

# Interactive Journaling for Effective Teacher Preparation

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## Abstract

This article focuses on *interactive journaling* as a constructivist reflection tool and offers practical ways to implement its use in teacher preparation. The constructivist philosophy of theory-practice-reflection is a connected and practical approach to the teacher preparation process. *Theory* occurs in the implementation of classroom theory and pedagogy. The field experience supplies the critical *practice* component, during which time teacher candidates are not only observing but are active participants of learning. *Reflection* is the connection piece in the Constructivist cycle of teacher education as candidates consider what it takes to be an effective teacher and relate theory to practice.

## Introduction

In June of 2010 more than 200 teacher educators gathered on The Hill in Washington, D.C. to emphasize the importance of high-quality teacher education programs. "President Barack Obama has a long record in support of effective teachers and the rigorous preparation of our nation's educators," said AACTE President & CEO Sharon P. Robinson. "AACTE and its 800 member institutions call on the President and his Administration to honor that commitment and ensure that strong clinical training is part of our nation's plan for teacher development" (accessed at <http://aacte.org> 9-3-10).

Field experience is an essential component, if not the core, of a good teacher preparation program. It is true that teacher training and education occurs in the college or university education classes, but that alone does not adequately prepare a future teacher. The crux of the preparation occurs when teacher candidates are out in the schools (field) with hands-on experience and supportive guidance by an experienced mentor teacher. It is true that education professors can bring years of teaching experience to the college classroom, and combined with theoretical underpinnings can

provide a reasonable look at the profession of teaching. However, it is the actual field experience, analogous to a medical or scientific-based lab, where the learning comes alive. That is where the connections are made between theory and practice and meaning is made through experiential understanding. Knowledge is built, or constructed, through a process called adaptation as the learner builds connections between schemes (organized units of knowledge) through interaction with the environment (Morrison, 2012, p.130); in this case, the adaptation occurs between theory from the college classroom and practice in the schools alongside experienced mentor teachers.

### **Vital Connections – Teacher Education at Heidelberg University**

At Heidelberg University, a small liberal arts university in northwestern Ohio, the education courses are based on the Constructivist Theory which presupposes that a unifying thread ties together theory-practice-reflection, building tools for the actual learning process through which knowledge is constructed. The Constructivist principle states that knowledge is a process, not a product, and it occurs in a continuous cyclic fashion. Teacher candidates derive meaning from actual classroom experiences and construct their own understanding. The conceptual framework in Heidelberg's teacher preparation program is called "Vital Connections," based on the Constructivist Theory of learning. Active learning is an essential part of Constructivism. Learners construct knowledge through physical and mental activity and are actively involved in problem-solving activities (Morrison, 2012, p.129). The symbol seen in Diagram 1 appears on all our education course syllabi and in the classroom. All courses are designed and organized with this foundational basis.

**Diagram 1** – Heidelberg University’s Constructivist Framework



**Rationale:** The teacher licensure programs at Heidelberg University are based on a **Constructivist** philosophy. This means that the pre-service and in-service teachers in our programs build or construct their knowledge as a result of a student-centered, hands-on approach to learning. From the beginning of their experience at Heidelberg, our students are actively involved in their coursework and clinical/field experiences. Specifically, the students build or construct their new knowledge about teaching and learning with several tools - **theory, practice, and reflection**. These are the building tools that connect the constructivist core of the conceptual framework to each of the teacher education licensure programs.

**Theory** - principles of teaching and learning

**Practice** - clinical and field experience

**Reflection** - thinking about, evaluating and revising one's teaching and learning.

Thus, constructivism is at the core of the conceptual framework, and the building tools of theory, practice, and reflection connect this core to each of the licensure programs.\*

\* Early, Middle, Multi-Age Grades, Adolescent to Young Adult (AYA), Intervention Specialist (ISP), and Master of Arts in Education (MAE)

The School of Education faculty embraces the notion of Constructivism in the practical sense that we believe that knowledge is gained through an active process in which learners develop new knowledge over time through real-life experiences. The classroom mentor teachers are critical members of the training partnership and are supported by the university faculty with communication, professional development, tools, and even a nominal stipend. The three parts in this learning cycle (theory, practice, and reflection) each entity build on the next throughout the learning process.

