# Chapter 10
# A Work in Progress

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## Introduction

I never planned on becoming a teacher educator. As a matter of fact, until I attended my first Self-study of Teacher Education's Castle Conference in 1998, I had never even heard the term teacher educator. I find that ironic since I have spent my whole career in education and had worked through three university degrees in education. At any rate, when I first learned the term teacher educator, I did not identify with it. I had been a middle school and high school teacher and administrator for most of my career, and, as I imagine has happened to others, while being a full-time high school administrator I was invited to participate in an education class at a local university.

## *A Foot in Two Worlds*

In 1999 I was working full time as an assistant principal at a suburban high school when a local professor of education tapped me as someone who actually did action research in a school. In 1995 I had begun a voluntary professional development program at Highland Park High School (IL) that used the methodology of action research to help teachers to improve their practice (Senese 1998). In many ways my introduction to and strong belief in the power of action research opened the door for my entry into the world of higher education. I made a presentation to the professor's graduate class about what we were doing in the Action Research Laboratory (ARL) at the high school. When I entertained questions, the professor could see that the

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students were not grasping what she saw as the significance of my visit. To this day when I relate this story I call myself Exhibit A. She said something to the effect of, "You need to understand. He really does this stuff at his school. It isn't just something you learn in grad school. This high school is actually applying it." I suddenly understood my importance to her and to this class. I was the evidence that what they were learning and studying in their coursework could be something more than a hoop to jump through at the university to obtain an advanced degree. I was a connection to the real world of education. I was the practical practice.

A few years after that initial encounter, I was asked to contribute a chapter to a book that the same professor was co-writing about how to conduct action research in schools, *Teachers Doing Research*: *The Power of Action Through Inquiry* (Burnaford et al. 2001). I was flattered and honored. Prior to this I had only had two short articles published in the *Journal of Staff Development* (Senese 1998, 2000). In the book chapter I described the ARL, how it came to be, how it worked, and the early results we had achieved (Senese 2001). I was still Exhibit A. My own action research (both with teachers in the ARL and with students in my English classes at my high school) took on a greater significance to me because I saw my role expanding beyond one high school. You could say I was hooked.

## *Encounters*

In 1998 I, along with three classroom teachers in the ARL from my high school, traveled to East Sussex, England, to participate in our first self-study conference hosted by the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (SSTEP), a special interest group of the American Educational Research Association: Herstmonceux III. This was a big deal for a school district to support four employees to travel abroad to present to university types. In truth we were shocked that our proposal had been accepted. At the time that we wrote our proposal we did not know what self-study was, what teacher education was, or even what the American Educational Research Association (AERA) was about. I can honestly say that if our first foray into teacher education had not been this conference, I probably would not have continued with self-study. The participants were not just welcoming; they embraced us. I learned a lot over the course of those 4 days, more about myself than about self-study; then again, maybe that is self-study. I can pinpoint my start in teacher education to that conference.

A few things stand out to me as I reminisce about that Castle Conference in 1998:

1. Knowing that we were presenting to teacher educators, we asked the question: How can we involve institutions of higher learning in the ARL? The first answer we received was a booming John Loughran retorting: Why would you want to do that and ruin a good thing?

   I was confused and intrigued by John's response. I could not understand why these teacher educators were interested in a small professional development program at a suburban high school in the U.S. We were looking to expand our

experiences with action research and it seemed logical and advantageous to involve an established educational institution in that. It took some time for me to realize that rather than being the light on the hill, university schools of education are institutions, same as others, governed by tradition, politics, regulations, and prejudices. John was warning us off (and all the way from Australia!).

2. Since a coffee break immediately followed our presentation, many of the audience members stayed after and spent time talking with us. Their enthusiasm and encouragement were shocking. I say shocking because back home we had to downplay our work in the ARL lest we rock the boat too much. It was not that we kept our work under a bushel, but there were rumors from the faculty that some teachers (those in the ARL) were getting special treatment. Well, some of us were presenting at an international conference in England, so I suppose they had a point.

