

# Immersing Teacher Candidates in Experiential Learning: Cohorts, Learning Communities, and Mentoring

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## Abstract

In this article, we present three models of teacher preparation programs that immersed their candidates in experiential learning aimed at bringing together theory and practice. We identify the key components that can be generalized from studying such programs, examine factors that led to their dismantling, and propose a potentially more sustainable model.

## Keywords

Experiential Learning: Cohorts, Learning Communities, and Mentoring

## Introduction

A continually vexing problem regarding the preparation of teachers has been the challenge of guiding candidates toward making the connection between the academic side of learning to become a teacher and the practical side of the profession. It has long been recognized that the traditional student teaching (also called practice teaching) experience at the end of a program of study has been an inadequate and artificial means of transitioning to the responsibilities and demands of a full time teaching assignment following this closely supervised period. The specificity of any given teaching assignment, the day-to-day decision making, and all of the other often-unpredictable demands on a new teacher make it impossible for any teacher preparation program to fully ready novice teachers for the reality of their first

teaching assignment, when mentoring and support are generally minimized or non-existent.

It is foolish to fail to recognize that there are real students who are being taught by those novice teachers; their learning and their welfare are at stake. The more prepared new teachers are to implement their accumulated knowledge about how children learn, the better off those students will be. The medical profession offers its prime directive: *primum non nocere*, or “first, do no harm,” a key tenet that applies as well to inexperienced teachers, who are prone to doing harm due to a lack of the extensive experiential learning, monitoring and mentoring. A number of teacher preparation programs have attempted

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to smooth the way by various approaches that incorporate experiential learning within the educational program leading to initial teaching licensure and that first teaching position. We will describe three of these programs and identify those factors that made them effective by closing the gap between academic preparation and actual teaching experiences.

The first two models discuss alternative route programs – that is, programs that operate by following approved state guidelines pertaining to various alternative licensure pathways, usually temporary ones with clearly defined requirements to insure candidates will eventually meet all of the established standards for full licensure of the kind that those following the traditional course would obtain. These alternative route programs have existed in the US for many years and came about in response to projected teacher shortages and as a means of reining in a growing epidemic of generally unregulated “emergency” teaching certificates. The models of instruction generally follow one of two designs. Both require candidates to have an undergraduate degree in a relevant area, and then immerse them in a summer student teaching experience, from which they move directly into their own classrooms for the next two years while pursuing their master’s degree and/or obtaining a level of teacher certification equivalent to that of someone following the traditional route. Some of the models subsume the candidates into existing teacher preparation programs (with additional field supervision), while others provide a focused curriculum aimed at connecting theory and practice within a targeted setting.

### **Model 1: Intern Teaching Program for College Graduates**

Arguably, an internship approach offers the potential for smoothing the way for new teachers and thereby prevent or minimize a great many of

the “harmful” errors that a part and parcel of the first-year experience. Indeed, such an approach has been implemented by a number of teacher preparation institutions over the years. As one example, co-author Howard Miller is a graduate of one such program, the Intern Teaching Program for College Graduates that was initiated by Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, in 1968 (Temple University, 1968). This graduate program, which is no longer in existence, was designed to develop liberal arts and science graduates as secondary school teachers. It incorporated two years of full-time teaching and formal campus-based course work. Some of that course work was specific to the program; the rest was made up of courses that were part of the existing traditional teacher preparation program. The highly selective program identified candidates with strong academic backgrounds in the liberal arts and sciences. Successful completers received provisional teaching certification (i.e., state licensure) and a master's degree.

The program began, as many such models do, with an intensive summer orientation that included the equivalent of the student teaching experience that would typically come at the end of a traditional teacher preparation program. Interns spent part of the day in a mentored classroom, working, at first collaboratively and then independently, under the guidance of a licensed teacher from the school district, an immersion into teaching one clinical supervisor referred to as a “trial by fire.” Immediately following the summer experience, the interns were placed in a full-salaried teaching position, with extensive supervision through weekly visits provided by the university faculty. First-year activities included a weekly seminar on campus and course work focusing on the nature of learning, the school's role in society, and specialized subject teaching methods.

## **Model 2: New Teacher Residency Program**

The New Teacher Residency Program (NTRP), a finalist for the 2009 Association of Teacher Educators Distinguished Program in Teacher Education Award, was in operation at Mercy College from 2002 to 2010 as a collaborative project with the New York City Public Schools. It was established as an alternate route teacher education program that focused exclusively on preparing teachers for high needs elementary and middle school general education and special education classrooms in New York City. During its years of operation, it graduated some 2,000 teachers. Similar to other immersive teacher preparation programs, like Temple University's Intern Teaching Program, NTRP Fellows took graduate-level coursework while teaching full time in urban public schools, under the provisions of a temporary alternate route teaching license provided by the New York State Department of Education.