## Theory

There are many distinguished contributors to the American education system that date back to Martin Luther in the 1500s to the present (Morrison, 2012). The theoretical underpinnings and foundational knowledge of teacher education are learned in the college classroom portion of teacher education. Many instructors, especially in early childhood education, provide model lessons – complete with books, hands-on materials, puppets, etc. – and the college students take on the role and age level of the children whom they are aspiring to teach. We use case studies of examples of possible classroom situations and problem scenarios and discuss solutions to how we might solve these challenges of the teaching world. Experienced instructors use their experiences as classroom teachers to share what they have done or would do in various scenarios. In my own experience, I often find that when I talk about an actual experience that I had as a kindergarten teacher and I launch into telling the story, the college education students become entranced and hang on every word. I can dangle that story like a carrot, and the teacher candidates are mesmerized with interest as they sit waiting to hear the ending – like a good cliffhanger – with a look of expectancy and curiosity on their faces as if to say, *So what did you do?* I find that those are my favorite teaching moments, because I am talking about real people and telling the story with true passion. That, to me, is *true* teaching, and it reminds me of why I left *that* early childhood classroom to enter *this* classroom at the college level of teaching. I find that there is a power to the personal touch in relating an actual experience. This works well in teaching future educators, as an illustration from real life can motivate learners and is part of a humanistic approach to teaching. Telling stories from real-life experience encourages relationships, a key part of a social learning setting such as a classroom. From a social constructionist point of view, teachers and students together construct the knowledge of the classroom together. The classroom forms a social group in which a common culture is constructed, one of the complex pieces of the “puzzle of learning” (Wink & Putney, 2002, p.64).

Our education courses at Heidelberg also cover principles of teaching, ethics, morals, and professionalism. In our early level courses we explore what schools are like, alternative schooling approaches, what teachers are like, what it takes to build a career, and the like. During the middle to upper-level courses we introduce methods of teaching – specifics about how to teach the age-level and content areas of interest. At this point the courses specialize for early childhood, middle childhood, or adolescent/young adult. The belief here is that prospective teachers need a knowledge base of what children are like at specific age levels and how to reach them. Research has shown that what the public ranks among the top qualities of teachers is having knowledge of *how to teach* children and understanding of *how people learn* (Morrison, 2003). We feel that this equips the Heidelberg students with a knowledge base to go out into the classrooms (field experience) and make connections between what we have talked about in foundations classes (theory) and now see it “come alive” in practice.

### **Practice**

Field experience has been called the staple of teacher education programs (Wilson & Floden, 2002). If the education part stopped with the theory – if there were not the next part of the cycle, the practice – it would be empty, devoid of true meaning without the necessary connections made in order for real learning to occur. This would be like learning a science without having a lab experience. It is in the practice field or inquiry-based lab setting – in our case, in the field experience classroom – with the mentor teacher (or what we sometimes call the cooperating teacher) guiding and facilitating the practice teaching - where the true learning of *how to teach* takes place. In this manner, teacher candidates are actively learning pragmatically, or *learning by doing*). According to Dewey (1916/2004), the most effective education occurs this way in an integrative social context. Constructivist Jean Piaget (1972) would agree that through the Theory of Cognitive Development we learn by experience within our environment, that we can only understand experiences that we have actually had and therefore can relate to and make meaning from them. Just as a baby can learn through imitation as early as three days old and uses imitation as a cognitive tool, in the same

manner the education candidate observes the actual classroom teacher in action, imitates actions and language that s/he uses, combines this with that theoretical knowledge bank of what children are like and what good teaching includes, and then gets to try it out with that experienced guide (mentor teacher) assisting, giving feedback, making suggestions, and facilitating the learning. In this way the teacher candidate experiences a student-centered, hands-on approach, which is the backbone of a constructivist approach.

The basis for this connection is in the three-way relationship between the college supervisor/instructor, classroom mentor teacher, and teacher candidate. It is important that this trio has an open, communicative relationship. It is important that the education department maintains a good relationship with the area schools and that they support each other as part of the education community, providing the necessary tools and resources to guide the teacher candidates. Through our field placement director, we secure teachers who are willing to “host” an education candidate in their classrooms (via permission from building principals) and then the classroom teacher/mentors and teacher candidates are matched according to strengths and needs of a particular candidate. The college course instructors work individually to communicate expectations for that particular course and the requirements for the field experience by providing professional development and ongoing communication. It is critical to keep all three parties “on the same page” to ensure a fulfilling field experience for all participants. A stipend is also offered to cooperating teachers at the conclusion of the semester experience.

The other important realization - and a factor that we pride ourselves on as being a unique feature of the Heidelberg School of Education (and shared with prospective students) - is that we require a lot of field experience, and it follows a continuum of involvement. For example, in early childhood we can guarantee that during six of eight semesters the candidates will have some level of field experience (see diagram 2).

