

How Well Prepared to Teach Content Are Student Teachers? What Can College/University Faculty Do Better?

The Need for Pragmatic Content Application

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My first experience as a cooperating teacher several years ago was both an enriching and enlightening one. It was enriching because I truly enjoyed the enthusiasm and vitality exhibited by the young person in my charge and keenly became aware of my pleasure in assuming the role of mentor; it was enlightening because I realized first-hand the chasm that exists between the university courses in the content area and the lack of practical transference to the secondary classroom.

Mark (a fictitious name) had taken a variety of courses in methods, materials, and assessments in college. He had also experienced an even greater number of courses in various genres and time periods of English, American, and World Literature. Added to his syllabus were courses in research and composition. Nowhere in his required curriculum, however, was there a meeting of the content area with the practice of teaching—the English and education departments were in separate buildings, chaired and staffed by individuals unaware of the concerns and/or objectives of the other, and, in some cases, almost antagonistic in their relationships. Mark learned early how to satisfy the demands of each. While he actively participated in discussions in both arenas and fulfilled the requirements of both programs, nowhere was he challenged to bring what he had learned to practical application until his student teaching experience.

The end result was that Mark was ill-equipped to teach a general course of study that in-

cluded many literary works with which he was unfamiliar. He had specialized at college in areas not even sampled on the secondary level: Irish Studies, Folklore and Popular Culture, Feminist Studies, European Drama, and Literature of the Diaspora—all worthy subjects but light-years away from much of the mainstream high school curriculum. Mark was flabbergasted when he realized that much of what he had learned and loved in these courses was not useful to him in his pedagogical pursuits. It would be a foolish and unproductive stretch, for example, to take even isolated segments of these courses into the freshman high school English class.

In addition, Mark was even more frustrated when he was asked to teach grammatical construction or correct spelling, skills that he had not visited since four years earlier when he was a student in high school. I found myself twisting in my seat as I observed his inability to respond to a question and/or his conveyance of inaccurate information. I had to establish tutoring sessions for Mark so that he could teach the lesson properly and with some degree of confidence.

Finally, Mark had not learned an essential skill: he had never been trained to adjust the content to the age and level of the student. For example, he was ill-prepared for students who could not grasp or appreciate the vocabulary used by Edgar Allan Poe that prevented them from understanding his stories.

I fully comprehend that English professors may view those students who are English majors (and those who have elected their specialized courses) as a captive audience strongly motivated to read and delve into the literary criticism of the masters. For the most part, they are correct in their assessment. In that same class, however, are students

who will leave the university and attempt to assist young scholars who lack essential skills and whose life experience of Shakespeare may be limited to a one-semester course in high school. Within the curriculum mix that fulfills the requirements dictated by a degree and the State Department of Education certification is the need for an element of pragmatic content application. It is my belief that the education department of the university must find a way to create a practical interdisciplinary structure where content and practice meet.

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Why shouldn't a university student who plans to teach English be required to take courses such as Instructional Methods in the Teaching of Writing? Or Shakespeare for Young Minds? How about American or English Literature for the High School Student? And what of English Grammar and Usage Revisited?

High school English teachers dream of the day when they can throw aside all of the sometimes tedious aspects of the curriculum such as instruction in grammar and writing and spend their time waxing eloquent about the literary artist they most admire or the genre that entralls them. And sometimes, within the challenging demands of their profession, they are allowed some latitude to do so—that is, if they find a class of students willing and competent to follow along. If English teachers, however, truly care about preparing students for the business world or the domain of higher education that follows high school, they engage their pupils in exercises that build skills, and they target their lessons to the adolescent mind. There is no greater evidence of a talented and confident English teacher than one who has command of subject matter and is willing and able to clarify the material for students at all levels.

The education departments of universities would do well to create partnerships with members

of the other disciplines such as English. Once there is a sincere camaraderie established, they can then book a series of field trips to high schools within their community. Together, after observing many English classes, they may be able to determine what practical courses of study they may devise for the future “Marks” or “Marthas” of the world who may one day work with me or another cooperating teacher in the English classroom.

Whatever Happened to Mark? Teacher Preparation as Messy, Unpredictable, Joyous

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I have been prewriting this piece for nearly three weeks, Ron, ever since *EJ* sent me your manuscript and invited me to respond to it. During that time I have carried you with me, figuratively speaking, as I went about the task of supervising Kathy Jones, an English student teacher in Harris County (Georgia), twenty-five miles north of Columbus State University. I have thought once, twice, and, for good measure, a third time about your questions.

You ask, “How well prepared to teach content are student teachers?” *Not so well* is your implied response. “What can college faculty do to better prepare people entering the profession?” *More, different, better*, I think you might say.

