Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice

Volume 11 | Issue 1 Article 6

8-1996

Exploring Teaching: The Journey Begins

Ann L. Loranger

Exploring Teaching: The Journey Begins

by

Ann L. Loranger

> Traveling to the first class of ED 500, I thought about the years that had passed since my college course. How often I had wondered what I would be doing now if the decision I had recently made had been made years before. At least I made the decision. I would redefine myself. I would teach. The anxieties and fears which continue to foul the happier thoughts of that prospect reminded me how uncertain I was still about the decision. (Phil, age 46)

Phil, like other students whose stories contribute to this paper, represents a new breed of adult learners, non-traditional learners above the age of 25, who are returning to school in pursuit of a career change. Daloz (1986) suggests that by 2001 adult learners will comprise half of the students in higher education. These students are bright, motivated, and highly qualified; they bring with them a renewed enthusiasm for learning and a determination to make a difference in the world (Freidus, 1993). Many of these students turn to teaching as a choice for a career change.

Advocates of teacher education programs will have to not only accommodate but also support these learners. Studies (Freidus, 1993; Loranger, 1993; Madfes, 1989) show that many adult learners encounter problems during this change process and in classroom settings during field practica. Knowles (1984) asserts that "every adult person finds himself in specific situations with respect to his recreation, his family life, his community life, et cetera–situations which call for adjustments. Adult education begins at this point" (p. 29). If teacher educators are to meet the needs of non-traditional students, they must be sensitive to issues expressed by these students (i.e., changes in economic status, discrimination against adult learners, and the lack of credibility in these students' motives to teach).

The six students whose perspectives are shared here represent a range of backgrounds and ages:

(1) Dave: Dave is a 38-year-old, single male who quit his job as an air traffic controller. He has returned to school to get a degree that will enable him to teach high school English.

(2) Pam: Pam is a 40-year-old mother of three children. She resigned from a high paying job in the health care field.

(3) Phil: Phil is a 46-year-old father of two children. For the last ten years he has run his own business. He has returned to school to pursue a career in teaching which will be more rewarding and challenging than the service industry.

(4) Ann: Ann is a 33-year-old, single female. For the past fifteen years, she has worked in middle management for a national travel agency. She quit her job to secure a degree in library science. She elected Exploring Teaching to see if she would rather be a teacher than a librarian.

(5) Amy: Amy is a 33-year-old mother of three young children. She has been a housewife for the last ten years and wants to become certified in elementary education.

(6) Steve: Steve is a 27-year-old, single male. After five years in the retail business, he is returning to school because teaching is something he has always wanted to do.

The context for this inquiry is a course entitled Education 500, Exploring Teaching, a prerequisite to admission to the graduate programs in education. The purpose of this course is to provide students with an opportunity to explore teaching as a potential career. Course requirements include five hours per week of observation and participation for a total of 65 hours of assigned field placements and two hours per week in a seminar session with a university instructor. I first met these students as the instructor of this course, and I became interested in their stories as they began to evolve during seminar discussions and as reflected in their journals.

A review of the literature (Bennett, 1991; Bullough & Knowles, 1990; Cohen, 1983; Freidus, 1993; MacDonald, Manning, & Gable, 1994; Madfes, 1989) revealed that what these EDUC 500 students were experiencing was not unique to what other adult learners find when they attempt to enter teaching as a career change; that is, the transition is harder because of their prior life experiences. As a teacher educator, I must be attentive to how the experiences of these self-motivated adults impact the planning of course work and field practica in teaching.

Emerging Themes

With sensitivity and care, I listened to student discussions during seminar, and I read their journals in an attempt to help them make sense of what they were experiencing. Several themes emerged consistently from their stories and are presented here for discussion: motivation, experience, learning as mutual inquiry, and individual differences.

Motivation

The students expressed that their motivation to enter the field of teaching generates a level of commitment unlike the traditional students. In Amy's words, "If I can get in the door, I can shine."

Adults are highly motivated to learn and are very serious students. They come to teaching with a sense of commitment (Freidus, 1993; Knowles, 1984; Rife, Maloy, & Keefe, 1988). David verifies this in the following comment:

> I was barely a C student in high school, and I mean I just barely got through high school, and today my GPA is 3.5 or 3.7. I think a lot of this is motivation; I'm much more focused now.

