

TEACHER PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AS AIKIDO: ONE WARRIOR SEARCHES FOR HARMONY

Steven Fletcher
St. Edwards University

“If your opponent tries to pull you, let him pull. Don't pull against him; pull in unison with him.”
Morihei Ueshiba, founder of the Japanese martial art of *aikido*

The current secondary teacher preparation program at St. Edward's University follows a traditional route. Prospective teacher candidates in the program spend the majority of their time in the university setting, gaining background knowledge in teaching and learning theory, adolescent psychology, the use of technology in the classroom setting, and an overview of the educational system today. During their final semester before the student teaching internship, students spend 15-30 hours at the public schools in the area, practicing the theories they have studied at the university. In the culminating clinical semester of the program (student teaching), students apply knowledge from earlier coursework to the realities of daily teaching in the school setting.

Teachers prepared by the St. Edward's secondary teacher preparation program in this manner score well on state teacher certification tests that focus on both content and pedagogy, are readily hired by schools in the area, and tend to persist in the profession (based on limited data from alumni contacts). Yet in many ways this model is outdated, based on the both the diversity of the student population in the public schools and the latest research-based theories that guide teacher development. Traditional models of university teacher preparation are being challenged by other routes to becoming a teacher (including alternative certification, 5th year and online programs). St. Edward's must be responsive to the changing climate to maintain a competitive edge in local teacher preparation offerings.

We are uncovering more about what it takes to prepare and retain highly qualified teachers for the 21st century, and the literature (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 2001) indicates that the most successful programs focus on three critical areas. Darling-Hammond (2006) writes

...we have learned a great deal about how to create stronger, more effective teacher education programs. Three critical components of such programs include tight coherence and integration among courses and between course work and clinical work in schools, extensive and intensely supervised clinical work integrated with course work using pedagogies that link theory and practice, and closer, proactive relationships with schools that serve diverse learners effectively and develop and model good teaching (p. 300).

These three areas of concern, a) strong conceptual coherence at the programmatic level, b) the integration of theory and practice using a clinical supervision model and c) foundational partnerships between university and schools that anchor developing teachers in diverse urban settings, are what drive me now, both as the architect for the secondary education program at St. Edward's and as a budding researcher in teacher education in general and science education in particular. My work has centered on developing a Professional Development School (PDS) model for my teacher preparation program, and the development of this intensive field-based model (Holmes group, 1990; Goodlad, 1993; NCATE, 2001) promises delight and has already provided me with moments of intense vexation over the last two years.

Vexation

The main tenets of PDS match my own pragmatic philosophy and I embrace the notion that pre-service teachers spend significant portions of their time during their university teacher preparation coursework in local secondary schools. This places prospective teachers at the center of the action, fully situated in the context of the school culture and daily doings, from student fights to faculty meetings. But like many attempted conjunctions between the promise of the theory and actuality of the practice, the preparation and initial implementation of this model has suffered delay and a lack of focus. Like the novice aikido practitioner, I have been pulling and pushing on my partners (the local school system and fellow colleagues at the University) with little effect - either too soft or too hard - and getting nowhere. I think there are three main reasons for this.

First, the district and schools that I have chosen to place most of my energy seem inert to fundamental change, and are dealing with other factors like statewide assessments, and are in a constant state of flux with administrators and district personnel as well as staffing changes that affect the progress of the PDS. For example, I have chosen to work with four urban schools that surround the University campus. Of these four secondary schools, three have new principals as of last year, and the fourth has closed its doors to any university partners, based on low test scores on the state mandated assessment. The one school where I have made the most progress has a great science teacher and department chair, who let me know last week that she was leaving the district for another position. My closest ally from this school's administration told me that he is planning to leave if one of the 11 principalship positions he applied for comes through.

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Second, as a junior faculty member without tenure, the fundamental work that I am doing to build the program takes valuable time away from scholarship and teaching preparation. I wonder at times, like the colleague at another university remarked last year, if this is a bold direction, or a dodgy one, based on the uncertainty of the outcomes. I think that this tension has affected both the focus and my overall enthusiasm for the development of the program. I find myself fluctuating between my overall interest in self-preservation and eventual promotion through a more traditional foundation to my career (strong teaching record, scholarship and service) and this somewhat risky endeavor which takes lots of time and energy away from other more evidentially productive work.

Finally, St. Edward's School of Education buy-in has been low, with the exception of the dean and one colleague who teaches in the graduate program. The elementary education faculty, and associate dean appear to be taking a wait-and-see attitude before offering more than cursory verbal support. This tepid response to the kickoff of an ambitious and potentially transformative program is vexing. I end up doing everything, from marketing to recruitment. In addition, all of the courses will need facelifts to work at a site versus the university, so there is a struggle to find the time to create this as well. I applied for a summer grant to re-design the course materials for the program and was not awarded this grant by the University administration.

Venture

In an effort to jumpstart the change process at the school and district level, I have spent many hours over the last year building relationships at partner school sites (Crockett High School and Covington Middle School) as well as piloting site-based university classes that embed pre-service teachers in the daily routine of the public school setting. I have been given classroom space and resources at both schools during the last half of the spring 2008 semester and have held both curriculum and assessment (EDUC 4334) and secondary methods and management (EDUC 4333) courses on site for one day each week with students when applicable. In addition, I have created a PDS handout for potential collaborators and am working with key administrators at both sites to identify, recruit and encourage teaching faculty to become partners in this endeavor.

Two of my courses (EDUC 4333/EDUC 4334) have been blocked together for the 2008-2009 academic year to allow for extended time at the partner schools during the school day, and I have reached agreements with administrators for space and resources at both sites to enact the university coursework in the schools for the 2008-2009 academic year. I will therefore be delivering both EDUC 4333 and EDUC 4334 at local schools for the 2008-2009 school year, fully embedding our students and myself in the milieu of the schools.

I have also created and distributed marketing materials, including an informational flyer and brochure that describe the ways that I could aid the school/district with professional development opportunities, offered tutoring and classroom help for struggling students, suggested possible joint action research projects with my pre-service students, and attended events and coordinated high school science student visits to the University campus.

I have not yet found a way to reconcile my calendar schedule and task list with the situational events on a daily basis. I have attempted to divide the week into carefully compartmentalized segments, giving equal time to both program development duties and normal teaching/scholarship/service duties, but like the theory/practice divide, the practice is not in line with the carefully thought out schedule. Things come up, plans change, and I am left wondering what it is I actually did for the week.

Utilizing the support from my dean (both financially and through a shared philosophy), I was able to visit other PDS sites for information and exchange with colleagues. While at NARST this year for example, I was able to spend a few days with Kate Scantlebury in Delaware, examining her program there. I have also visited a PDS site at Trinity University in San Antonio, and continue to work nationally to build links and relationships with others in this area.

Conclusion

Like a novice practitioner of Aikido, I feel that my efforts to wrestle a complacent and strongly rooted school district and university education department have been a waste of energy. I have extended a great deal of effort and see little gain. In fact, I am watching a carefully constructed set of relationships from one site dissolve as my key contacts leave for other positions. However, I understand the need for patience and flexibility, and see promise in the teaching of Aikido masters who counsel a relaxed stance, an overall perceptiveness and awareness of others intentions, and the ability to use the forces that are applied against me to my favor. Any advice or feedback on this path would be most appreciative.