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KNOWLEDGE AND VISION IN TEACHING

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The author challenges the role of knowledge in teaching by pointing out the variety of issues and concerns teachers must simultaneously address. Teachers use two strategies to manage their multidimensional space: They develop integrated habits and rules of thumb for handling situations as they arise, and they plan their lessons by envisioning them unfolding as a drama might. It is entirely unclear where or how knowledge enhances teachers’ visions, but it is very clear that visions depend on a strong sense of purpose, direction, and momentum. Most teacher educators try to foster visions in their students, but their interest in vision creates two problems. First, it places them in conflict with their university brethren who expect to see them promulgating knowledge. Second, the particular vision they embrace is too narrowly progressive; it ignores many concerns that teachers try to juggle in their practice and many societal ideals for education as well.

Keywords: accreditation; educational reform; program standards/evaluation; teachers’ knowledge and beliefs

Let us begin by reminding ourselves of a few basic truths about teaching. One is that teaching is a multifaceted activity. By that I mean that teachers routinely do more than one thing at a time. I do not mean merely coordinating multiple things, such as materials, time, and students, but actually thinking simultaneously about different things. In fact, I recently interrogated teachers about their practices and found that their practices reflect their concerns about six different things: (a) covering desirable content, (b) fostering student learning, (c) increasing students’ willingness to participate, (d) maintaining lesson momentum, (e) creating a civil classroom community, and (f) attending to their own cognitive and emotional needs (Kennedy, 2004, 2005). At any given moment, one of these six areas of concern needs more attention than the others. If two students begin to quarrel, the teacher suddenly focuses on how to reinstate norms of courtesy and civility. If one student asks an imponderable, the teacher must think about the trade-off between maintaining lesson momentum and sustaining student willingness to participate.

These six areas of concern are not always present in every classroom thought, but none of them is ever abandoned either; any given unit, lesson, learning activity, or brief interaction with a student is designed to maximize, as much as possible, all six areas of concern. That is, all instructional practices include, whether tacitly or explicitly, ways to increase student willingness to participate, ways to foster learning, ways to foster community norms, and so forth. Moreover, teachers who develop sustainable teaching practices develop integrated, routinized approaches that simultaneously address all of these areas of concern in a way that the teacher can tolerate. By sustainable I mean practices that can be managed within a normal workweek, without unreasonable time commitments, and that are not so taxing that the teacher is exhausted and depleted after 1 or 2 years.
Now here is the rub. Most of the advice teachers get from others does not address all these things. People who call themselves experts and who promote particular approaches to teaching are generally addressing only one or two of these six areas of concern. For instance, a new approach to classroom management might address concerns about community norms but fail to address concerns about covering important content or fostering student learning. A new inquiry approach to science teaching may address concerns about content and student learning but fail to address concerns about lesson momentum or the teachers’ own cognitive and emotional needs. I suspect that when teachers try a new pedagogy or a new curriculum model and then announce that it “didn’t work,” what they probably mean is that they could not find a way to address all of their concerns within the framework of that model. What “works” for teachers is an approach that acknowledges all six areas of concern in a way that maximizes success and minimizes problems in each area.

There is a second basic truth about teaching, and it has to do with the ideals society holds for teaching. Society holds many lofty aims for education in general and for teaching in particular, but these aims are inconsistent with one another. There is a tension between the societal desire to accommodate individual needs and the societal desire to treat all students equally. There is a tension between the desire to follow students’ interests and the desire to ensure that required content is covered. There are tensions between the desire to provide students with basic skills and the desire to enable them to engage in abstract reasoning, between the desire to develop children as ethical and socially responsible human beings and the desire to endow them with the skills they need to find employment.

These societal ideals are also embraced by most teachers so that their personal goals for their teaching are numerous and contradictory, just as society’s goals are. As a result, any teaching decision is necessarily a compromise among numerous desirable approaches and desirable ends. This is a separate issue from the issue of the six areas of concern I mentioned above. But just as the six areas of concern to teachers must be integrated into a coherent practice, so must these numerous competing ideals.