I think you're right, and I think you're wrong. Preparing teachers is a messy, sometimes unpredictable, occasionally joyous business. Good programs produce some dolts. Nominally weak programs produce English teachers who dazzle. When I listen to those who think they know why, who know how to fix teacher education, I grow suspicious.

Due to a schedule quirk, Kathy is my only student teacher this semester, about number 200 in a long line of student teachers I've supervised. Melanie Thomason, her cooperating teacher, is herself the product of the University of Georgia's excellent English education program. Frequently one step ahead of me, Melanie is an asset. She will help Kathy become who she might be as a teacher rather than try to turn her into a cookie-cutter version of herself.

It's February. I've visited Harris County High School twice so far—the first time to go over student teaching policies and procedures, the second time

to observe. Kathy and I have communicated several other times via e-mail, and we will meet tomorrow afternoon in my office. Kathy is off to a good start. She's bright, kid-centered, and committed to being good at whatever she does. She's a learner, a grasper, and she lets those qualities show. She writes well. She knows many YA novels she can bring to the kids in Harris County. She's also experienced, at least as experienced as possible for a student teacher. In her practica, she worked closely on reading and writing with seventh graders and, more recently, she developed and taught lessons for juniors and seniors in an elective drama class.

During my first visit, she and twenty-three seniors wrap up first period in the computer lab. Senior teachers use *Pacesetter English* (CEE/ETS, 1996), a good curriculum for heterogeneous classes that avoids sacrificing academic substance or rigor. Melanie's class has word-processed their personal essays on the theme "Stranger in the Village," a James Baldwin story. Afterwards, we go over Kathy's schedule. She tells me that, after working with the film *Amistad* for a couple of days, she will begin teaching *Canterbury Tales*.

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Do I have any ideas? Sure, I tell her. I reminisce about contemporary adaptations of the prologue: "A coach there was . . ." or maybe a talk-show host or . . . well, how would one describe the guys from *NSync if they were on a pilgrimage? Where might contemporary pilgrims go, anyway—to Disney World, to the Million Mom March, to Temptation Island?

I suggest that a Chaucer lesson can also be about language—about how it changes. Maybe her kids could research words that entered American English during the past century or decade. Maybe they could speculate about words that will enter the language sometime during their lifetime.

I return to observe several days later. Kathy implements a good lesson. I arrive twenty minutes into the ninety-minute block, during the last scene or two of *Amistad*. She and her seniors discuss it briefly, the kids do some quiet vocabulary work, and then Kathy—who's practiced for the occasion—reads aloud "Get Up and Bar the Door," a poem from the Holt/Rinehart anthology. With gusto, if not absolute aplomb, she emphasizes words and pronunciations that are no longer part of English. Appreciative, her students talk about the language of the poem. Leaving her notes about how, when she leads a discussion, she should help her students shine more than she does, I slip out as she segues into a discussion of Chaucerian English.

Due to a combination of personal qualities and higher education experiences, Kathy Jones is on her way to becoming a strong English teacher. I am simultaneously proud of her work and humbled by it. On the other hand, I recall young men and women who, on paper, had all the right stuff, yet when they taught, failed to measure up. I wasn't able to help them see how a skillful teacher adapts English content in a way that engages fifteen-year-olds. I'd like to take credit for the Kathys, and I'd just as soon forget about those who couldn't or wouldn't transform their English major knowledge and become the women and men we want teaching our own children and grandchildren. It goes without saying to observe that neither credit nor blame would be fully warranted.

Maybe what really happens is this: good teacher education reinforces what is already there in a human being with potential. Good teacher education helps a talented preservice teacher perceive, then "let out" and develop her or his best as a teacher.

During the early nineties, we on NCTE's Committee on Teacher Preparation and Certification revised the *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts* (NCTE, 1996). Programs that seek national accreditation must attend to these guidelines; this provides their authority, their leverage. On the Committee we believed that we—even across several degrees of separation—might help programs graduate as many Kathy Joneses as possible. The resulting volume will never be a best-seller, but it does highlight at least part of what Kathy experienced in her program that I believe would have helped Mark. Here are some of those qualities.

First, Kathy's program reflects the idea that an English major and an English education major

are different. Kathy's studies—including adolescent literature—reflect these differences. Her program of studies is the product of Columbus State's English faculty and teacher educators as well as classroom teachers working together. Good relations between education and English have to be worked on; they are never automatic.

Second, Kathy's program includes a sequence of methods courses (among them, composition methods) and practica that helped her interact with adolescents of different ages, stages, cultures, and capabilities. Kathy used these authentic experiences to "grow her teacher" (as I sometimes put it)—a teacher who takes content and method and, in the crucible of actual practice, discovers what works, what doesn't, and how to take her emerging understanding of both to the next level during student teaching.

