

# INTRODUCTION

## HOW TO USE THE FIELD EXPERIENCE AND PORTFOLIO ACTIVITIES

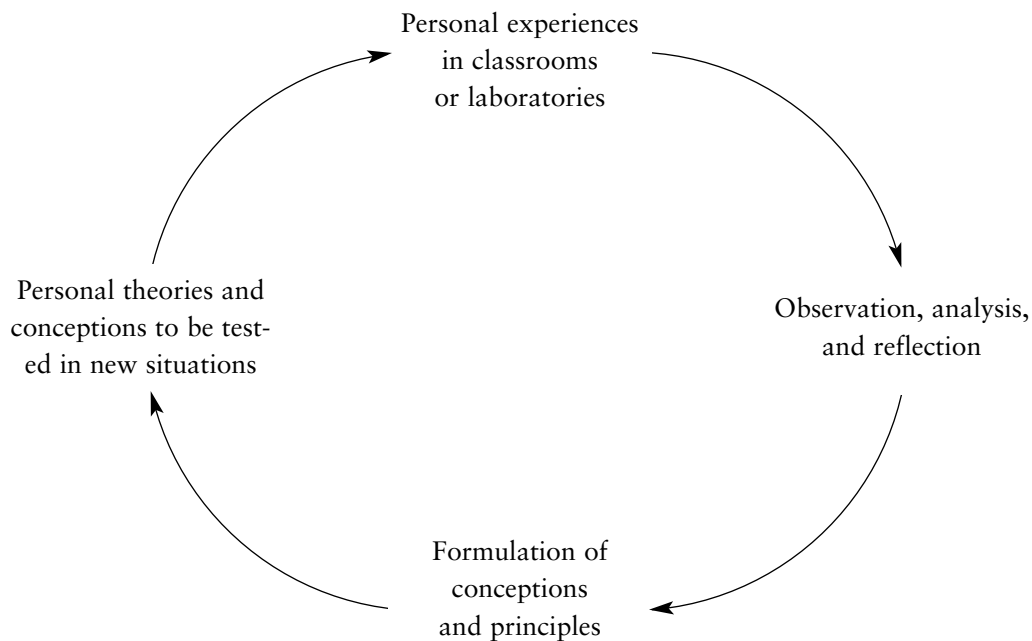
**L**earning to teach is a long-term journey. It takes purposeful action and careful reflection fueled by a desire for excellence; it requires an attitude that learning to teach is a lifelong process in which individuals gradually discover their own style through reflection and critical inquiry into one's own teaching. These field experience and portfolio activities have been written to help you start your journey. As a whole, they provide a variety of activities for you to use, including visiting classrooms, observing teachers or videos, interviewing teachers or students, talking to peers, reflecting with colleagues, and developing sample artifacts for your portfolio, such as journal entries, videotapes, or reflective essays.

As you begin your journey, you will find that there are some aspects of teaching that can be learned in a college classroom, and others that can be learned by studying what researchers and experienced teachers have to say about the topic. However, many of the most important features of the art of professional practice can be learned only through experience. This manual describes how you can learn from your experiences while you are still in your teacher preparation program and beginning years of your career. It reinforces a point of view described in Chapter 1 of *Learning to Teach*: Learning to teach is a lifelong process, and effective teachers become that way by having a learning agenda for lifelong growth coupled with careful analysis and reflection that produces this growth. Three facets of learning from experience are described here: the nature of experiential learning, developing the receptive skills—listening and observing—that promote learning from experience, and critical review and reflection.

### **Nature of Experiential Learning**

Everyone learns from experience and knows that experience is a basis for new ideas and behavior. For example, you probably learned to ride your first bicycle by riding one, and you learned about being a sister or brother by being one. Experience provides insights, understandings, and techniques that are difficult to describe to anyone who has not had similar experiences. The same is true for teaching.

Experiential learning differs from much of the learning that people are exposed to as students. Instead of starting with a set of academic principles or rules, in experiential learning learners start with concrete experiences or activities and then, by observing their own behavior and that of others, formulate concepts and principles that can be applied to new situations. This perspective is illustrated in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1.** *Cyclical Nature of Experiential Learning*

Dewey (1938) suggested that to learn from experience is to make a backward-forward connection between what we do to things and what we learn from these things and experiences. Johnson and Johnson (1998) provided a more detailed explanation:

Experiential learning is based upon three assumptions: that you learn best when you are personally involved in the learning experience, that knowledge has to be discovered by yourself if it is to mean anything to you or make a difference in your behavior, and that a commitment to learning is highest when you are free to set your own learning goals and actively pursue them within a given framework. Experiential learning is a process of making generalizations and conclusions about your own direct experiences. It emphasizes directly experiencing what you are studying, building your own commitment to learn, and your being partly responsible for organizing the conclusions drawn from your experiences (p. 7).