These two truths about teaching lead to a realization that there is an infinite number of possible ways of balancing among the six areas of concern to teachers and the myriad competing societal ideals. Each teacher’s practice represents a unique solution to this complex of concerns and aims. The best solutions maximize the benefits and minimize the drawbacks, but even the best solutions are necessarily fraught with drawbacks. And the reason we continue to disagree about what constitutes “best practice” is that we all envision different ways of solving these simultaneous classroom equations.

The third important point about teaching is that teachers must generate many such multidimensional solutions in the moment, as events unfold. These discrete in-the-moment decisions are often imperfect: Each considers only those things that the teacher happens to be aware of at the moment, and each is vulnerable to second thoughts later on. It is neither feasible nor desirable for teachers, midstream, to weigh each act for all its implications.

Now let us put these three truths of teaching into a single sentence. Teaching is an endeavor that requires simultaneous consideration of six different areas of concern, that strives toward ideals that are inherently contradictory, and that happens in real time where the merits of alternative courses of action must be weighed in the moment. This is the nature of teaching.

Teachers do two things to gain control of their work. First, they devise a collection of ready-made responses to events that reduce the need for extensive thought about each event as it unfolds. They develop habits, rules of thumb, and repertoires of responses, tools that are essential to reduce the cognitive burden of teaching. These tools enable teachers to develop sustainable practices, practices that are automated enough that they can be sustained without excessive cognitive or emotional burden.

The second thing teachers do is envision their lessons before they enact them. People who have studied teacher planning have noted that
planning is not a linear process that moves from instructional objectives to instructional strategies but rather, a process of envisioning in which teachers “see” what will happen, where students will sit, what displays will be examined, what questions will be asked, and so forth. Each unit, each lesson, each activity, is like a play with different characters playing different roles, with a problem at the beginning and a denouement at the end. Because teachers envision their instruction in real time, they are able to see how all of their areas of concern will be addressed—what content will be studied, how classroom norms will be enacted, where students will sit, what will motivate students to participate, how momentum will be maintained, and so forth. Teachers envision the entire play and all of its acts.

Although I use the term vision to describe teachers’ plans, I do not mean this in the religious, idealist, or head-in-the-clouds sense of the term but rather, to mean that teachers have a feet-on-the-ground sense of purpose and direction and of actions that get there from here. They are plans—not plans that are developed in a logical or rational way but scenarios that are envisioned. Teachers may derive their visions from their ideals, but the visions themselves are not idealistic imaginings; instead, they are detailed plays with scenes, episodes, and characters all organized to lead to a particular conclusion. The plays that teachers envision are the teachers’ solution to the problem of balancing among six different areas of concern and the problem of balancing among multiple and competing educational goals. The plays form a path through the thickets of ideas and ideals that fight for their attention. These plays also help them adapt to circumstances as they arise, just as mental maps can help drivers plan a detour. If drivers know their eventual destination, and know the roads in the area, they can change their route when they encounter a roadblock and still eventually reach their destination. If teachers know the denouement to their play, they too can alter the script as they go and still eventually reach that resolution. The plays that teachers envision help them anticipate, accommodate, and respond to the contingencies of classroom life.

The teaching practices we see, then, derive in part from teachers’ visions of the sequences of events that will lead students through a curricular unit to some new knowledge, and they also derive in part from the collection of habits, rules of thumb, and repertoires of responses that teachers have developed. Each teacher’s play represents her or his solution to the complex array of concerns and competing ideals that confront the teacher. And each automates as many practices as possible simply to reduce the cognitive burden of the task.