   One delegate (and now a friend), Donna Allender gave me a piece of advice that I have never forgotten. In talking with her, I gave teachers credit for the work they were doing in the ARL and tried to deflect any attention from myself. Donna encouraged me not to underplay the critical role I performed as a supporter, encourager, and enabler of the action research that the teachers in the ARL were conducting. Giving teachers the opportunity, the freedom, and the tools to conduct their research was, after all, a key component of the ARL. I had not fully realized that in my role as a school administrator I was in a position to support teachers in ways that they could only dream of. Without that support, the whole program would crumble. For example, one ARL team wanted to deemphasize the importance of grades and have students put their energies into learning. They thought they did not have the authority to withhold grades from student work, but with encouragement from me (and knowledge of school board rules), they discovered their own power to change the prevailing system. The ARL created a critical variation in how teachers were thinking about their practice and even about their profession. My role in the equation was to balance the resources I could provide with the energy of the teachers who were willing to learn more about teaching and learning.

3. On an outing during a free afternoon at the Castle Conference, I spoke with another of the teacher educators. When I shared with her how encouraging and welcoming everyone was and how interesting all the work they were doing was, she explained: "That's why we come here, to find validation for our work. Don't think that this is how things are in our universities. We are the oddballs."

   That gave me something more to chew on. Having limited experience with teacher educators had led me to assume that they all thought and acted as this select group at this conference did. Since that time I have recognized the remove between university schools of education and local schools. It is not so different than the remove between what we call feeder or sender schools (the elementary schools that send their students to our high school) and receiver schools (the next school up the ladder). The communication between two independent systems, when it exists, can be tenuous and sometimes even contentious. I remember vividly as a sending middle school teacher in the early years of my career being told by the receiving high school English teachers that we were *not* to teach particular pieces literature, that

we were to assure that all students wrote to the high school's standard, and that we were to teach the rules of grammar so they did not have to. There was no discussion, no compromise and no explanation, just admonitions. Some of these communication problems are aggravated in Illinois because the state has more than 2000 school districts, some consisting of only one school. High schools, for the most part, are independent of the elementary schools that feed into them. A logical progression of standards, practices, and beliefs that spanned elementary school to high school (and then to university) is a rare thing indeed.

That teacher educator's comment about "oddballs" also made me feel at home. Throughout my teaching career, I have developed a philosophy that good teaching should intend to subvert the system. Not subvert it in some nihilistic way, but in ways that would improve it, even if that means destroying it in order to recreate it. I don't intend to create chaos or devastation, but sometimes a thing must topple in order to be strengthened. I have been influenced by Wheatley's (1992) exhortation about how organizational change happens: "In a dynamic, changing system the *slightest* variation can have explosive results" (p. 126). That belief encouraged me to establish the ARL. I felt that the teachers involved would become leaders in the school community who could influence the direction that the school was taking. I continued to attend Castle Conferences every other year and my relationships with those teacher educators have enlightened and encouraged me as a teacher educator.

Shortly after making my initial connections to the professor at Northwestern University, I discovered that I had an additional value to her. She and another professor were going to be teaching two courses in research at the same time during the spring term and they each needed to attend professional conferences, so I was asked to co-teach with each of them. That meant that I assisted each of them and, because the courses were scheduled concurrently, I ran back and forth between the two classes. When one was absent, I was allowed to teach that day. I enjoyed working with the two of them and my practical nature and current teaching experiences gave me ways to add my own ideas to the courses. At that time, though, I hardly thought of myself as a teacher educator, although in some way I suppose I was. Over the next few years this relationship and my experience developed into my co-teaching with a variety of professors in the Master's program at Northwestern University. Little by little (in my subversive way), I inserted my ideas and techniques and beliefs into the courses. In addition, my entrée into the university reminded me of the kinds of supports that practicing teachers require in order to meet challenges in the profession.

## Transitioning

Then, in 2007, two events altered my trajectory: (1) I retired from public school teaching after 36 years in the field. (2) I was asked to teach by myself the entire three-course sequence that comprised the Master's project, the major product of the

graduate degree program at Northwestern University. No one in the history of the program had done that! I felt blessed with this honor.

Having been a classroom teacher for over 35 years made me approach my university teaching with a practical eye. I have worked with teachers as a staff developer, colleague, and assistant principal in several public school systems, so I believe I understand that teachers want to temper the theoretical with the practical. Even minute understandings can make big differences. Hence, I aim to provide learning experiences that can translate into practice the very next day.

