

## *“Enlarging the Space of the Possible”: (Re)Imagining Teacher Preparation*

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The authors of this paper, under the guidance of Deborah Seltzer-Kelly, have produced an article full of fine problematics, that is, of issues with which to wrestle, all built around reimagining teacher preparation and asking us to engage with the concept so as to “provide a space of the possible” (Osberg, in Seltzer-Kelly et al.). For me the title provides much to play with: “(Re)Imagining Teacher Preparation for Conjoint Democratic Inquiry in Complex Classroom Ecologies.” Here, I would re-imagine or re-image teacher-preparation; play with John Dewey’s use of con-joint, rather than joint; or his notion of democracy, not so much a form of government, as a way of life, or his emphasis on inquiry as pragmatism’s logic. All this I would envelop in the complexity of complex classrooms, especially those having their own ecology, a Batesonian idea. Moving beyond *playing with*— an instructional device Gregory Bateson (2002 [1987]), endorses, there is embedded in the article a master list of 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual thinkers: Bateson and Dewey, already mentioned, Buber, Deluze, Freud, Hillman, Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas, Mead. From psychology the work of Rogers features prominently, and from education, the work of Aoki, Davis and Sumara, Osberg and Biesta, and myself is prominent. Alfred North Whitehead, though not mentioned directly, appears in the often and well stated reference to *relations*. These are, Whitehead was fond of saying, the “really real” of reality (1938, 206) Under girding all are the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle. Quite a pantheon of thinkers. All are worth further study. As educationists, I believe we should delve into the writings of the scholars the authors present to us.

My own intent in this essay is to focus on one particular way of re-imagining teacher-education; but first I'd like to mention three ideas in the Seltzer-Kelly et al. paper which caught my attention: relations, grades, order.

*Relations:* My own study of Whitehead, Bateson, and C.S. Peirce (1992 [1898]) via Donna Trueitt has attuned me to the notion of relations being the reality of our world; not the "solid, hard, massy, impenetrable Particles" of atoms Newton (1952 [1730], 376), considered the foundation of all, the building blocks of nature. Once I began to feel comfortable with Whitehead's dictum, though, I also began to see (1) that our curricular designs were indeed atomistic, each unit autonomous unto itself, and (2) that an alternative design could be found in Whitehead's (1978 [1929]) and to some degree Dewey's (1966 [1916]) notions of *process*. Process acquired substance for me as I read more in the field of complexity. Here, much akin to the authors in their papers, I began to see curriculum and instruction in terms of connections, emergences, networks, patterns, systems. Above all, in terms of relations. A second reading of the authors' papers brought out to me the importance each author attaches to the concept of relation and its tie to complexity thinking. Here indeed is a way to enlarge the space of the possible in reimagining teacher education.<sup>1</sup> Later on, I will comment on some specifics in teacher education we at LSU have developed over the past decade.

*Grades and Deficits:* It is easy to overlook the various author's use of the word deficit; it appears infrequently. This, however, would be unfortunate, for at least two of the phrasings are pregnant with potential. One is "the effort to assign deficits to children; another is "the dynamic that prevails when deficit thinking and blame infuse classroom relationships." The actuality is that *deficit thinking and blame* continually infuse the classroom; they enter each time a grade is assigned or feedback given. Both of these operate from a deficit hypothesis. Every grade given (even an A) measures the distance from a desired goal. Feedback is almost uniformly to show mistakes. Self worth is measured on a deficit scale.<sup>2</sup> It is romantic to assume this modernist "discursive practice" (Reiss, 1982) will be dropped in our lifetimes; but understanding how prevalent is this practice, and how stultifying it is, may well help us mitigate some of its more pernicious effects. I speculate that many a teacher schooled, not educated, in the art of teaching would believe s/he was doing "good" by maintaining a distance between the goal set and the performance achieved. In many ways, this is a "manly" approach.