Now, at last, we come to the question of knowledge. Observers of teaching persist in believing that some solutions, some classroom plays, are superior to others, and they desire to improve the solutions that teachers have devised. If it is true that some solutions are better than others, we face the question, What accounts for these differences? The differences we actually see lie in the habits, repertoires, and the rules of thumb teachers depend on. The differences we suspect are responsible for what we see are the plays teachers envision for each unit and lesson. To some extent, observed differences in practices are accidents of history—the coincidence of events that provoked responses that eventually became part of teachers’ repertoires. And to some extent, these differences in practice have also developed in response to different sequences of events that teachers imagined would lead students through the curriculum to some desirable outcome. If teachers design their classroom plays to accommodate multiple areas of concern and to balance among multiple and competing societal goals, and if each play represents a unique solution to these numerous concerns and ideals, then what causes some teachers to develop scripts that we think are better than other scripts? Is it knowledge? Or is it their sense of purpose?

More important, how can teacher educators facilitate the development of practices that (a) optimize the numerous concerns and ideals that teachers must accommodate and (b) are sustainable? Should they provide specific bodies of knowledge?
WHAT COLLEGE PROVIDES TEACHERS

If my portrait of teaching practice is very close to reality, then arguments about relevant knowledge are difficult to make, for no particular bits of knowledge can necessarily help teachers simultaneously think about all of their areas of concern and balance among competing societal ideals and plot out a route that will move a group of students toward a particular educational destination. Indeed, I have suggested that the tool that helps teachers manage all of this is the ability to envision classroom events unfolding and the ability to revise certain scenes to further accommodate one or another of their concerns. Moreover, these visions are not static, like an image of a landscape, but instead dynamic, like a play, with a set of acts and scenes that lead to a particular conclusion. Nor is this an idealistic vision in the sense that we use the term visionary but instead, a concrete, operational plan. This is a vision with purpose, direction, and momentum.

It is certainly possible that knowledge can nurture such a sense of purpose, but how that influence happens is not clear at all. For instance, many people argue that a benefit of a liberal education is that it creates a person who is more open minded, more thoughtful, more judicious, or has some other qualities of intellect or character. If such transformations occur, they do not derive from any particular pieces of knowledge or any specific combination of pieces but rather, from the individual’s response to the entire corpus. This may be why arguments about the “best knowledge for teaching” never get resolved. Let us examine these arguments more carefully.

Arguments about the knowledge we should provide to teachers come in two varieties. First there are arguments about the proportion of the college curriculum that should be devoted to the academic disciplines as opposed to the topic of education itself. Some advocates believe teachers need to know more about the subjects they will teach, others believe they need to obtain a repertoire of routines and practices that they can carry into the classroom and use, and still others believe teachers need knowledge of the educational process and the role of schools in society. These arguments occur both within universities and outside of them, and they have been “resolved” numerous times during the past century by national commissions and other learned bodies. These are arguments about the knowledge teachers need.

The second type of argument occurs only within education programs. These arguments are not about the relative importance of one body of knowledge as opposed to others but instead, are about how to help young adults learn to think differently about teaching and develop a vision that will lead to a sustainable practice.

These two types of arguments differ not only in their topics but also in their terms of reference. When people engage in the first argument, about how much curricular space should be allocated to academic disciplines and how much to education per se, the terms of reference have to do with the value of different bodies of knowledge. People argue about which knowledge is more valuable, which knowledge is more relevant, and which knowledge is more useful. When people engage in the second argument, about how to organize the education program itself, they rarely address the merits of any particular body of knowledge. Instead, they refer to the processes by which young adults grow and develop into teachers, to how prospective teachers think about teaching and how teacher educators can best alter their beliefs. The arguments that occur within education programs rarely refer to the knowledge needed for teaching and more often refer to the process of learning to teach and to how teachers are formed or transformed.

In fact, much of this second argument is about how to alter the naive assumptions and ill-formed images of teaching that reside in college students who are themselves not yet completely formed adults. That teacher educators think and argue in these terms may be one of the reasons outsiders are dubious about the value of teacher education, for they do not hear many references to things they consider to be knowledge. At the same time, such thinking may be appropriate if the practice of teaching is anything like the description I introduced above.
But the notion that education can explicitly influence teachers’ visions of their own practice raises numerous problems. One is that we cannot easily separate (a) helping students develop a more complete and productive vision of teaching from (b) proselytizing, a process that is unbecoming in a university. Another problem is that the goal of fostering purpose and vision does not address the dominant question that occurs outside of teacher education concerning the relative merits of knowledge about education and knowledge about academic disciplines. Advocates for the inclusion of education courses in the college curriculum argue for the value of the knowledge that is provided, not for the vision that is provided.