With an eye on the usefulness of all we did in the courses, I was very conscious of making every second count. For example, I try to balance each university class with interactive activities with peers as well as with reflection. As I tell my students, any of these activities can be adapted for use in their classrooms, and many of them report that they have taken advantage of them in their home schools. What makes this practice distinctive from just discovering a worthwhile activity and using it (as many teachers do at professional conferences) is that I require that teachers know how each activity works, why it can be of use, and when it would be appropriate to use it. For example, over my years of university teaching I have become a resolute proponent of using protocols to promote and focus both discussion and listening among peers. Too often teachers slip into the role of problem-solver rather than provoking other teachers to think more deeply about their own situations. Protocols have proven to be an invaluable tool for doing this. Some of my students have written their own protocols to use with their students and staffs.

A strong practical bent and identifying with the teachers that I teach have been connections that I would loathe to abandon. That pedagogical conviction grounds what I teach, how I teach, and even who I am as a teacher educator. While teaching at the university I often refer to my prior work as an assistant principal and classroom teacher to illustrate ideas and to concretize the abstract. Students read an article I wrote for the inaugural issue of *Studying Teacher Education* called "Teach to Learn" (Senese 2005) because it illustrates in a realistic way my honest assessment of a 5-year period of my teaching high school English. The article, in short, demonstrates that I did not always achieve what I wanted in the classes I taught, but that I learned from each and continually improved what I did. I want students to think of me as a fellow teacher, one who is still learning his practice even after all these years. They will learn to teach by teaching and reflecting on the results of that teaching. Action research offers them a window to develop this view.

Even the other courses that I teach at Northwestern University (Using Student and Teacher Work to Study Teaching and Learning) are grounded in the philosophy and methodology of action research. In that course, I rely heavily on students using protocols to give them a structure in which to analyze and interpret the work that they or their students have produced. It is done in real time because they are either student teaching or practicing teachers at the time of the course. From week to week, students experience the camaraderie of working with teaching peers to learn more about themselves and their students. The course has become so popular that the number of sections has doubled in the last year.

Having transitioned from a full-time assistant principal and teacher at a local high school to an adjunct instructor of between four and six classes each year at a local university has afforded me an expanding view of myself. Although it has taken years for me to be comfortable with it, I now can identify as a teacher educator (or as I put it, a teacher teaching teachers about teaching).

## Anchoring My Teaching

### *Axioms*

Through my research and my professional writing, much of it related to self-study, I have uncovered my educational belief system. Although I have taught for over 40 years in middle school, high school, and university, until I began analyzing and interpreting my practice through action research and self-study, I would have struggled to describe my pedagogical beliefs. I believe a description I once wrote about teachers conducting action research could also describe my own position as a teacher educator:

> When they develop confidence through practice and a deeper understanding of what they do and why they do it, teachers are much more willing to take risks, to uncover assumptions, to explore the tacit and make it explicit – all necessary traits for learning about teaching. (Senese 2007, p. 50)

Through my research I have come to acknowledge that I rely on a strong set of beliefs to guide my teaching actions. Captured in three axioms (Senese 2002), these beliefs give me guidance when I make pedagogical decisions. A "backward glance" (Wheatley 1992, p. 21) of my teaching practices established these foundations to my teaching.

I uncovered these axioms when I undertook a self-study to compare my high school English teaching and my role as a staff developer (teacher educator of sorts). By reviewing my work and words over a 5-year period, I concluded that my actions in both roles were guided by these principles. To this day, I refer to them when making decisions about teaching and learning.

- Go slow to go fast.
- Be tight to be loose.
- Relinquish control in order to gain influence.

Each axiom has a built-in balanced tension and appears to be counterintuitive. None of them are easy to do, but through a (now) conscious effort to enact them in my practice, I have developed a sense of how to apply them.

If I want to move faster (a class, a lesson, a procedure), I know that first I have to move slowly and teach slowly until the students internalize the concept, routine, or method. The time spent deliberately laying the foundation at the start pays off in the end. Establishing routines, overtly using and repeating key concept phrases (e.g., In

your action research project, you are not trying to prove anything.), and scaffolding experiences are all part of this axiom in practice.