*Order and Disorder:* Order is mentioned directly in the paper only a few times: once when Shannon (this paper) was crying the lament of first year teachers: "Some days it was all I could do to keep order, let alone teach." Such a challenge, indeed a hard challenge, brings to my mind a most imaginative second grade teacher who continually

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<sup>1</sup> I use the phrase teacher education, rather than the more descriptive phrase, teacher preparation only to emphasize the need to educate teachers in the humanities as well as the sciences. Teacher preparation needs to include an education in the Arts as well as in the Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> In a 1922 essay, "Individual, Equality and Superiority," Dewey makes a trenchant comment about testing: "[T]he results of mental testing proves the extent to which we are given to judging and treating individuals not as individuals but as creatures of a class, a quantitative class which covers up truly individualized traits" (in Ratner, 486)..

had to hassle her students to line up quietly before leaving the room for lunch. One day she asked them to order themselves — self-organization — before leaving the room. They quickly agreed to so do, some days with the tallest person leading, some days with the shortest, they even tried a mixture of boy-girl interspersed with tall-short. One day the children asked the teacher to step outside the room while they organized themselves. When they were ready, they asked the teacher to return and *to guess the order* they had developed. With this simple act, a new world of logic entered their sense of being; the orders they developed were complex and creative. Indeed this sense of complex order became a part of the fabric of the class, not only before lunch but after lunch as well. Test scores went up. These students acquired faith in their abilities and applied this confidence to the tasks they were asked to perform. A complexity community was formed, a community that was alive, engaged.

A second reference to the concept of order, comes in Kalinda's contribution to (re)imagining teacher preparation. She uses the word in the sense of teachers needing to have a strong understanding of "the needs of students with chronic disruptive behaviors such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)." Leaving aside the *oddness* of the acronym, Kalinda's point is that "teachers' ability to implement classroom interventions for these [disruptive] students can have enormous influence upon the students' ability to learn." Kalinda then goes on to problematize the role teachers play in this intervention, expressing the belief that even if empathetic intervention does not result quickly in "improved academic performance," the student "may well develop some improved self-efficacy because of the teacher's belief in him/her." My own experience with students expressing disruptive behavior, although slight, was enlightening to me and quite in line, with what Kalinda's research is showing. In the late 1980s I was supervising student teachers in a rural town in California. While the student teachers I was supervising did outstanding activities with their students, at least one regular teacher challenged us to work with a class of disruptive students, which is how this school handled its "problem" students. We accepted the challenge and the teacher in charge of the class was overjoyed to have help. Our approach was to turn away from the textbooks and worksheets (of the regular classes) with which the teacher had been provided, and to create projects — outlining each student's body with crayons on white sheets of paper and then filling in the various organs (and studying what those organs did); or playing card games such as a modified form of Black Jack, whose intricacies we increased at will for those able and willing to handle such; or playing tic-tac-toe on a four quadrant number line grid. It was amazing how attentive were these children, how they helped one another grasp concepts, how they began to work with concepts that in time would become both sophisticated and useful. The curriculum was nonlinear, more interpretive-poetic than analytic-referential (to borrow a phrase from Reiss). A linear progression from the simple to the complicated is, I believe, one of the ghosts that inhabit north American textbooks and the type of learning these books advocate.

An order different from textbook order is what interests me the most. It lies beneath the surface of the written word and deals with the struggle each author has, indeed we all have, in finding an alternative to the didactic, teaching-as-telling, Donna Trueit and

Sarah Pratt describe so well (2006). This new order is, to use my words, recursive, relational, rigorous, and *emerges* from a curriculum rich in possibilities, problematics, perturbations (Doll, 1993). This order underlies an experimental teacher education program a few doctoral students and I designed in the late 1990s. It has now been in operation about a dozen years and is the way, at LSU, we put into practice a reimagined teacher preparation program. The original impetus was a national attempt by colleges of teacher education to upgrade their preparation programs. It is called Holmes after a Dean who headed the commission. The emphasis, one we like, is on an integration of the academic with the professional. After attending a few of the Holmes' meetings, we found our view of how a teacher education program should be designed quite different from that the commission advocated. We have kept the name but only the name. The idea of putting two Interns (our name for the pre-service teachers) in the same classroom has been considered not only radical but absurd. Drawing heavily on Gregory Bateson's notion of utilizing difference, though, such a grouping seemed then and seems now quite proper. The LSU program also draws heavily on Bateson's notion of a "difference which makes a difference," as well his sense of play, and levels of learning. These form a new epistemology, one focusing on depth learning and creative action (1972). The program also draws on A. N. Whitehead's triad of romance, precision, generalization (1967 [1929]) which we, following my love of alliteration, call play, precision, principles. Of special note here is Whitehead's insistence that precision, developed too soon, without attendant playfulness with concepts, leads to learning that is shallow, "inert," "barren," "useless" (Ch. 1). A third guide for our program is Michel Serres with his interest in teaching with humility, searching for a "third space," where possibilities exist, and questing for the sacred or spiritual (2000 [1991]; 1998 [1990]). Arching overall is the presence of John Dewey and his lifelong wrestle with personal experience and democratic values.<sup>3</sup>

