

# Contextual Teaching and Learning Project Brief

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## Learning in the Field: Impact of an Early Field Experience on Preservice Teachers' Learning in Educational Psychology

In recent years reformers in teacher education (e.g., Goodlad, 1990; Wise & Leibbrand, 2000) have called for the inclusion of guided field experiences "early and often" in the preservice teacher education program. Preservice teachers themselves have identified field experiences as among the most useful elements in their teacher education programs (Winey & Squibb, 1991). Yet field experiences are only one of the ways to help preservice teachers put learning in context, and there is always a trade off: for every hour spent in doing and analyzing field experiences, there is one less hour available for class work on structured cases, problem-solving simulations and small group discussion on other topics. It must be asked in any given situation whether what is gained from an early field experience is worth the time and focus lost.

### Methodology

This paper addresses this question in one particular circumstance by comparing student learning in two sections of an introductory educational psychology course taught as part of the Contextual Teaching and Learning Project at the University of Georgia, one with and one without an integrated field experience component. Students in both sections ( $n = 27$  and  $23$  respectively) planned to teach at the middle or high school level, in math, language, history, government, science, home economics, or business. Most were sophomores, from 19-21 years old.

In this course, my co-teacher, Marty Carr, and I used five main "contexts" as sites for students to encounter, reflect upon and examine the implications of the concepts we were teaching: the students' own past educational experiences, vignettes of "typical" school situations, the class itself as a model of contextual teaching and learning, an informal outreach project, and the students' envisioned future teaching practice. (For additional information on the teaching of this class, see Knapp, 1999.) Partly in response to student feedback from the Spring section, a one-credit, two-hour per week field experience was added to the second section, taught in the Fall. Students were assigned to observe two teachers in their subject matter area, typically one from the cooperating middle school and one from the high school, each for one hour per week. Both schools serve a culturally and economically diverse student population, ranging from the children of professors and business executives to children from the local subsidized

housing projects. Each school is generally acknowledged to be one of the best at its level in the district, whether ranked by test scores or by more subjective local opinion.

These field experiences were incorporated directly into the classroom work, primarily through observation journals which were completed each week by each student and formed the basis for classroom discussion, small group activities, and a final paper. Journal assignments were coordinated with learning topics for each week, and required students to both observe and analyze what they observed in relation to specific concepts that had been addressed.

As the Fall class continued, Marty and I began to wonder whether adding the field experience component had been a good decision. We realized that, while students had gained the opportunity to observe actual teaching in classrooms, they had also lost other opportunities for learning. Perhaps because weekly journals now focused on their classroom observations, students' did not seem to be making as many connections between their own past experiences and the concepts we were discussing. Discussion of field experiences left less class time for small group work with written cases or projects. Most disturbingly, it seemed to us that, no matter what was the official "topic" of the week, in their observations many Fall students seemed to focus, almost obsessively, on the problematic behavior of some students in the classes they observed, and their own fears about class management that these behaviors seemed to bring out. We knew that concerns about student behavior and classroom management can predominate in the first years of teaching (Barrett & Davis, 1995), but we felt that students' focus on these issues at this early stage of their preservice education was actually blocking their learning in other areas that we felt were important to the class.

### Data Analysis

To confirm or disconfirm these "hunches," I decided to compare the understandings demonstrated by students at the end of this class with the those demonstrated by students from the Spring class, as shown by their responses to the following question, which was part of the final assessment in each class:

*Choose three (3) important things you believe you have learned in this class about children's learning and development. Write about what you learned, how you learned it, and why it is important learning for you; that is, how will it specifically affect the ways you plan to teach?*

I analyzed student answers from the Fall section as we had already analyzed those from the Spring (see Knapp & Carr, 2000), looking for responses instantiating the following eleven principles of contextual teaching and learning, all supported by significant research in both constructivist learning and cognitive science.