Second-career male and female teachers entering graduate programs in elementary education consciously choose teaching as the career they want (Freidus, 1993). As Steve attests:

> The thing is you really tend to value education now much more than before. Then a few years in the work force, or more years as the case may be, will definitely make you more aware of that when you have much more appreciation for your own education but also to educate others as well. So I think that's really one of the big motives behind education, not only to improve yourself but to improve others.

Commitment to teaching was also a factor in a study by Cohen (1983) who compared a group of student teachers classified as returning students or adult learners to a matched group of college age student teachers. The results indicated that the two groups had different types of expectations, concerns, anxieties, and commitments to teaching. She concluded that "socialization into the teaching profession is not only affected by the academic experiences of the preparing teachers, but also by their nonacademic experiences" (p. 1).

Experience

The prior experience that adults bring to a new learning experience is also an important factor for consideration. Lindeman (1926) observed that "Experience is the adult learner's living textbook" (p. 90). All the students commented on the value of getting into the classroom immediately in order to experience real teaching. Ann shares during discussion:

> I have strong managerial skills. I work well with people because I respect them and feel that everyone has value and worth. I am an active listener ... I truly like people.

Dave writes:

> I have a unique background that would benefit the students that I teach. I believe that my previous academic background will allow me to better understand how students feel when they are not achieving academically.

Looking at the experience and knowledge that older students bring to teacher preparation programs, Madfes (1989) suggests that second-career participants in teacher education have a harder transition because of the "occupational and professional baggage" of the experienced worker. She found that support was not offered unless it was requested and that older beginning teachers were often considered "new to the school, not new to teaching" (p. 7). Based on her findings, Madfes made several recommendations: (a) that the application of theory and practice be made clear, (b) that the transition from worker to student to teacher be made easier, and (c) that teacher educators be more sensitive to the life adjustments these students are required to make, such as obligations to family, reduced salary, the anxiety and stress related to change, and acceptance by peers. The life experiences of adult learners should play an important role in the planning of course work and arranging of field placements.

Learning as Mutual Inquiry

Adults are self-directed in their learning. As a result, mentors and students learn through mutual inquiry. Daloz (1986) suggests that "education is something we neither 'give' nor 'do' to our students. Rather, it is a way we stand in relation to them" (p. xv). He uses the metaphor of a journey to describe what he and his students go through together: "It is a question about a relationship: Where are our students going, and who are we for them in their journey?" (pp. 2-3).

For students like Phil, the journey begins with the course called Exploring Teaching. This is how Phil describes it in his journal:

> The time involved in getting from where I am to the classroom, subtracting those precious minutes and hours from time shared with my wife and children, the extra financial burden on our all-too-meager family resources, the feelings of rusty in

adequacy from having been away so long, a slower learner now. So much more cautious. Starting my own business ten years ago felt like an adventure. This felt a little like sailing a Sunfish to Africa!

The notion of learning as mutual inquiry for adult learners also underscores the significance of the role of mentor that the cooperating teacher assumes in the student-teacher relationship. The role of mentor is one of guidance, support, and commitment. If adult students are to be successful, then the role of the cooperating teacher becomes more challenging when working with adults rather than traditional students. Presumably the cooperating teacher becomes the students' mentor in the field. There are some challenges in this presumption. Pam comments in her journal:

> I think one of the most disillusioning things I ran into (being out in the schools) is not being taken seriously, that I must have been a failure in whatever it was I was dealing with. On the contrary, I was very successful in my former employment, and I floored the company I worked for when I resigned.

It is also difficult for some teachers to regard "older" students in the role of apprentice. Adult male relationships with cooperating teachers have been found to be even more problematic in that cooperating teachers do not know whether to regard these men "as experts from the outside world, peers, or neophytes" (Freidus, 1993, p. 23).

Because the cooperating teachers do not know how to respond to these adult learners, these students do not receive the feedback on their teaching that is needed in order to improve. "Cooperating teachers feared that they might sound condescending if they discussed their teaching in the ways they would explain it to a 20-year-old" (Freidus, 1993, p. 24).

Individual Differences

Individual differences seem to increase with age. Educators of adults should provide for difference in style, time, place, and pace of learning (Knowles, 1984).