The theory behind experiential learning is, in many ways, very similar to the principles on which the constructivist perspective about learning rest. As described in

Chapter 1 of *Learning to Teach*, learning from a constructivist perspective is not viewed as passively receiving information from someone else, but instead as actively engaging in relevant experiences and having opportunities for dialogue and reflection. This type of learning is especially useful in complex learning situations such as teaching, which can never be completely described to the beginner. It is also useful for applying many of the skills and guidelines described in *Learning to Teach*.

Experience alone, however, is not sufficient. For best results, the learner must be willing to depend less upon the teacher than in other types of learning. The learner must have a set of learning skills, that is, must be able to observe and reflect on experiences in order to conceptualize from them. The following sections describe some of these skills in more detail.

## **Training the Senses for Experiential Learning**

People learn from experience primarily through their senses. Two are of particular importance for learning to teach: listening critically and observing keenly. These come together through reflective thinking and analysis.

**Listening.** Learning to listen carefully and pick up subtle cues from experienced, expert teachers is one important skill for those learning to teach. On the surface, listening appears simple but, in fact, it is a rather complex, sophisticated process. It has been observed that most people strike one of three listening postures when they hear new information or are experiencing a new environment for the first time.

The first listening posture, and by far the most common, is to listen for information that *confirms* what you already know. Although such information can be important, such a posture is obviously limiting. You may think that a person who says things you already believe is pretty smart, but you don't really learn much from what you hear. If your posture is only to listen for supporting comments, you may actively distort the meanings of what others say.

The second listening posture, one that seems fairly rare, is to *seek answers* to honest questions. When you recognize a discrepancy or dilemma for which you personally need an answer, you can formulate honest questions about it. Often the need for certainty in our lives makes us uncomfortable with honest questions, so we either discredit the questions or seek only superficial answers. If, however, you seek answers to honest questions, you are likely to hear more and differently than those who do not. Honest questions that are not simply critical doubting give direction to listening and new meanings to information. However, questions also have a limiting effect. They tend to restrict your attention to information that seems relevant to your questions, a process referred to as selective perception. Also, questions invite certain interpretations of information to the exclusion of other possibilities. They tend to create a "set" for understanding.

The third listening posture, which is very rare, involves being open to information as a means of creating new insights and perspectives. How many people saw apples fall before Newton conceived the laws of gravity? In a world of continuous, accelerating change and awesome technologies, it is essential that we listen for new understandings and new ways to comprehend our experience. Paradoxically, we simultaneously sense that our ways of experiencing are limited yet believe that the basis for all human understanding already lies within our experiences.

**Observing.** Although classroom observation is one of the most frequently used ways to learn about teaching, observation alone is insufficient and can, in fact, lead to incorrect conclusions. This is true for several reasons, two of which are most important. First, when you go into a classroom to observe, you take with you a host of anxieties and biases from past experiences; and, second, life in classrooms is a series of rapidly moving, complex events. Each of these problems is described in more detail in the sections that follow.

*BIAS AND ANXIETY.* You are all aware of many instances in everyday life in which bias and anxiety distort people's perceptions. Note the number of times that victims or eyewitnesses of criminal acts are unable to give investigators a detailed or complete description of the event, just moments after it occurred. Or think of the times that the wrong person is picked out of a police lineup. Think also of the times that you have heard two friends tell you about what they saw on a vacation they took together and the wide discrepancies in their reports.

Being an eyewitness to classroom events is no different from witnessing other events, except it may be a bit more complicated. Every person in the process of learning to teach has biases that influence what he or she attends to while observing classrooms. These may involve concepts of good teaching or, perhaps, values about what is appropriate behavior for children and young adults. They may be attitudes about classroom life carried over from early experiences as a student—a sense of boredom and withdrawal associated with a grammar lesson, or antipathy to a teacher with a gruff voice. The important point is that these concepts, values, attitudes, and past experiences inevitably influence what an observer perceives and learns from classroom observation.

Anxiety is another important influence, particularly for beginning teachers. When people are nervous and anxious in a situation, their vision and perceptual fields tend to narrow, and they miss much that they normally would attend to. When beginning teachers are observers in someone else's classroom, it is natural for them to be unsure and to worry, "Are we intruding on the teacher's lesson? Why are the children looking at us?" Similarly, initial teaching situations are stressful, anxiety producing, uncomfortable. A normal reaction is to distort what is observed and, many times, to ignore threatening information.

