

Bring Context to Mentoring

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Abstract

The nature of mentoring varies, but shares a commitment to nurture on-going, in-depth relationships through dialogue, decision-making, and reflection that has often been absent in traditional university-field site settings. One of the most exciting aspects of this new approach to teacher education is sharing power and wisdom with a variety of participants. Teachers and teacher educators provide avenues for beginning teachers to teach from real world contexts in order to study the complexities of their own teaching. School-university partnerships inherently provide a rich resource for modeling problem-solving and effective decision-making. This article will describe and examine staff development delivery systems for a school system/university partnership. Challenges for professional development sites, which focus on contextual teaching and learning, will be presented, along with a vision for sustaining and evolving such relationships.

“Bring Context to Mentoring”

In 1998, I received a grant from my state’s department of education to create a better mentoring process for our school/university partnership. Working closely with the school system’s curriculum director and assistant superintendent, we designed a program around the Pathwise Series (ETS, 2002) and Praxis III Classroom Performance Assessments (ETS, 2002). The school system and the university agreed that any school personnel and university educator who wanted to become mentors for preservice interns, student teachers, and beginning teachers must be Pathwise trained to use the assessment instruments. This took place at the same time the state adopted The Praxis III Series to evaluate beginning teacher's classroom performance.

Pathwise Series and Praxis III Classroom Performance Assessments

The state's adoption of the Praxis III: Classroom Performance Assessments are used as a way to evaluate all aspects of a beginning teacher's practice. This process takes place during the first year of teaching and is evaluated by a person not connected with the school system. Upon completion of the yearlong evaluation, the state determines if the beginning teacher will be awarded a teaching license. Praxis III assessments are nationally validated criteria to observe and evaluate a teacher's performance (ETS, 2002).

The Pathwise Series affords universities, colleges, and school systems a new way of structuring professional development for preservice and beginning teachers. Pathwise is a mentoring process to prepare the preservice and beginning teachers for the Praxis III.

The Pathwise Series (ETS, 2002) is tied to research-based standards to help teachers at all levels (student, beginning, and experienced teachers) improve their teaching practices. The standards provide the education community a common language to use when they talk about good teaching. Pathwise incorporates best practices, such as using formative assessment to guide professional growth, training, and materials for a beginning teacher induction system, and coaching techniques. The Pathwise Series is designed around three core principles of assessment: (1) common language; (2) clear and concrete levels of performance; and (3)-structured events for mentors and mentees. Upon completion of the Pathwise Series training the participants' learn:

- the roles and practices of a mentor to promote effective decision-making in beginning teachers' lesson planning and preparation;
- how to assess teaching through observation techniques, examination of artifacts, and analysis of student work;
- how to apply strategies for teaching to standards; and
- techniques for coaching and providing feedback for the purpose of improving practice (ETS, 2002).

The major focus of the grant was to train the school system's teachers and administrators in the Pathwise Series. Upon completion of the grant, over 75% of the eligible faculty and administrators went through the training to become mentors for preservice and beginning teachers.

Advanced Mentoring Course

Educators who completed the Pathwise training in the first year were given the opportunity to extend their mentoring knowledge through a yearlong advanced mentoring course collaboratively taught by several faculty members at Old Dominion University. The course was taught at the partnering school system's high school. The 130 participants (teachers, counselors, social workers, principals, and administrators from the central office) received three hours of graduate credit. The participants were introduced to several topics in the Pathwise training, such as the art of teaching, self as a professional, diversity, and collaboration. Each month the participants were required to

fulfill assignments, which demonstrated their understanding through of the application of the knowledge gained in class with students or beginning teachers they were mentoring.

The Pathwise training and the mentoring course produced stronger relationships between our two educational institutions thus creating a community of pre-kindergarten through university teacher-learners. Previously, each institution perceived each other as places to serve each other's needs rather than collaborate in the teaching and learning process. The course offered opportunities to recognize the importance for eliminating barriers between departments within a university or a public school, between universities and public schools, and between public schools. We learned that by utilizing a problem-based approach to professional development, our collaborative efforts recognized and capitalized on the strengths of diverse populations that exist in all educational settings.

Developing and maintaining exemplary teaching and mentoring at both institutions became the partnership's goal. Excellence was measured by the educators' ability to incorporate theory into practice. Participants understood that by having access to contextual or real world examples of theoretical propositions new and experienced educators are more likely to begin to see the importance of integrating theory into their own classrooms.