If I want to provide choices, freedom, and opportunities for creativity to students, I know that I have to develop simple but strict guidelines in which they can flex their minds. These parameters create a safe environment in which to experiment. Keeping directions simple and uncomplicated, yet maintaining exact parameters (e.g., An assignment must have my approval before it is considered completed.) make this axiom simultaneously flexible and rigid. The combination of the two encourages divergence while maintaining standards.

If I want to inspire or guide student learning, I know that I have to abandon an authoritarian stance, the voice of an all-knowing sage. Influence, although subtle, carries much more weight than control does. Remaining involved in student progress while students assume responsibility for their own learning and development can be a slippery slope. By definition the teacher of any class is in a position of authority, but how and when that authority is exercised makes a difference in how students learn.

My self-study forced me to look inside myself and uncover these tacit beliefs. My research then provided me with a way to name my beliefs, which in turn allowed me to share them with others and enabled me to discuss them and test them. Stating them as axioms keeps them simple enough to remember and therefore much more likely to be applied to new situations. They are useful, not only to me, but also to many others who have heard about them.

## Teaching Teachers About Teaching

Through self-study I have also learned that in order to teach teachers about teaching, I must not only teach content and process but also demonstrate the "why" of teaching in my courses. This has been described as "a need for the tacit to become explicit" (Loughran 2006, p. 52). Therefore I often provide my graduate students with reasons why I have chosen to structure a lesson in a certain way or why I have written an assignment thusly. I want them to see what it means to be a teacher who makes conscious decisions based on data and experience. The marriage of *phronesis* and *epistome* (Korthagen and Vasalos 2005) encourages informed teaching.

As Berry (2007) has pointed out, teacher education is a complex practice. Her tensions, just like my axioms, require a teacher educator to maintain a balance between seemingly conflicting interests.

In one example of her tensions in teaching teachers, Berry (2007) clarifies the need to find a balance between "Confidence and uncertainty," explaining that this balance is "between making explicit the complexities and messiness of teaching and helping prospective teachers feel confident to progress" and "between exposing vulnerability as a teacher educator and maintaining prospective teachers' confidence in the teacher educator as a leader" (p. 32). I can be painfully aware of this balancing act when graduate students have claimed that I was aloof or indifferent to their

struggles. To ameliorate this perception, I explain that sometimes I purposely do not give directives because I want them to wrestle with the answers to their questions. Doubt can be their friend. In doing so, I believe that the students, in the end, will develop a reliance on their own abilities to resolve problems. Instead of trying to cut their thinking short, I encourage them through questioning to develop their own ideas. In the end, each teacher educator has to recognize the individual needs of each teacher practitioner.

The kinds of questions I have learned to ask more often than not (and this began when I was an assistant principal) rely on pushing the thinking of others. These "probing questions" are asked in order to push another person's way of looking at an issue or to propose something the teacher may not have considered. These probing questions do not offer solutions or even direction, but rather broaden the spectrum for the teachers. For example, rather than providing my students with direction (e.g., you may want to rearrange the domains in your project.), I try to get them to think about their own purposes (e.g., How do you want the reader to understand the progression of thought from domain to domain in your project?).

## Teacher as Learner

If anything has emerged as a general theme in my work in self-study, it is the pervasive and rock solid belief that to be a good teacher, a person has to continue to be a learner. Teaching is such a complex activity and art that to ever believe that one has mastered it would be a grave mistake. I first expressed this in writing in a paper for a Castle Conference and then again as an article in the very first issue of *Studying Teacher Education* (Senese 2005). Since then I have discovered that I live this belief in everything I do associated with teaching because:

> Learning not only to accept the risks involved in teaching, but also to embrace them is daunting but necessary… Once teachers admit that their profession is fraught with (educated) guesses, risks, and uncertainty, they will be freed to become better teachers. (Senese and Swanson 2006, p. 239)

Dissecting what exactly this means produces an often-overlapping catalog of ways to look at the profession of teaching.