*CLASSROOM COMPLEXITY.* Finally, it is difficult to observe accurately in classrooms because events move rapidly and the total classroom environment is complex. Many have observed that teachers have literally thousands of independent interactions daily with students—more interactions with clients than occur in any other occupation except perhaps air traffic controlling. Classrooms with teacher aides and where teachers have several small groups working simultaneously present even more rapid movement and complexity.

*GUIDELINES FOR OBSERVING IN CLASSROOMS.* Several steps can be taken to overcome bias in observation and to reduce the complexity of classroom life. If followed, they can make observations more accurate and more valuable as learning experiences. Several guidelines are offered below that have been found useful by beginning teachers as well as researchers (see, for example, Good & Brophy, 2004).

### **Guideline 1: Become Aware of One's Own Values, Attitudes, and Conceptual Blinders**

People never become completely aware of their attitudes and prejudices, just as they are never completely aware of the sources of daily fears and anxieties. However, setting aside time now and then for self-reflection and introspection heightens awareness.

### **Guideline 2: Make Careful Arrangements with Teachers before Observations**

Careful arrangements before a visit will relieve some of the anxiety associated with observations in a strange classroom. A talk with the teacher, either in person or over the phone, a few days before a visit will help clarify expectations about what you want to accomplish as an observer and about how the teacher wants you to behave during the visit. Arrangements can be made about where you should sit, how you are to be introduced to the class, and so on.

### **Guideline 3: Reduce Complexity by Focusing Observations**

Even the most experienced observers cannot see everything going on in a classroom, so they focus on particular events or behaviors. This is particularly important for the beginner. One does this by either observing a few of the actors in the classroom—four or five students rather than the whole class—or watching for a few behaviors at a time, such as the way students respond to a teacher's questions or praise. The learning aid sections of this book provide several recommendations for focusing classroom observations by reducing complexity.

#### **Guideline 4: Attend Mainly to Observable Behaviors**

A very common cause of distortion in what a person sees is that too often the observer tries to interpret motives from behavior instead of just observing it. Take, for example, the following written notes from an observation.

“The teacher spoke in a loud voice and frowned.”

“The teacher was angry with the children.”

The first is an example of what the observer actually saw. The second is an interpretation of the teacher’s feelings. Observers should concentrate on observable behavior, as in the first example.

#### **Guideline 5: Remain Unobtrusive during Observations**

Harry Walcott, a noted educational anthropologist, once wrote that when he was observing people in any social setting he “keeps his eyes on his paper and his pencil going all the time.” This is important advice for classroom observers. A note taken once in a while cues teachers and students about what the observer is looking for. Making eye contact with students in class increases the chances of their wanting to interact with the observer, thus interrupting the observer’s concentration and perhaps the teacher’s lesson.

#### **Guideline 6: Extend a Thank-You to the Teacher and to the Students (If Appropriate) after Your Observation**

Observers are guests in classrooms. A thank-you is required just as it would be to a friend at whose home you spent a weekend.

### **The Professional Portfolio**

The encouragement of educators to develop professional portfolios has accelerated in the past several years as the importance of reflective problem solving and critical inquiry has increased. Assembling a portfolio develops reflective thinking, decision making, and evaluation skills, and as a learning device it has been picked up by teacher educators for its potential for promoting reflective thinking and inquiry.

A portfolio is a collection of ideas, artifacts, and products that provides an authentic means for teachers to represent their views on teaching, their work, and their students’ work. Portfolios are not just something you do one time; they are useful for keeping a record of professional growth over a lifetime of learning to teach. They are particularly useful for displaying your work when interviewing for a teaching position. Many teacher education programs require teacher candidates to build a portfolio early

in their program so it can evolve and mature as the candidate grows and changes. Some states also require portfolios as part of the evaluation process for beginning teachers.

The Portfolio and Field Experience Activities have been designed to help you reflect on the important ideas covered in the chapter and to develop artifacts that can be placed in your portfolio.

Items most teachers put in their portfolios include reflective essays showing how they think about teaching and learning, artifacts such as sample units of work or lesson plans, and samples of their students' work, particularly work that shows how the teacher has impacted student learning. Some teachers also include photos and videos showing classroom teaching and student interaction.

There is no particular format to follow in a portfolio. However, the portfolio, like all work, should be neat, organized, and creative. Most important, the portfolio should represent you.

## **Microteaching or Teaching in Small Groups**

Listening and observing in classrooms is one form of experience. Another is microteaching: actual practice in scaled-down situations. In microteaching, you arrange to teach a brief lesson to a small group of students in an actual classroom, or you teach a short lesson to your peers. Microteaching is an invaluable experiential process for learning to teach and for helping you begin to consolidate your teaching knowledge and skill. It is an effective means of offering practice and feedback and an activity that is valued very highly by beginning teachers who participate in it. As with any endeavor, microteaching requires planning and organizing to ensure its success. The following guidelines are offered to assist you in your planning for microteaching, whether as a part of your teacher education program or as something you decide to arrange on your own.