Participants in the two-year, thirty-six credit Master's in Urban Education program were screened and selected by school district personnel and assigned to one of the participating public and private colleges and universities to pursue their course work while serving as full time teachers, starting with an initial intensive summer academic and practical preparation that including mentored classroom teaching equivalent to student teaching. The NTRP employed a cohort model in which the Fellows took the same courses in the same sequence over six semesters, including summers, ending with the awarding of a Master's Degree in Urban Education. Unlike many such programs, the NTRP curriculum was developed specifically for its students and centered on what it referred to as the six *Essentials of Effective Practice*. These requisite goals for teachers were measured through corresponding indicators that reflected the program's student learning outcomes and were

aligned with local, state and national standards relevant to teacher education. The six *Essentials of Effective Practice* were: Commitment to Learning, Deliberate Practice, Accountability for Student Learning, Teaching the Whole Student, Improvisation, and Educational Leadership

Each new cohort of Fellows began the program by participating in a summer institute coordinated between the city school district and NTRP. The summer institute aimed to help Fellows examine and understand the socio-culture contexts of communities they would serve, and to lay the foundation for effective instructional planning for students with varied learning needs, developing a classroom environment conducive for learning, and developing an awareness of the multiple resources available to assist in the teaching and learning process. The summer institute was a true collaboration, with NTRP providing the academic course work, and the school district providing advisory sessions and appropriate summer school classroom placements. During the fall semester, and for the next two years, the Fellows continued their NTRP coursework in tandem with their classroom teaching and support from college and school district mentors, supervisors, and advisors. Because of the specific nature of the relationship between the NTRP and the New York City Public Schools, all of the course work was carefully aligned with both New York State and New York City learning standards.

A unique feature of NTRP was the use of the learning community model, applied not only to the cohort of participants, but to the instructors as well. NTRP adopted the learning community model of collaboration among the fulltime faculty and the experienced teachers who served as adjunct faculty. In practice, this meant that fulltime faculty members regularly visited the classrooms of the adjuncts who taught many of the sections of the courses, and observed, participated, or co-taught the lessons. Adjunct faculty were also

required to attend pre-semester workshops and several planning meetings during the year. Such collaboration among full-time faculty and experienced adjunct facilitators enabled Fellows to pedagogically transverse the bridge between theory and practice that is essential to novice in-service educator development.

Finally, the NTRP program provided field supervisors who worked in tandem with the school district's mentors to continue ongoing classroom observations and support for the entire two years of the program. To insure the link between academic theory and actual practice, all of the college-based field supervisors took part in 12 hours of initial training and 12 hours of ongoing training, along with an additional 8 hours facilitated by the School District. Throughout, both the NTRP and the School District monitored the effectiveness of the Fellows and of the program itself through extensive observations and surveys.

### **Model 3: Clinically Rich Mathematics Teacher Preparation Program**

The Secondary Mathematics Education Program in the Department of Secondary Education at the Mercy College School of Education developed and operated the Graduate Level Clinically Rich Mathematics Teacher Preparation Program, starting in 2011 and running for five years through 2015. It was supported with a \$2.4 million grant through the New York State Department of Education as part of the U. S. Race to the Top education initiative.

The Clinically Rich Mathematics Teacher Preparation Program, coordinated by Mercy College Associate Professor of Mathematics Education Dr. William Farber, developed a corps of 50 highly qualified mathematics teachers to work in high needs schools in a nearby school district, located outside of New York City but still within and reflective of the greater urban metropolitan area. The target student population was typical of the region, including

those from low-income home environments, representative of racial and language diversity, and inclusive of students identified as having disabilities. The program was built upon a needs assessment that drew on a variety of formal assessment points (national, state, and local test data) and through a planning phase that included representatives from the College and the collaborating school district.

As implemented, this was a 14-month, 45-credit graduate program that, for the participants, extended over two summers and one academic year, culminating in the awarding of a Master's of Science in Secondary School Mathematics Education degree and eligibility for a New York State Teaching Certificate (contingent on meeting other state-mandated requirements). Most germane to the focus of this article, the program integrated college course work with intensive clinical experience in typical classrooms in regular public schools.