I begin every year in my university teaching by posing (and then often reinforcing) the question, "How do you know what you think you know?" The question is simple and foundational but absolutely necessary to ask. I believe that a substantial part of teaching consists of making thousands of decisions in a single day, from the comprehensive "What are the expected learning outcomes?" and "What activities and content will help students to achieve these outcomes?" to the routine "Where should I stand at any given moment?" and "Do I respond to or ignore that behavior?" This is why teaching is so tiring and why excellent teachers are exhausted at the end of the day! Because teachers can get so good at "thinking on their feet," they sometimes forget to question why they may be doing something a certain way. It is necessary to ask, "How do you know what you think you know?"

Posing this question requires that teachers suspend their beliefs, at least for a while, and consider alternatives. Accepting doubt as an essential part of teaching demands fortitude and courage, but it also enriches the options. Teachers have confided that this subtle shift in their self-perception has not only improved their practice, but also has freed them from self-imposed constraints. No single person will ever "master" teaching, but each teacher can improve. The reflective practices that teachers encourage in their students are the very tools that teachers need to continue to grow in their profession.

Meeting the challenges inherent in teaching also demands an emotional involvement, a passion for learning and for helping others to learn. When I taught high school English, I confided in students that my role was to make them independent of me. After all, I would not be around for the rest of their lives, but if they had the tools and drive to continue learning on their own, I had done my job. I am not certain that they always understood this at the time, but it reinforced my commitment to make myself less important if not entirely unnecessary for their continued education.

One way to encourage this stance is to form a community of learners that embraces other teachers, the students, parents, and the community. Long gone should be the days when a teacher could bolt the classroom door and teach the curriculum. In the best of circumstances, learning, even in schools, continues outside the classroom and the more meaningful the interaction among community members, the higher the quality of learning. In my own high school teaching I often involved other school personnel (from the superintendent to teacher aides), parents, senior citizens, other students, and university professors in the learning and teaching. I recognized that I was not the sole teacher even in my classroom. I was only one of many teachers. Members of the broader community as well as all the students were teachers. This belief has entered into my university teaching, too, when graduate students form coaching groups to pursue their action research projects.

## Methodological Frameworks

### *Action Research*

Action research certainly has influenced who I am as a teacher educator. Not only do I conduct action research in my classroom, but I also make its methods available to others. In founding the Action Research Laboratory at Highland Park High School in 1995 (Senese 1998), I created a voluntary professional development program for teams of teachers to conduct their personally meaningful action research.

My identity both as teacher and as researcher converge in my practice. Therefore I have always shared my action research with my students at the university, just as I did with the students I taught and the teachers I worked with at the high school. The act of conducting action research was primarily to inform my practice, but it also serves other purposes. Berry (2007) suggests that teacher

educators must negotiate a tension between "Acknowledging and building upon experience," by which she means navigating the differences "Between helping students recognize the 'authority of their experience' and helping them to see that there is more to teaching than simply experience" (p. 32). If that is so, then acknowledging my role as a learner in any class, and not just as a teacher, is essential. I must base the choices that I make on more than gut feeling. There are reasons behind changes made in the courses I teach, the ways in which I react to students and their work, and the roles I play as a teacher educator. I can explain all this (up to a reasonable point) to those who are or plan to be teachers to demonstrate the necessity of remaining a learner in their profession. As a matter of fact, I used to tell my high school students (and now the teacher candidates) that I should be able to give them three reasons for why we do anything in class. If I cannot, perhaps we shouldn't be doing it. And I have sometimes been held to that principle. Long gone are the days of the all-knowing sage imparting knowledge to others (although many incipient teachers would prefer that model). When an activity or lesson achieves less than I had hoped, I ask for input from students: how did they experience the lesson or activity? What suggestions do they have to improve them? Remaining a learner in my chosen field of teacher education makes me a better teacher (Senese 2005). As I discovered years ago:

> The position of "teacher" does not automatically make someone a teacher. By assuming some of the risk in the classroom as a true learner, I ultimately liberated students in order that they might see themselves as both teachers and learners while simultaneously liberating myself to become a learner. (p. 52)