AC ! Students are actively engaged in constructing knowledge and solving problems. (Resnick & Kopfler, 1989)

MC ! Learning in multiple contexts gives students experience in using what they have learned to identify and solve problems in new contexts (transfer). (Hatano & Greeno, 1999)

COOP ! Students learn from one another through cooperation, discourse, teamwork, and self-reflection. (Vygotsky, 1978)

REAL ! Learning is closely tied to "real world" issues through outside-of-classroom experiences and simulations. (Cronin, 1993; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993)

PE ! Students prior experiences are valued and seen as fundamental to learning. (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996)

DIV ! Teaching must be flexible to adapt to the needs of diverse learners. (Sternberg, 1997; Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000)

SOC ! The ways in which students can contribute to the improvement of society through their learning and resultant actions are emphasized. (Bilig, 2000; Wade et al., 1999)

ASS ! Student learning is assessed in multiple meaningful contexts. (Darling-Hammond, Anness, & Falk, 1995; Shepard, 2000)

PS ! Higher order thinking and problem solving are emphasized above meaningless memorization and recitation of facts. (Anderson, 1993; Bruner, 1990)

SD ! Students are encouraged to make choices, develop alternatives and be self-directed, sharing with the teacher responsibility for their own learning. (Ames, 1992; )

CC ! The classroom context evidences the kind of caring, respectful relationships between teacher and students and among students that are conducive to learning. (Noddings, 1995)

(adapted from the CTL Conceptual Framework, 1999, [www.coe.uga.edu/ctl](http://www.coe.uga.edu/ctl). Preceding each element is the coding abbreviation used for it in Table 1 below.)

In order to measure not only the number of students asserting/describing a particular principle, but also the depth of learning that had occurred, students' responses were further coded as follows: one (1) indicated any basic description or explanation of the principle; a two (2) was given to responses which also included a good example of the principle taken from the student's or other people's past experiences; the highest value, three (3), was assigned to only those responses in which students were able to clearly

and realistically describe how they might use the principle in their future educational practice. This type of instantiation in *specifically envisioned future practice* (Knapp, 2000) is the best measure we can have at this time of students' ability and disposition to transfer their learning in our class into their future actions as teachers. Also, because of our feeling that students had focused much more on behavior and management issues in the Fall, I tallied how often students in each class had written about management issues in their responses and how many in each group had chosen class management or related issues as one or more of the "three important things" they had learned.

## Results

As shown in Table 1, (see page 4) responses from students in Fall class overall demonstrated slightly less commitment to or in-depth understanding of the 11 CTL principles used for this evaluation than did those from the Spring. As suspected, somewhat greater differences were reflected in the frequency and emphasis in students' writing on class management issues. There were 36 substantial descriptions/discussions of classroom management student behavior issues in the 18 Fall student responses analyzed, or approximately 2 per response, while there were only 33 such descriptions in the 26 responses analyzed from Spring, approximately 1.3 per response. Fifteen out of the 26 Spring students (58%) chose to write about classroom management or a related topic (e.g., reinforcement and punishment) as one of their "three important things." Twelve of the 18 Fall students (67%) chose to write about classroom management for one of their "things," and five wrote about management-related issues for two of their three "things." Also, far fewer students in the Fall class made spontaneous positive remarks about the class itself (39%, compared to 81% in the Spring class) and about "looking forward" to teaching (27%, compared to 42% in the Spring class) in their final exam responses (although there were no specifically negative remarks from either class).