The program used parts of the existing core secondary education teacher preparation curriculum, along with a set of new courses focused on mathematics and mathematics education content. To assure the connection between theory and practice, candidates met in a weekly colloquium led by Dr. William Farber, the project's academic coordinator and associate professor of mathematics education, to discuss problems of practice; to shore up the implementation of their individual objectives (based on their specific school and classroom placements); and to allow the candidates to provide evidence of practice and reflection through the use of video recordings of their teaching, a research paper about current practices in mathematics education, and the development of an inquiry project. Candidates were also required to maintain and submit a portfolio documenting their activities. Visiting experts, mentor teachers and clinical faculty participated in the weekly colloquia to provide examples and instruction in the application of

data analysis in the mathematics classroom, to demonstrate current classroom technology for mathematics instruction, and to share applications of differentiated strategies in mathematics teaching. Outside of the colloquia, additional key features included the deployment of a support team of experienced teachers in the collaborating school district, college-based clinical supervisors (all of whom were retired mathematics supervisors from school districts in the region), and a cohort model that allowed for the creation of learning communities among the participants.

In sum, the program combined pedagogy and academic content with on-the-job training to ensure a nexus of theory and practice within a highly supportive environment in both the academic and practical realms. Teacher candidates worked in a cohort under the close supervision of experienced teachers in the collaborating school district, adjunct faculty clinical supervisors from Mercy College who provided up to 22 onsite visits during the academic year, a designated Mercy College faculty advisor, and other selected college faculty. As an additional fillip, training was provided to the designated school-based mentors, and mathematics teachers and supervisors within the participating schools were invited to participate in all of the trainings and workshops so as to ensure consistency of effort and implementation across the schools and classrooms. In the end, three cohorts of candidates graduated from the program, and, to date, 45 of those candidates are presently regularly assigned secondary mathematics teachers in public schools.

### **Key Components of Success**

Across the programs we have provided as exemplars, there are three factors that were essential components of their success, and a great deal of research suggests that these are, indeed, important elements to successful

experiential learning programs in the field of teacher preparation. The first is the use of the cohort model (Branyon, 2008; Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006; Lei, Short, Smallwood, & Wright-Porter, 2011; Seed, 2008), in which candidates enter the program and take courses together from start to end. Cohorts promote collegial support among the participants and serve as a cohesive element, while providing an impetus toward persistence of effort through program completion. The second component is the use of mentoring (Bowden, 2014; David, Sinclair, & Gschwend, 2015; Kahraman & Kuzu, 2016; Owen, 2015; Savage, Cannon, & Sutters, 2015; Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2013), especially mentoring that is ongoing, encouraging, collaborative, and thorough. The third is the use of learning communities (Botha, 2012; Fresko & Nasser-Abu, 2015; Kent & Simpson, 2009; Meyer (2002); Rausch & Crawford (2012), whether these follow the NTRP model of coordination between full time faculty and experienced teachers who serve as adjuncts, or are used to promote active engagement of the teacher candidates in their own learning through collaborative efforts.

### **Problems with Sustainability and Alternative Model**

There is ample evidence to show that the models we have described, and others like them, have been high successful in developing high quality beginning teachers through immersive learning opportunities that combine academic preparation and field-based experiences. Unfortunately, few such programs have been shown to be sustainable in the long run. Typically, these programs and their ilk are designed to meet the immediate needs of critical teacher shortages; when those shortages no longer exist, the necessary support tends to evaporate. Cohort groups, learning communities, and mentoring are all financially challenging in the long run. In addition, there is

a great deal of effort involved in creating and sustaining working relationships between college or university-based teacher preparation programs and school districts with shifting priorities and needs. Changes in leadership and the relative willingness of state education officials to sanction alternative programs are also factors that impact the sustainability of such models. What we ask, then, is this: Is there a way to incorporate some of these key elements (cohorts, mentoring, learning communities) into a traditional teacher preparation program?

What we would argue for is more of a long-term commitment to programs along the lines of these models. That would require the collective will of the institutions, the school districts, the legislators, and the taxpayers – not an easy set of stakeholders for finding common ground. We do note, however, that there is a growing trend afoot in which the courts are ordering the states to live up to their responsibilities by overhauling their inadequate educational systems, as recent cases in Connecticut (Harris, 2016) and elsewhere demonstrate. Any such overhaul would (or, at least, ought to) necessitate a reconsideration of how teachers are prepared.

Several states, including Missouri, where co-author Jordan Jay teaches, offer specialized programs to assist beginning teachers through partnerships between teacher preparation programs and school districts. These programs require new teachers to return to the higher education institutions for additional workshops and mentoring when they have had actual teaching experience and are more prepared to connect theory and practice. It would require very little expenditure of time or money to establish such requirements throughout the country. These new teachers, who share many common concerns and challenges, would become a *de facto* cohort and learning community. Beyond that, they would be in a position to mentor pre-service teacher

candidates themselves, provided they are trained to do so as part of the in-service coaching they receive as new teachers themselves. This is what we offer as our final model, one that is self-sustaining, and one that captures the essential elements of cohorts, learning communities, and mentoring.

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