Actively participating in action research and self-study has provided me with the platform from which I can continue to grow as a professional. The courses I teach at Northwestern University are grounded in action research. The three-course Master's Project sequence introduces students to the methods of action research so that they can study their teaching and improve their practice. By the end of the final course in the sequence, each student produces a major paper based on a self-selected action research topic. But producing this Master's project is not the goal of the courses to my mind. The experience of learning about yourself as a teacher and learning how to conduct action research are my guiding principles. Sometimes the teaching assistants and I discuss what the objective of the master's project is as we read students' papers. I believe we have come to the conclusion that through this master's project we are offering individuals opportunities to become teachers. Andrew Hirshman, one of the longtime teaching assistants in the program and also a graduate of the program, raised the issue this way:

> Is the goal a thoughtful, polished project or an internal change within the candidate? I think clarifying this is important with regards to how we interact with the teacher candidates. Questions or issues can be quickly "solved" or fixed with a "decree" saying this needs to be like that or that needs to be like this. This will help the finished projects achieve a certain uniformity and the appearance of success, but is it success? Are we trying to produce projects or teachers? (Senese et al. 2014, p. 221)

I know that Andrew knows the answer to his question because the most successful teaching assistants in these courses construe their role as one of shepherding. That is why we call the teaching assistants "coaches" rather than TAs in our program.

## *Constructivism and the New Science (Self-Organizing Systems)*

In conjunction with a strong and guiding belief in the power of making my own practice transparent, constructivism has been a deeply satisfying framework that has influenced my teaching, both at the high school and the university. The axioms that I discovered in my work (Senese 2007) can be traced to constructivist beliefs that make meaning a personal discovery. Just as I encourage students to construct their own meaning and understanding, I demonstrate my own growth and change through constructivist beliefs.

These beliefs led me to conclude that in order to construct understanding, everyone in the classroom must be both a teacher and a learner. Although a teacher maintains a position of authority, the students in the class mediate that position. Every time I teach, I learn as much about teaching as do my students. The fluidity of teaching and learning (and the blurring of the lines between the two) keeps me fresh, current, and relevant.

In addition to reinforcing the personal nature of learning (and teaching), constructivism has reinforced and expanded my notions about making a difference and about evincing change, especially in organizations and institutions. Having had a leadership role in a high school for 16 years and a self-styled leadership role in other school settings (as teacher leader, assistant department chair, committee chair, and even union president), I have been intrigued by the larger picture in education. Schools are deeply entrenched institutions and trying to be part of their evolution (or even subversion), has been a life-long goal of mine. Constructivism as a theoretical construct has helped me to navigate the tides without being swallowed by the maelstrom. It has taught me that I need to construct meaning with others and as I change, they will change, and the organization will change. Evolution, as a way to grow, is a complex and organic process. I cherish Lambert et al. (1995) exhortation to create intentions that propel change:

> Change that is constructivist in nature emerges from the meaning-making process and is therefore unpredictable and evolving. Preset objectives, as well as predetermined strategies and techniques that are too tightly drawn, violate the very nature of constructivism… Attempting to harness real change that is being pulled by intention, not pushed by prediction, is so complex that its understandings can only be constructed in the conversations among co-leaders in a learning community. . . .[W]e metaphorically refer to [this] as 'sea change,' a process in which the sea moves in upon itself as the entire sea shifts forward. (Lambert et al. 1995, p. 59)

As that statement proclaims, constructivism can be messy, but through my evolving constructivist beliefs, I have become more accepting of chaos as defined in chaos

theory. There is a comfort in the belief that life itself is messy and constantly morphing into something that can accommodate.

## *Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices*

Self-study, of course, has been a major part of my journey to becoming a teacher educator. By intensifying my learning to the level of the self, I have been able to delve more deeply into the core of who I am as a person and as a teacher. This journey to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the self in my practice has taken years to evolve. From the first SSTEP Castle Conference that I attended with Action Research Laboratory teachers in 1998 until now, I still feel a novice. I recognize that because my journey to being a teacher educator was perhaps longer than many teacher educators' journeys, I may not have the professional background or theoretical platform that other teacher educators do. I do have experience, though, and I have relied on my naiveté and experience to propel me in those circles. Sometimes when I believe that I have an original perspective on educational theory or practice, I discover that, in fact, there is already a name for it and even a history behind it. But it is that freshness and practicality that makes me different from those further removed from the day-to-day lives of teachers.