## Diagram 2 - Outline of Early Childhood (EC) Courses (\*with Field Experiences)

- ✘ Semester 1 – \*Intro to Education – 12 observation hours
- ✘ Semester 2 - none (general education courses)
- ✘ Semester 3 – \*Preschool Block – 30 field hours
- ✘ Semester 4 – \*EC Block 1 – 40+ hours
- ✘ Semester 5 – \*EC Block 2 – 50+ hours
- ✘ Semester 6 – \*EC Block 3 – 100+ hours
- ✘ Semester 7 - Reading Tutoring – 25 hours
- ✘ Semester 8 – \*Student Teaching – 13 weeks

The experience begins in Semester 1 with a situation of working with one student or a small group, in a tutorial fashion. Then it quickly turns into a *participant observation* (Spradley, 1980) situation. The candidates are actively involved in the learning situation. For example, there is no such thing as sitting idly by in a preschool classroom, because, as I tell the candidates, anyone who is tall and adult-like is thought to be a teacher-type and is drawn into play. The candidate is not writing lessons, for example, during the preschool block but is very much involved with the children and observing the mentor teacher in action at all times. As they enter Block 1, time increases as well as more requirements and interaction opportunities with teacher and students. With each succeeding block there is more time in the classroom with hands-on activity, lesson planning, and teaching experience. The junior Block 3 is half-day, providing a daily “dress rehearsal” that leads to the culminating all-day senior student teaching experience.

### Reflection

The part of the cycle that truly “seals the deal” or cements the brain synapse connections that cause learning to occur, is the last part of the Constructivist cycle – that is, reflection (see Diagram 1). This is where we see actual student learning, where the learning *comes alive*. The reflection piece can and should be done in a variety of ways – including in-class discussion and collaboration about theory and practice. These are vibrant discussions because the candidates come from their various

classroom field experiences and compare notes, swap stories, and share ideas. This also rehearses their collaboration and professionalism. Written reflections are a way to document the connections made between theory and practice. The Reggio Emilia approach promotes the use of documentation, designed to help the observer “see the relationship between what the children are doing and the underlying theories and philosophical principles that provide the rationale for the experience” (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002, p.121).

### **The Reflection Tool**

The Vital Connections framework states that teacher candidates will be able to reflect on their own practice and assume responsibility for their professional growth, performance, and involvement as an individual and as a member of a learning community. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) defines reflection as thinking systematically about practice and learning from experience. A very valuable tool that we use for reflection purposes at Heidelberg is the method of journaling, a more personal and narrative form of scientific inquiry lab notes. However, the purpose is not to simply record occurrences in the field but also to wonder, question or “talk through” what happened. I ask the early childhood candidates to weekly reflect on each two-hour field experience in the preschool. They are expected to use terms learned in class and *apply* theoretical learning. They send their journals to the instructor, who in turn provides feedback, comments, etc. Research shows that through the medium of writing learning occurs in a unique way: “In language we can bring to explicit awareness what we formerly had only an implicit sense of” (Wertsch, 2000). It allows ideas to be put on paper and expressed with precision and insight. Journaling is a tool for reflecting and used effectively can be the medium through which cognitive connections between theory and practice are realized. Vygotsky would agree that it is through these *tools* that we fundamentally shape and define human activity (Wertsch, 1990). This approach is also grounded in the Constructivist learning theory, which maintains that knowledge cannot be transmitted, rather it must be constructed by the learner building on existing understanding and experience (Moore, 2003).

Just as the field experiences are on a continuum with the amount and level of experience increasing along the way, so the journaling changes form and purpose throughout the range of field experiences. The juniors choose a theory they have learned about and must specifically designate the theory (and where they learned it), relate it to something that occurred in field (practice), and then *reflect* on the meaning this provided for them. Again, they send journals electronically to the instructor, who in turn responds with comments and feedback. This can be used for assessment as well, with the use of a simplistic rubric. (Diagram 3 shows an example of what is used to assess some of early childhood journals.)

### **Diagram 3 – Journal Assessment Point Scale**

- 10-9 = thorough, reflective, well written (including grammar & conventions of print)
- 8-6 = good, acceptable response but more thought needed
- 5-1 = below average, major components missing
- 0 = not submitted (8 entries are required).