1. *Microteaching requires a small-group setup.* Microteaching is best accomplished with groups of six to eight students or peers. If using peers, each group needs a facilitator. This can be one of your peers, a professor, or a clinical teacher. The role of the facilitator is to ensure that all microteachers have adequate time to give their lesson and to receive feedback.
2. *Microteaching with peers requires a large chunk of time.* Each microteacher needs enough time to adequately present a brief lesson and receive feedback on it. Generally, lesson presentations run about 10 to 12 minutes, followed by 5 to 10 minutes of feedback from peers or students and the facilitator. This means that 2 to 3 hours must be set aside for each microteaching lesson if six to ten persons are involved. In actual classrooms, with just one person microteaching, less time is required.

3. *Special equipment is needed.* Ideally a microteaching lab should be available, and many colleges and universities have this type of facility. The lab should be outfitted with a video camera and recording equipment and should contain the audiovisual supplies usually found in classrooms (for example, overhead projector and screen, chalkboard, chalk, and erasers) for use by students in their presentations. Microteachers need to bring a blank tape with them so their lessons can be recorded for later use. In a laboratory where microteaching is being done with peers, the job of recording each lesson can be rotated. In a real classroom, the teacher or one of the students can be asked to assist with recording the lesson.

If a special room set aside for microteaching cannot be arranged, a roll-around video recording system or camcorder can be used. With a roll-around, the camera and recorder system are lodged on a cart and wheeled to rooms where microteaching sections are to be held. If video is not at all feasible, audio recording can be used as a last resort.

4. *Feedback is a vital element of microteaching.* Whether you are microteaching with real students or peers, feedback on the lesson is critical. Feedback should be specific and should include both recognition for good performance and constructive criticism. Comments such as, “I liked how you projected enthusiasm with all your gesturing,” or “It would have been easier to understand your advance organizer if you had provided a visual aid” are much more useful than a general, “I enjoyed your lesson.” If real students are being asked to provide feedback, they will need to be given explicit directions on how to provide feedback. Chapter 8 in *Learning to Teach* contains information on how to give feedback.

If you are using microteaching to practice one of the models described in Chapters 7–12 in *Learning to Teach*, it will be helpful to use the appropriate observation instruments provided in this manual. Students or your peers can fill out the instrument as they follow the lesson and recall the particulars during the feedback phase, and you will have something concrete to take away and reflect upon.

5. *Remember analysis and reflection.* A microteaching practice session will be of most value if you watch the videotape of your lesson and reflect on the feedback you received. Sometimes a short written critique about how the lesson went, incorporating the feedback you received, is a good learning device.

## **Reflection and Journaling**

Through reflection, experiences become more valuable. It is when teachers start to conceptualize and formulate their own rules and principles that they start to build personal theories to guide their teaching practice and serve as springboards for new discoveries.



But how does one begin reflecting? Although reflective thinking is not a haphazard trial-and-error process, neither can it be scheduled to happen every morning at 9:15 A.M., as jogging can be.

One of the most productive ways to foster reflective thinking is by using a journal. Here is advice to beginning teachers provided by Frank Lyman (personal correspondence, no date) a teacher-educator at the University of Maryland, about how to approach the process of reflection:

A person learns by experience. However, for the fastest, most advanced learning to take place, disciplined reflection is necessary. Experience is not the best teacher; reflection, or analysis, is. There are many ways to reflect on experience and it is helpful to try out several. During student teaching, you will master one way and be invited to invent others. The journaling strategy is the prescribed way. Use it four times a week. For the fifth entry use any format to probe an issue related to curriculum/instruction/school climate. If you can invent an effective strategy for analyzing a teaching/learning event, show me.

## **Learning from Colleagues and Professional Organizations**

An additional source of experiential learning for beginning teachers is the learning that comes from interaction with colleagues and at professional meetings. Unfortunately, many beginning teachers do not seem to have good professional networks and do not regularly attend professional meetings. It is important for beginning teachers to set goals for themselves early in their careers that will help guide professional experiences and growth. In the Online Learning Center is a list of the names and addresses of several professional organizations that have meetings nationally and locally where teachers can learn about research and interact with colleagues. An example of such a professional organization is the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). This organization publishes a monthly journal, *Educational Leadership*, that contains many interpretive articles on research. The organization also has local units in every state that produce newsletters and hold regular meetings of interest to teachers. Phi Delta Kappa also provides similar services to teachers, as do the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and many subject-specialty associations. A beginning teacher who wants to grow will become a member of some of these associations and will build a network of colleagues interested in improving their teaching by keeping abreast of the latest research and practices.