Yet a third problem is that we have little evidence that we can successfully give students a productive vision for teaching. Even those who argue that a liberal education can transform young adults often define that education as including massive transmissions of knowledge rather than a collection of developmental experiences. Indeed, we have no evidence that we have ever succeeded in giving teachers the kind of curriculum-embedded, purposeful vision they need to sustain a practice. It is this last problem that I turn to now: the vision we offer.

So teacher educators live in an ambiguous place. They are surrounded by audiences who demand to know what knowledge they offer to teachers, but they are themselves more interested in their students’ vision and sense of purpose than in their own knowledge base. When they are not accountable to outside audiences, their conversation turns unashamedly away from knowledge to questions of vision.

**TEACHER EDUCATORS’ COLLECTIVE VISION**

Teacher educators are famous (or notorious) for the progressive vision of teaching that they espouse. They embrace terms such as learning community, coconstruction, inquiry, and social justice. They do not all share the exact same vision, of course. There are numerous variations on these themes and occasionally some sharp disagreements among teacher educators about the meanings and significance of these terms. But the terms capture the general framework of the teacher education community as a whole and they roughly characterize what we might call the TE collective vision of teaching practice. I see four problems with this collective vision:

1. **The TE collective vision is incomplete.** One problem with the TE collective vision is that it does not address all six areas of concern to teachers. The practices that teachers find to be sustainable are those that address all six of their areas of concern. Sustainable practices solve the problem of how norms of civility will be introduced and enforced, what content will be taught, how teachers will foster student learning, how lesson momentum will be maintained, how teachers will foster student willingness to participate, and how the teachers’ own personal intellectual and emotional needs will be met. The TE collective vision is incomplete because it does not address all of teachers’ concerns. It attends mostly to concerns about classroom norms and student willingness to participate, and somewhat to how to foster student learning, but pays much less attention to the problems of lesson momentum, content coverage, and the teachers’ own personal needs.

2. **The TE collective vision lacks a repertoire of habits and rules of thumb.** Sustainable practices depend on not only a strong vision of how various parts of the play will lead to the right denouement but also a repertoire of habits, techniques, and rules of thumb for responding to events as they unfold. For instance, because students are all novices in the subjects they are studying, they are likely to make comments that move the conversation away from its envisioned direction. Each time such an apparent digression occurs, the teacher must decide how to reconcile this remark with the direction of the group as a whole. If the teacher dismisses the student, such a reaction may reduce the student’s willingness to participate. If the teacher responds to the digression, she or he may lose the attention and interest of others and, hence, lose lesson momentum. Sustainable teaching practices include rules of thumb and repertoires that help teachers quickly and reflexively respond to such events without becoming befuddled and overwhelmed by them. These reflexive responses are the very heart of sustainable teaching practice, and no teacher can create the kind of social and intellectual community that teacher educators envision unless she or he knows how to respond to dilemmas like this. Yet teacher educators tend to provide only the vision and not the repertoires or rules of thumb needed to respond to such events.

3. **The TE collective vision ignores the press of competing ideals.** Recall that one of the basic truths about teaching is that it is beset with multiple and conflicting ideals; conflicts between, for instance, responding to individual difference and treating all children
equally or following student interests versus ensuring that particular content is covered. Instead of acknowledging the reality of multiple and conflicting ideals, the TE collective vision embraces one side of each dilemma. In so doing, it competes with other ideals, often with ideals that are valued by members of society at large. Teacher educators’ insistence on particular ideals at the expense of others has spawned reading wars, math wars, and history wars as members of society who disagree with the TE collective vision seek to recapture the hearts and minds of teachers. Instead of helping teachers develop an integrated, sustainable practice that acknowledges multiple and conflicting ideals, the TE collective vision asks teachers to limit their attention to a narrow spectrum of social ideals rather than acknowledging the full range.