The students in Exploring Teaching discussed these issues frequently. The following are excerpts from two students' discussions:

> I tried to go to school and work at the same time, but one of them had to give. So for me, I made the sacrifice and I do have a part-time job with a little bit of money, but certainly nothing compared to what I was doing. But I can schedule, and I'm rather fortunate that the people I'm working for support me. (Ann)

> I do have a schedule between a husband who is now supporting the family and I have to support my children. I'm a mother, and that's my job in life. I'm a student second, but I'm a mother, and that's the hard thing ... is to put this all together if you can think about the fact that I have to think about this and a career, too. (Amy)

Fessler and Christensen (1992) offer their model, *The Teacher Career Cycle*, as a basis for understanding and guiding the professional development of teachers which can apply to adult learners. Within this cycle, they describe a stage which they call the "enthusiastic and growing" stage. Key ingredients of this stage are enthusiasm and high levels of job commitment and

satisfaction. They present a number of interactive yet mutually identifiable characteristics that influence the work of a teacher: family support structures, positive critical incidents, accumulated life experiences or life stage, unique individual dispositions, and avocational interests. They suggest that enthusiastic teachers are stable and positive. Our adult learners certainly enter teaching manifesting the characteristics of enthusiasm and job commitment. Pam validates this in the following journal entry:

> Quite simply, teaching seems the ideal profession for one who takes a vital interest in the world around her. And it is precisely this, my enthusiasm for learning, that I hope will be an inspiration to others. But enthusiasm is also greatly aided by strong interpersonal skills and the ability to communicate clearly and effectively. I have had ample opportunity to develop these assets in my combined experience and will bring it all to teaching along with the "wisdom" of maturity.

Summary and Conclusion

The focus of this paper was on six adult learners–Dave, Pam, Phil, Ann, Amy, and Steve–who enrolled in an introductory education course to explore teaching as a career change. Previous studies support what these students claim are some of the challenges facing adult learners entering the teaching profession. Issues, such as competition in the job market, age discrimination, suspicions about their motives, scheduling of time, financial worries, and being held to the same criteria as traditional students in the learning arena are revealed in their discussions and in their journals. Also revealed is that, despite these concerns, these students are highly motivated and remain undaunted in their pursuits.

Implementation of any new programs for the adult learner entering teaching will have to include plans to accommodate and consider the needs and issues related to these learners that we heard discussed; for example: (a) flexible scheduling of courses and opportunities for independent studies; (b) field placements with cooperating teachers who are comfortable working with "older" student teachers; (c) opportunities for self-growth and self-reflection through shared discussions, journal writing, and portfolios; and (d) assignment to academic advisors who support the motives and aspirations of adults who change careers for the opportunity to teach. The teaching profession must maximize the potentially rich contributions of these special learners to the area of teacher development and educational reform as we plan for teacher preparation in the twenty-first century.

In summary, the following entry from Steven's journal captures the essence of this paper. Steven writes:

> I feel compelled to take an excerpt from *Walden* in which Thoreau writes, "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, and will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him ... If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost, that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

Steve concludes, "I have built my castles in the air, and I have begun to build the foundations, and I will not rest until it is completed."

References

Bennett, C. (1991). The teacher as decision maker program: An alternative for career-change preservice teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education, 42*(2), 119-130.

Bullough, R. V., & Knowles, J. G. (1990). Becoming a teacher: Struggles of a second-career beginning teacher. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 3*(2), 101-112.

Cohen, M. (1983, April). *Teacher concerns: Developmental changes in preservice teachers.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec.

Daloz, L. A. (1986). *Effective teaching and mentoring: Realizing the transformational power of adult learning experiences.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fessler, R., & Christensen, J. (1992). *The teacher career cycle.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Freidus, H. (1993, Winter). Commentary: Men in a women's world–male second-career elementary teachers. *The Holmes Group Forum, 7,* 21-24.

Knowles, M. (1984). *The adult learner: A neglected species* (3rd ed.). Houston: Gulf.

Lindeman, E. C. (1926). *The meaning of adult education.* New York: New Republic.

Loranger, A. L. (1993, May). *Implications for adult learners entering the teaching profession.* Paper presented at the 1993 National Conference on the Adult Learner, Columbia, NC.

MacDonald, R. H., Manning, M. L., & Gable, R. A. (1994). An alternative certification program: Career transition. *Action in Teacher Education, X(VI),* 19-27.

Madfes, T. (1989). *Second careers–second challenges: Meeting the needs of the older teacher education students.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the California Educational Research Association.

Rife, F. N., Maloy, R. W., & Keefe, M. W. (1988). Returning to teaching: Why post-degree students re-enter college for teacher certification. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 15,* 65-74.