myself and treating them like children because I did not fully understand their needs. . . . I learned I must never assume what a student can and cannot do without first observing and asking the students himself. With every class I teach, I continue to learn that being a teacher, I am also a student....

I have discovered that the students are very comfortable in class when I am modeling an assignment because they are given ideas through the things I do, and the entire class shares the assignment-including the teacher! ...

I passed out pictures from a magazine and asked the students to look at the pictures and tell a story about their favorite one. But before they told their story, I told them a story about my favorite picture. This helped my students understand the assignment and it helped me form a bond with the class because I was an active member of the group.

Again, by journaling and writing about their outreach projects, I hope students are forming habits of reflection in action that they will continue to use as teachers.

Specific instantiations in students' envisioned future educational practice:

In the outreach paper and on the final exam, if a student describes, for example, her learning about the effects of individual differences in temperament, she also has to explain how what she now knows about temperament will affect her future actions. Students are instructed to "be specific . . . Don't just say 'I plan to adjust my teaching to accommodate student's diverse cultural backgrounds,' give an example or two of how you might do this in a specific situation with specific students/clients/children you are likely to have." This requirement on the final paper and exam is intended to extend the "transfer" of what students themselves consider their most significant learning into their future practice as parents, teachers, and other educational professionals. This last step, I believe, helps to overcome the potential for contextualized learning to become "context-bound." I am asking students to deliberately extend their newly constructed understandings into the kinds of situations in which they hope to use it. From the sample replies in the

appendix, p. 9, you can see these situations range from current employment contexts to envisioned future teaching situations to ideas about their own learning. In this case, by asking students to construct and then analyze their own "contexts," I am enabling them to address and summarize their learning in the contexts that they believe will be most meaningful to them in the future.

Conclusion

In the past, many of us in educational psychology have disregarded or devalued the rich variety of learning experiences with which prospective teachers enter our classes. We have often relied heavily on a traditional lecture- and text-based pedagogy, which involves students' not in the construction of useful understandings of the underlying ideas in our field, but rather in the memorization of isolated facts and "principles" which, even if they are retained, remain unconnected to actual experiences and possible contexts of application, and therefore unused in our students' future educational practice. Introductory educational psychology courses often have such a large registration that we cannot provide full field experiences for our students, but, as seen by these examples, we can and should use the many authentic contexts available to us and our students as contexts for meaningful learning.

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Author:

**Dr. Nancy F. Knapp, Assistant Professor,
Educational Psychology, College of
Education, the University of Georgia**

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For further information on the UGA project on Contextual Teaching and Learning in teacher education, our web site is: www.coe.uga.edu/ctl

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