## Discussion

The analysis presented above seems to confirm our impression that the students in the Fall class, who regularly observed in classrooms, became more focused on issues of managing student behavior, somewhat to the detriment of their learning in other areas. Students seem to have been dismayed by some of the more difficult student behaviors they observed, even in these above-average schools. The 18 Fall students wrote a total 24 substantive negative descriptions or remarks, and only 4 positive comments, about students they had seen in their observations, and the tone of many of these negative comments was fairly strong. I suspect that many of our Fall students were suffering from the kind of culture shock that often afflicts first-year teachers. One particularly articulate student explained her feelings this way:

*I grew up in a pretty well-off section of C-- County compared to most other places. I was in pretty much all Honors classes as well. The students I constantly observed in my high school with me, were usually motivated for some reason or another. . . . I was shocked the first day I went in to observe for my high school class. First off, what I grew to realize over the course of my observings was that this is a very respected teacher. The students look to him as a friend. He is young and easily relates to the students. But the first day I walked in, I was surprised to see so many empty seats. There were about fifteen people absent. I was also shocked to see all the students [who were] sleeping. Even some of the students who were in class just sat there looking at something else, and if not that, were just not paying attention. I talked to the teacher about these situations a good deal. He explained to me [about] some of the children, such as one they called a "work project"--if they can just get him to come to school two days out of the week, not mattering if he sleeps all day or what, they have succeeded. There were other students who would turn an open-note/open-book test in totally blank. Then you had your general ones who just did not turn in homework, take notes, or participate at all. The teacher told me some of these students cannot even read and some are just trying to make it until they finish high school so they can get on with their lives. The sad thing is, is some of these students will never make it out of high school. Many of the students in this class already had a set date to drop out of school.*

## Conclusions

It is clear that students in our Fall class did not always draw the lessons we would hope from their early field experiences. It could be argued that it is good for these students to be exposed to some of the unavoidable negative aspects of teaching early in their preservice programs, and thus to have time and support in learning how to deal with them before they go out to teach. Certainly, this seems a better idea than to have them come up against these problems all unawares, after they graduate, as do all too many first-year teachers (Barrett & Davis, 1995; Harris, 1995). Yet field experiences are not a benefit if they decrease students' learning and continuing motivation to teach, as they seem to have done in our Fall class. The contrast between the attitudes of these students and the very positive attitudes students develop in a service-learning course that I teach, which involves twice-weekly tutoring of delayed readers in low SES elementary schools, makes me wonder if the experience of working one-on-one with a student better enables early preservice teachers to get below the surface and develop less-stereotyped and perhaps more compassionate understandings of the students who find it hard to succeed in school.

At this point, I have mainly questions, rather than answers, but the issues raised in this study do suggest that we should not be satisfied with a simple blanket recommendation to "include more field experiences" in early

teacher education courses. Research is needed, not only on the potential benefits and pitfalls of such experiences, but on the different types and structures of field experiences that may be most helpful at different times and for different purposes in teacher education. It is time for us as a field to move beyond looking for *what* we can do to add field experiences to looking at *why* and *how* these field experiences can be structured to best benefit our students.

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### Project Web Site:

<http://www.coe.uga.edu/ctl>

Table I

Percent of students instantiating CTL principles at each of three levels in a final assessment question: a comparison of Spring and Fall sections

CTL Principle (Code)	<u>At least Level 1</u>		<u>At least Level 2</u>		<u>At level 3</u>	
	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall
(AC)	38%	22%	27%	17%	19%	5%
(MC)	12%	0	* 5	0	0	0
(COOP)	42%	72%	42%	55%	19%	33%
(REAL)	46%	39%	31%	22%	19%	22%

	<u>At least Level 1</u>		<u>At least Level 2</u>		<u>At level 3</u>	
(PE)	54%	33%	38%	17%	27%	0
(DIV)	73%	67%	50%	50%	19%	27%
(SOC)	8%	0	0	0	0	0
(ASS)	31%	22%	19%	22%	15%	11%
(PS)	50%	39%	38%	27%	31%	5%
(SD)	81%	61%	58%	44%	35%	33%
(CC)	85%	83%	65%	67%	23%	33%

**NOTE:** All figures are rounded to the nearest whole percent, based on 26 total responses analyzed from the Spring class and 18 responses from the Fall Levels are inclusive; that is, students whose responses included a Level 3 instantiation of a particular principle are also included in the percentages of those writing "at least" a Level 2 and "at least" a Level 1 instantiation of that principle.