4. The TE collective vision is static rather than dynamic. Finally, the TE collective vision is static. Teacher educators’ visions are more like images than stories; they are more like scenes that have a certain look and feel than like sequences of events leading to conclusions. The TE collective vision is not tied to any particular learning outcome. It is a vision of a social and intellectual community disconnected from any particular content, story lines, sequences of events, or conclusions. In contrast, specific things happen in teachers’ visions: ideas are introduced, questions are asked, students do things, there are disturbances, and puzzles are resolved. Teachers’ visions are situated in the particulars of curricular units and geared toward the purposes of those units. The TE collective vision lacks any specific curricular purpose.

These four problems with the TE collective vision reduce the likely impact of teacher education. By failing to provide teachers with any rules of thumb, or any repertoire of specific strategies for responding to classroom events, it leaves teachers unprepared. By ignoring the complex mix of ideals that society as a whole embraces, it limits their ability to respond to ideals that society as a whole cares about. By offering a static rather than a dynamic vision and by failing to address all six of teachers’ areas of concern, it gives teachers incomplete guidance. We cannot expect young adults to enter teaching with a vision that is static, incomplete, and unattached to any curricular purpose and that fails to acknowledge the range of competing values and ideals expressed by communities who hire our graduates. We cannot expect our graduates to implement our vision in these circumstances.

THE DILEMMA WE FACE

As teacher educators, then, we are on the horns of a dilemma. We know that teaching depends on two important things: a repertoire of strategies and rules of thumb for responding to unanticipated events and an ability to envision how a series of acts and scenes can lead to satisfying denouements. The repertoire of habits and rules of thumb help teachers move efficiently through their lessons without having to think about every move along the way, and they help them quickly find appropriate responses to unexpected contingencies. The ability to envision enables teachers to simultaneously accommodate all of their areas of concern because they can revise different scenes as they rehearse the overall play in their minds, seeking scenarios that better accommodate all their concerns. We also know that the teacher candidates who enter our programs do not have either a repertoire of practices and rules of thumb or a capacity for envisioning and rehearsing multifaceted classroom events and that in fact, they often hold naive and incomplete images of teaching. We know, for instance, that their visions of themselves as teachers are insufficient. Finally, we doubt that knowledge alone can alter these naive beliefs and that knowledge alone can transform young adults into teachers with the capacity to envision lessons unfolding into learning.

We face two major problems. The first is an external problem: We reside within institutions that are designed largely for the transmission of knowledge and are not well suited to other strategies of development. Our institutional hosts and our public audiences expect us to provide our candidates with knowledge. When we focus on beliefs they suspect us of proselytizing. These expectations and suspicions reduce our professional status.

Our second problem is internal. We are hampered by our own vision of teaching. The TE collective vision is incomplete in that it fails to address all of the areas of concern to teachers. It is blind to competing ideals embraced by society as a whole and so does not prepare teachers to accommodate these contradictory expecta-
It lacks a repertoire of habits, rituals, and rules of thumb that would help teachers to actually move coherently through their lessons. And it is a static vision rather than a dynamic vision. The TE collective vision includes images of learning communities, with children happily coconstructing knowledge, but they are still images—photographs unrelated to any particular curricular purpose. It does not help teachers who must envision specific sequences of events that start with a problem, move through an examination, and ultimately lead to a satisfying conclusion. Because of these failures in the TE collective vision, teacher education often fails to give teachers the tools they need to develop a sustainable practice and may in addition actually hinder them from developing these tools on their own.

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL INFLUENCES


Mary M. Kennedy’s scholarship focuses on the relationship between knowledge and teaching practice, the nature of knowledge used in teaching practice, and how research knowledge and policy initiatives can improve practice. She has published three books addressing the relationship between knowledge and teaching and has won five awards for her work, most recently the prestigious Margaret B. Lindsey award for outstanding research in teacher education.