Third, Kathy isn't alone as she "grows her teacher." Because of the partnership between Columbus State and Harris County Schools, we can place student teachers with exemplary cooperating teachers such as Melanie Thomason. Further, Kathy sees her university supervisor, a one-time English teacher and English education specialist, as a source of support and teaching ideas, a knowledgeable nurturer more than a generic evaluator. This threesome—the powerful triad of student teacher, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor—combine to promote Kathy's growth in powerful ways.

Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts is the latest blueprint for colleges and universities that are serious about quality teacher education. At their best, the guidelines provide leverage for improved program design, for getting needed resources, for developing partnerships with secondary schools.

Wrapping this up, I can't help but think about Mark. Is Mark a teacher, and, if he is, what sort of teacher did he become? Did he bridge the chasm separating his knowledge of English and what he needs to bring to his work with adolescents? If so, what did he do?

I hope Mark is still in the profession. One thing I know is this: learning how to teach begins—through observation and experience—well before one enters college, before one decides on a major. Learning how to teach intensifies—it becomes self-conscious—in university literature and composition courses, in professional studies, and in student

teaching. Beyond this—messy, unpredictable, idiosyncratic—growing one's teacher continues as we progress beyond the uncertainty of the first year or two and gain confidence and savvy. Mark, perhaps, and Kathy for sure (to say nothing of Melanie, Ron, and Jim) are still engaged in the process.

Ron Responds to Jim

I am encouraged by various elements of your response, Jim, especially in the fine delineation of the English education program at Columbus State University—perhaps more college programs would do well to develop such a model. The collaborative accord you mention—student teacher, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor—working together toward the common goal of "growing a teacher," as you term it, was in place with Mark and helped save the day. Mark continued to gain valuable experience in a variety of educational settings after graduating from college, and eventually more self-assured, landed a full-time position at a secondary school. I am pleased to report that he is flourishing and continuing to grow as a teacher.

I also concur with your insightful evaluation that good teacher education programs ultimately can only be praised for reinforcing the potential that is already there in the prospective teacher. What is to be done, however, with the student who seems to lack the potential to become a good teacher but who chooses to remain in a teacher education program? This appears to be an ongoing conundrum for those involved in the preparation of future educators. I will leave this issue, therefore, for another discussion.

It is certainly difficult for any English education program to grow a teacher if the seed is not there. On the other hand, it is also possible for a program that leans more to theory and less to practice to cultivate a fragile blossom whose life expectancy is either brief or certainly less vibrant. Without belaboring the metaphor, pedagogical methods and practices within the content area need to be an integral aspect of a future teacher's university experience.

Like Kathy, Mark was bright, student-centered, and committed. He was more than willing to observe and dialogue about technique, but he lacked, at the time, Kathy's experience and skill. Before Mark could engage his students and exercise creative pedagogy, he needed to feel secure about what he was teaching. This came for him through on-the-job experience. Perhaps he is better for it. I

only wish that a more pragmatic approach were in place for him at the university level—it would have aided me as his cooperating teacher, the students entrusted to his care, and Mark’s own self-confidence. On the other hand, as I revisit this experience, perhaps there was some fortuitous force at work in matching Mark and me. He challenged me in a new way to facilitate his growth as a teacher, and in so doing, I also grew professionally.

Recently I was a guest instructor in a teacher education class at a neighboring state university. Ironically, like your closing remarks, my first words to them were that they have been apprentices of observation all their lives. I encouraged them to keep

a log detailing what they observed and deemed worthy of emulating in their classrooms, and also to jot down what they would never want to repeat when they were on the opposite side of the desk. I then provided an example of a technique that I had recently witnessed and demonstrated its value by putting it into practice.

Like you, Jim, as well as Melanie and Kathy and Mark, I am also still growing. Hence, I will continue to search for *the more, the different, and the better* in all that I do, not the least of which will be a constructive evaluation of the university teacher preparation programs with which I am linked.

EJ 60 years ago

Forward Thinking Forebears

“We, more than any other group in America, have in our control the solution to the problems of the teaching of English. We must be cognizant of pressure groups from without coming in to inform us and the public concerning next steps in our program. We welcome criticism always as a means to growth, but we must scrutinize it carefully as to the sincerity of its educational purposes and the validity of its claims. . . . If we do not do so for ourselves, other less adequately prepared in experience with boys and girls, in understanding the place of the language arts in the total program of education in a democracy, or in richness of content in the field of English itself, will step in and do it for us. This is today’s challenge to teachers of English. It is a mighty one, but I believe it will be answered.”

Dora V. Smith. “Today’s Challenge to Teachers of English.” *EJ* 30.2 (1941): 101–13.

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