These authors, along with others we studied in the Friday morning doctoral seminar (Heidegger, Gadamer, Peirce, Rorty to name a few), became the foundation for the weekly Holmes Friday afternoon Reflections. Various faculty from LSU, from other colleges and universities, and a few international visitors dropped in to either or both. Lunch on Friday was a potpourri of ideas, and a number of doctoral students played significant roles in the Holmes afternoon program. Our intent in all this was not just to honor difference but to utilize it. The academic and the professional became entangled in one another. Here, I might have said integrated rather than entangled, but the academic and the professional were not intended to synthesize; rather each had its own vibrant dynamism, a dynamism that honored the dynamism of the "other." In honoring "the otherness of the other" (Derrida, 2001 [1992], 180) we understand better ourselves.

Professionally the program certifies the student-intern at the elementary level, with a middle school option, as an add-on for those so desiring. The program is five years,

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<sup>3</sup> While *Democracy and Education* is the usual book one refers to when talking of Dewey's views on democracy, the Ratner collection (1929) of "Popular Essays in Social and Political Thought" written by Dewey in the decade after *Democracy and Education*, offers personal insights on specific aspects of democracy not found in Dewey's formal writings.

and one or two summers long. Work in the schools occurs during the sophomore, junior, senior years, with a full graduate year in two socially and culturally different schools. The students receive a Bachelor's degree after four years and as Interns a Master's plus certification in the fifth year. During the junior year the students are placed in cohorts and this grouping carries over for the senior and graduate years. For graduate status and the rank of Intern, the Holmes pre-service teachers have to be accepted by the graduate school. During the fifth year, the Interns are placed two to a classroom, four days a week, in one school in the fall and in a different socio-economic school (and different grade level) in the spring. Two clinical faculty meet with the Interns while they are in the schools, and also utilize the Friday morning sessions to review the teaching of the week. A research project, often done in tandem by the two Interns who have worked together all year, culminates the Intern experience.

From the Interns point of view the afternoon academic sessions are a bit confusing. These always start with a reading that raises questions of social justice, particularly relevant to the state of Louisiana and its racial mixture. While disturbing, intentionally provocative, to many of the Interns, especially those coming from elitist backgrounds, the power of this initial reading has a dramatic effect on helping the Interns relate to many of the students they teach on a Monday to Thursday basis. The readings from 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals are harder for them to comprehend and utilize. Over the year, however, their skills in reading and interpretation improve greatly, as does their general intellectual competence. They take pride in their accomplishments and begin to understand life and its experiences from new perspectives. Detailing research projects to classmates, teachers, parents prepares the Interns to become leaders in the schools they chose for their first year teaching experiences. Multiple offers of teaching positions is the norm.

From the perspective of the Baton Rouge or New Orleans school teachers, the hardest part to grasp is that the students, as teacher-trainees, are not in the school for a full year, nor for a full week, and that each classroom teacher is to work with two Interns. This arrangement is intentional, for our desire is to encourage reflection. Reflections based on relations. The Interns are not there to copy the classroom teacher, they are there to work with the teacher on common issues. Differences in observations and styles are not seen as failures but as opportunities for further growth and insight, for "enlarging the space of the possible."

The LSU Holmes' Elementary and Middle School Program is now a featured artifact among LSU's teacher-education programs. It is small, albeit doubling in size during its continued tenure, and experimental. As such it has had and continues to have an effect on LSU's other pre-service programs: notably two pre-service teachers to a classroom, the use of clinical faculty, an increased emphasis on academic preparation, and cultural diffusion via multiple school placements. The Holmes program is not meant to be *the* or even *a* model, but rather a living example of "enlarging the space of the possible." Each director puts his or her own stamp on the program. I retired in 2007 and the program is now under the guidance of a faculty member I worked with in my latter years at LSU. This same *continuity with difference* has occurred with the clinical faculty. The program

requires time, effort, commitment by faculty, school teachers, administrators, and students. One of the outstanding features is how this group has formed a community over the program's life. I have been inspired to write what I know of the program in response to concerns of Shannon and Serina , since their concerns are ones that motivated me and my doctoral students to propose a program "(re)imagining teacher education, focusing on helping teachers-to-be "become a different kind of educator," ones able to live with the system while at the same time changing it.

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