I saw this very thing when I was an assistant principal. My role put me in many teachers' classrooms to make observations, yet I did not have a classroom of my own. I led professional development activities for the faculty, yet I was removed from their daily experiences. But in the last five of my 16 years as an assistant principal I reentered the secondary English classroom as a teacher. Although I taught only one class a day, experiencing the routine, the challenge, and the joy of being a teacher put me in a much more favorable position to work with teachers. As I noted some years ago,

> By positioning myself as a fellow learner about teaching, I have created a platform from which I maintain some influence. This is also true of teacher educators who are perceived as teachers by those they teach. Teacher educators perceived as continuous learners about teaching command a respect from teachers. Making practice transparent is equally important as being an informed instructor. (Senese 2007, p. 57)

That is why I cherish and value my self-perception as a teacher and a learner when I consider myself a teacher educator. The road I took to becoming a teacher educator would never have unfolded without my first being a student of teaching.

## Contribution

As personal as any narrative may be, it can still speak to others; we can learn from each other's stories. As unique as any narrative may be, it may contain elements that resonate with others. One of my contributions to the field of teacher education is to

share my story in the hope that it may speak to others. I recognize that the path I have taken is more about myself than about self-study. Then again, the two are intertwined. At bottom, I teach and that identification as a teacher explains who I am as a teacher educator.

For example, I believe that my teaching is grounded in practicality. As a teacher educator I never leave my experiences as a classroom teacher behind. Theory may help to explain or elucidate what happens in the classroom, but the reality is that the practical method, outcome, and experience will always trump the abstract for me.

That does not mean that theory or methodology has no place in teaching. As a matter of fact, I believe that it needs to take an even more prominent place in teacher education, but when and where it occurs makes a significant difference. When I am trying to solve a problem or to address an issue, theory and methodology as a response or solution complements the practical. It cannot be one or the other, but often in schools of education, the theory or methodology comes before burgeoning teachers even know what the issues are. That is why action research has become my methodology of choice. It can provide practical solutions to real issues yet causes me to seek out beliefs, theories, and methodologies that will clarify the data that I collect. For better or for worse (better I believe), classroom teachers operate this way, too.

I also continue to conduct other research, namely self-study. That methodology lends itself to improved understanding and better teaching and in that regard can provide me with ways to name or describe my practice. I will always need to learn more about myself, my beliefs, and my practice in order to continue to succeed in my chosen profession. The moment that I understood my dual role as both a teacher and a learner in a classroom (Senese 2005) and accepted that every student in my classroom is a learner and a teacher, too, I was able to acknowledge the unpredictability and challenges that are teaching. Now I work to share this understanding with other teachers.

Being a classroom teacher does not always allow a practitioner introspection and an honest assessment of one's beliefs and practices. I have witnessed too many teachers who believe that they have discovered the best way to teach and skate along for years without any change or growth in their profession. Unfortunately our education system not only allows this, in some ways it encourages it. Sometimes as an assistant principal when I offered teachers a new way of approaching an issue, I was countered with the tired response, "If it ain't broke, why fix it?" To my mind this attitude about teaching belies the essence of the teaching/learning process. Some students excel in a traditional school environment because they learned to "play school": so too some teachers believe that teaching consists of formulaic planning and execution.

Being a teacher educator (there I admit it!) has allowed me to understand in a deeper way what teaching and learning are: truly complex and collaborative activities. Having to meld content, theory, and practice and to know when to use them, how to apply them, and how to assess them in order to teach other teachers about teaching has innumerable layers. Without being a teacher educator, I do not know if I ever would have reached that level of respect for a profession I esteem and value.

Resurrecting, reviewing, and piecing together my personal/professional narrative in this chapter has highlighted for me the evolutionary nature of being a teacher educator. In some ways that journey is parallel to yet divergent from the path to becoming a teacher. Balancing those two perspectives remains a constant challenge as well as a pleasure. Accepting that the endless process of becoming is the nature of the calling both reassures and disquiets me because, just as with cycles of action research, it never ends.

For all those reasons, I still see myself as a teacher. Being a teacher at the core encompasses all those roles: teacher, learner, and researcher. To be good at only one of those roles is not enough. Not anymore.

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