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Achieving Balance in Graduate Programs: Negotiating *Best Practices*

The narrative introduction to the graduate catalogue at the state university where I work probably reads pretty much like the one at your college or university. The program of study for the masters degree specifies that inservice graduate students are to engage in an extensive study of content-related literature, theory, and research. Despite the rhetoric of graduate catalogs, teachers who enter graduate school programs begin their advanced studies, expecting—and sometimes vociferously demanding—coursework that will provide them with a practical framework for teaching English language arts in secondary schools. Their interest in studying theory and research is often conditional. They scan my vita to see if, when, and how long I taught P-12 students, not just graduate students. They examine my syllabus to see if I have designed a theory-heavy course or one that appears to connect research findings to improved and enhanced practice. They critique the theoretical frameworks I offer to see if they pass the real-world sniff test. What my inservice graduate students tell me they want most is a collection of courses that focus primarily on enhanced instructional techniques. When I maintain that improved practice is and must be grounded in research and theory, my graduate students sometimes think I'm veering into the esoteric. This is the ground that we negotiate together: how to situate the values of intellectual inquiry within the context of practical application.

Many of my students confess that they enter the masters program to move up on the salary scale, but they also admit that they come to graduate school to learn how to enhance their teaching. I suspect that they have begun to question the effectiveness of their instructional techniques and that

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they are dissatisfied with the minimal successes of their teaching practice. They may further be frustrated with their unguided, random searches for new ideas about how to teach their English language arts content. Certainly, they lead the harried lives of classroom teachers. They teach too many classes, too many students, and often compromise their best instincts, yielding to the pressure of surrendering too much class time to instruction in test-taking strategies for those ubiquitous high-stakes tests. Consequently, they don't have much time left over for unguided and potentially unproductive searches for *what works*. Perhaps this is why teachers seem so vulnerable to any in-service program or publisher's claptrap that promises instant results in student achievement. At least one goal of a graduate program aiming to produce effective curriculum directors and classroom teachers, not necessarily high-powered researchers, must be to make practitioners' searches for information and new ideas less random, less idiosyncratic, and less focused solely on individual experiences in a particular classroom. As English educators, we fulfill this goal by providing direction in effective and efficient study of research and theory that can directly impact practice, despite the fact that it is sometimes challenging to take that literature to practitioners in ways that they can transfer into their classroom lives. By providing opportunities for their inquiry to become more focused and more grounded in emerging research, those of us in teacher education guide our graduate students to know the *why* behind the *how*.

Many recent discussions of research-based effective teaching have used the term *best practice*, defining the term as "solid, reputable, state of the art work in a field" (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998, p. viii) and as a concept that "has its roots in law and medicine and implies that professionals have standards, are aware of current research, and offer clients the field's latest knowledge, technology, and procedures" (Chenoweth, Carr, & Ruhl, 2005, p. 2). The term *best practice* in its colloquial use generally refers to the quality and effectiveness of everyday *practical* teaching strategies and techniques that are grounded in current theory and research findings. However, in its most common implementation, one that has trickled down and is variously interpreted by a range of sources from the researcher to the practitioner, *best practices* can be enacted in classrooms without teachers necessarily knowing the precise theory and research behind the practices. Without a larger sense of how the research and theory guide instruction, teachers can easily lose sight of what comes next, compiling merely a collection of haphazard, random, and disconnected tool-box-type activities. Graduate programs for teachers in English language arts education must help teachers build their pedagogical knowledge from the bottom up, grounding their prac-

tice in coherent research and theory.

This trickle-down effect occurs because *best practice* is somewhat temporal. Ideas about the specifics of *best practice* for a particular content, purpose, or context shift and change as research about teaching and learning alter focus, explore new territory, and generate fresh findings. In fact, Chenoweth, et. al. (2005) indicated, “Education has not had a tradition of *best practice* because the field, until recently, has lacked well-developed standards or clear outcomes informed by previous work and research. Educators have failed to take advantage of what has been learned in the past and tend to tinker anew each time that change is proposed” (Wilson & Daviss, 1994 p 2). This assertion that instructional practice is a constantly reinvented wheel is supported by additional recent research (Bickmore, Smagorinsky, & O’Donnell-Allen, 2005) indicating that teachers often don’t realize that their instructional methods come from two opposing traditions—teacher-centered vs. student-centered—so they rather randomly choose what seems to work best with their students without particularly heeding the associated, and perhaps conflicting, theories. Clearly, then, *best practice* is a term that is influenced and interpreted based on the context of those who use it. University professors and content researchers stress theory and the research that supports theory-formation when they discuss *best practice*. Practitioners, in contrast, focus on instructional techniques that work for them in their classrooms with their students, relegating theory to the instructional back seat and contextual implementation to the driver’s seat.