The last step of journaling in Block 3 just before the culminating senior student teaching experience includes another form of interaction. The audience has changed from course instructor to classroom teacher. The candidate journals daily with the mentor teacher in order to ask for advice and to make inquiries. The candidates consider what they bring to the profession and what characteristics might describe them in the teaching role. Used in this way the journal assists the teacher candidates with details for their particular classroom and also serves as a tool in an important reflective process of negotiating their role as a teacher (Bakhtin, 1981). The journaling process helps them to build their knowledge of what it means to be a teacher as they try on the role during the practice experience. The candidate is so accustomed to use of the journaling tool by this point of teacher training that s/he finds it natural to insert theory without even specifically trying! The hopeful intention is that the mentor teacher will respond with answers, suggestions, comments, etc. I have found that this two-way communication is indeed helpful in most situations when the candidates are in the field

experience daily but don't have time to chat with the mentor teacher. Of course, as individuals and circumstances vary, the amount of interactive reflection between candidate and mentor teacher varies, but it is encouraged as an important part of the learning process. Topics that might not otherwise be approached are covered and relationships are developed through the medium of writing. This level of *interactive* journaling allows the exchange of ideas between teacher candidates and their mentors. It offers the candidates an opportunity to reflect on their practice, and thoughtful reflection in turn informs practice and improves teaching.

Socioculturalist theory, inspired by Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1981) view learning in terms of dynamic social activity (Wertsch, 1991) and as a social process. New knowledge is constructed interactively through collective learning, which occurs as an outcome of social interaction (Adger & Hoyle, 2004). The field experience is the learning community in this case, and the learning occurs between teacher candidate and mentor teacher through exchange of comments and ideas via the journal. This form of interaction is rather unique and a different twist on journaling from most forms used in our education program. At this stage, teacher candidates should be considering who they are as a teacher, or self-as-teacher (Bakhtin, 1981). Reflection is a tool that encourages the teacher candidate's role negotiation, self-identity, and enhances the candidates' professionalism and communication skills. Both mentor teachers and teacher candidates have shared their feelings that this method of reflective journaling has proven to be an effective means of growth and role negotiation.

A more sophisticated approach to journaling is reserved at Heidelberg University for the graduate level, in courses that are usually taken by experienced teachers seeking the master's degree. My class members journal with each other, thus sharing their teaching experiences and collaborating with one another as co-professionals to exercise critical thinking skills. As a third interaction, I (as the class instructor) respond to their partner journaling with my comments. All participants are acting as true members of a common learning community by discussing issues of concern, sharing

experiences, and supporting one another in the teaching profession. One graduate student described the additional dimension that this form of interactive journaling allows:

This journaling technique added a dimensional perspective to our classroom discussion. The interactive journal allowed us to keep the discussion going which basically extended our learning time. By extending the conversation throughout the week I found myself applying the ethical perspectives in other areas of life.

(Heidelberg University graduate-level student, 2010)

This three-way interactive journaling was used in a course on ethics in the education profession, in which there was much discussion to be continued outside of class. In some cases there were three students interacting with the instructor:

I think interactive journaling is a useful tool. The journal portion allows for the processing and reflection of content used in and out of the classroom. By sharing our thoughts with fellow classmates, we were able to gain insight into the different perspectives of others. I was fortunate to be in a group with two other students and the instructor. The interaction was particularly valuable and interesting. I was able to learn how others might deal with a situation based on their background, knowledge and experiences.

(Heidelberg University graduate-level student, 2010)

With a series of field experiences and use of a collaborative tool such as journaling, teacher candidates build their professionalism and identity as a teacher over time. They will build on their strengths and weaknesses identified in each field experience and set goals for the next step of the journey. We feel this helps to create caring, conscientious and competent teachers – some of the very important dispositions for tomorrow’s teachers to possess.

## **Summary**

Teacher preparation is a critical process for informing the profession and inevitably preparing the future work force. The recursive nature of the theory, practice and reflection cycle provides experiential, active learning. Journaling is a useful tool for teacher candidates to reflect on their own practice and assume responsibility for their

professional growth and involvement as a member of the learning community. Journaling can be done in a variety of ways and becomes a valuable tool to enhance effective teaching and life-long learning. The particular use of interactive journal documentation for reflection throughout a pre-service teacher's training can enhance the ability to make connections and see relationships between theory and practice. Along with hands-on classroom experience built on solid partnerships between teachers at all levels, the journaling tool helps the learning come alive. Field experience and tools like journaling continue to provide the foundation for hands-on learning, makes for the most complete teacher preparation and development.

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