The mentoring course is an example of a development opportunity consistent with each educator's professional needs, while meeting the state requirements for professional license renewal. The school and university educators practiced the belief that teacher development does not end on graduation day, but continues throughout the professional tenure of every educator. Through the scope of class activities, course concepts were reinforced by contextual opportunities for the many levels of the teaching profession: student teacher, beginning teacher, and experienced professional.

Contextual Teaching and Learning

Contextual teaching and learning is a framework that encourages educators to take a critical look at the developmental growth of all the stakeholders (e.g. students, teachers, teacher educators, student teachers, administrators) involved in the learning process. Smith (2000) defines contextual teaching and learning as:

Contextual teaching in teacher education programs is teaching that enables K-12 students to reinforce, expand, and apply their academic knowledge and skills in a variety of in-school and out-of school settings in order to solve simulated or real-world problems. Contextual learning occurs when students apply and experience what is being taught by referencing real problems and needs associated with their roles and responsibilities as family members, citizens, students, and workers. Contextual teaching and learning emphasizes higher-level thinking, knowledge transfer across academic disciplines, and collecting, analyzing and synthesizing information and data from multiple sources and viewpoints.

When learners engage in contextual teaching and learning experiences, they encounter and master situations that connect to a person's past interactions inside and outside of the school environment. Proponents of contextual teaching and learning maintain that it is essential to focus on the qualities that all individuals bring to the teaching and learning process:

- General characteristics of the learner consist of gender, age, work experience, education and ethnicity (Kemp et. al, 1998).
- Knowledge base: prerequisite skills and attitudes learners must bring into the learning process in order to benefit from the learning experience (Kemp et. al, 1998).
- Learning potential: each person has a different capacity to learn knowledge and skills, which can be increased and decreased (Prevost, 1996).
- Learning styles: deliberate activities (psychological and physical) used by learners to acquire knowledge (Souders & Prescott, 1999).
- Metacognition: learners' understanding and regulating of their learning (Reid, 1988).

From the mentoring course, the participants concluded that effective educators incorporate these characteristics in the classroom by using a variety of methods, such as interdependent group interactions, multiple intelligences, collaboration, cooperative learning, and authentic assessment, which involve the home, family, work-site, and community.

Meeting the Challenges

The role of contextual teaching and learning in school system/university partnerships will continue to evolve as educational institutions and communities work together to enhance school culture. While it is only through the pooling of resources that the enormous promise for contextual teaching and learning offered by professional development could manifest itself for school systems and universities, there are still a number of challenges.

The world of education, whether it be in an elementary school or a university, is very slow and often resistant to change. Too often educational institutions are non-reflective of the society in which they are located and more focused on the mission to convey an irrelevant knowledge base to students who often see little need to acquire such knowledge. Therefore, resistance to change is a major challenge that permeates all levels of education and may create barriers to the formulation of professional development partnerships (Abdal-Haqq, 1998).

A second challenge is creating and maintaining teaching and learning sites that engage participants at all levels in dialogue and decision-making about staff development topics. This process requires an enormous commitment of energy by all the participants

and the redirecting of institutional resources. Time, the immense consumer of energy and resources, is often used for meetings to discuss and resolve a wide range of problems, both routine and serious. Also, time is needed to build rapport among partners so that an open, honest and trusting relationship is fostered. Time is essential to constructing a learning and teaching community (Hausfather, Outlaw, & Strehele, 1996).

A third challenge for professional development with a focus on contextual teaching and learning arises from the institutional demands of universities, which at times conflict, with the demands of school systems. While research and grant possibilities may abound in such relationships, the complex give and take of decision making in professional development may make it difficult to produce the studies, publications and grants needed for tenure and promotion at the university. For example, the richness of real world interactions in such partnerships seems to warrant more in-depth approaches to research. This research demands more time and data from multiple perspectives to provide insights than might be the case with studies where a researcher more rigorously controls the interaction and the variables under study. "Going with the flow" in a real world site demands patience and flexibility as well as a willingness to involve others in examining the complexities of teaching and learning (Souders, & Prescott, 1999).

Essential to addressing these challenges is the establishment of open communication and trust among participants in the partnership. Communication and trust develop when the partners get to know and respect each other both professionally and personally. They find that they share a common commitment to the enhancement of student learning. Time must be found in hectic schedules for dialogue about methods to improve instruction and the role each participant can play in reaching this goal.

By meeting these challenges, professional development utilizing contextual teaching and learning experiences will be able to function as continuous agents of change in a structure traditionally resistant to change both from the outside and inside the academic world. Most would argue that educational change is essential to meet the demands of the future. How successful they prove to be in meeting these challenges may be measured in how well they connect to the world around them and subsequently, how well they prepare students for the world that they will enter when they complete their formal education.

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