If *best practice* is to be most often realized by practitioners as what works, it is important for teachers to stay current with what is considered to be *best practice* at any given moment in time. For most, however, doing so is a hit-or-miss endeavor for two interrelated reasons: (1) *best practice* is based on research that practitioners neither encounter nor apply to their instruction, and (2) the very nature of *best practice* is tectonic since it changes based on the most recent and currently emerging research findings. Because teachers are short on the time necessary to read and reflect on research findings and then to devise ways in which they could enact these results in their teaching, most teachers rely on interpretations of research delivered to them by a host of secondary sources, including conference presenters, in-service directors, workshop leaders, authors of accessible articles in practice-oriented professional journals, and us, their graduate professors. These readily-available resources allow many teachers to know about contemporary practices

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and how to implement these in their teaching, but what is not directly acknowledged is the fact that these multiple sources of information may themselves be more fragmented than consistent and more varied than uniform in their philosophical underpinnings. The work of reflecting, staying current, and selecting *best practice* is therefore a demanding, time-intensive effort.

The term *best practice*—hierarchical, exclusive, and singular—suggests to practitioners that one *best practice* exists among all of the possible instructional strategies from which a teacher could select at any given time. But good teachers know that all classroom practices are not created equal even though they may be grounded in sound theory and research, and are therefore termed *best practice*. Practitioners undertake the task of selecting strategies from among the myriad of those termed *best practices*, of determining which *best practices* are most appropriate for their specific instructional contexts, and of forging and then implementing a coherent set of *best practices*. Haphazard attempts to improve teaching are unlikely to succeed unless practitioners participate in an extended process of inquiry and reflection that then yields a sound basis on which to shape instructional choices and decisions.

Enter graduate school, the place where a balance between the theoretical and the practical can be found, where the research that supports the generation of those methods termed *best practice* can be read, discussed, and fully vetted—but not without considerable effort. Without making the commitment to develop and hone their intellectual curiosity, practitioners too often live their professional lives focusing on the coffee spoons of teaching and learning rather than on the larger, interwoven issues and ideas that guide the informed and most effective uses of *best practices*. It is primarily in graduate school that practitioners expect to situate into their schedules the time it takes to read research, understand theories, and devise methods for enacting those ideas and concepts in their professional work.

It is also primarily in graduate school that practitioners encounter the mentors and thinkers who help them link together a constellation of *best practices* as supported and explicated by the related theory and research. These transformational encounters provide not just a tool-box of activities, but a pathway of inquiry that will sustain and support their professional work and development.

Dealing with this recurrent, nearly archetypal, issue of finding balance between the practical and the theoretical in graduate programs is the task of English language arts educators and the requisite activity of graduate students in our field. The relevance of *best practices* in instruction is

clear, but that is not the end-run of graduate school. Instead, graduate schools must help practitioners re-discover their curiosity and their professional imagination. English educators must create the time and space for in-service teachers who are our graduate students to discern the value and relevance of tying *best practices* to theory and theory to effective practice. Graduate school is the context in which practitioners can expect to examine their current instructional strategies and methods, and to encounter research findings that ring true. When our graduate students' curiosity is roused, we can lead practitioners to recognize theories and methodologies that are consistent with research-based, reasonable, and feasible instructional activities. This process of establishing an inquiry-driven perspective enables practitioners to re-envision what happens in their classrooms and to know why it happens. Through this process of intellectual negotiation, of engaging in a feat of scholarly balance, we reaffirm the centrality of inquiry to teaching and learning, conveying the connected, evolutionary, and practical to our graduate students—and, in turn, to their P-12 students. It is a negotiation that is central to the formulation, implementation, and understanding of *best practices*.

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