Teacher Education Reform:
Putting Experience First

By Rena Upitis

Rena Upitis is a professor and dean of the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. *She notes that this article could not have been written without the guidance of "C4"—Tom Russell, LeRoy Whitehead, and Nancy Hutchinson. She thanks these colleagues for the discussions over the past two years that are, in some very fundamental ways, embedded in this article.*

I am learning how to skate. Today is my fourth time on the ice, and it is the first time I haven't spent ten minutes complaining that my feet hurt or wishing that I had learned to do this 30 years ago. I'm beginning to feel like a skater. There are moments when I look up from my feet, stop worrying about falling, and pick up enough speed to pass a few other beginners on the rink. I'm not ready for the Olympics, but I can skate.

Learning to skate is like learning to teach—or at least the way I think learning to teach ought to be. Once I had decided to learn to skate, I could hardly wait to get to the rink, put on my new "Canadian Tire special" skates, and try it out. If someone had offered to teach me the theory of skating, I would have listened impatiently with one ear or—more likely—asked them to stop. All I wanted to do was to find someone to guide me and to get on the ice. And I knew what kind of guide I needed; it had to be

someone I liked, someone I could trust not to laugh (too much), someone who already knew how to skate, and preferably someone who had taught other skaters before me.

I found just such a guide or "learned friend" (Upitis, 1990). During our first lesson together, I was concerned only with standing up and reaching my goal of letting go of the boards and my skating teacher by the end of the session. But by the second or third time, I was ready to hear about some of the theory behind skating. In other words, I had formed questions, based on my beginning experiences: "Why do I need to bend my knees?" "How can I skate faster?" "How do I stop without banging into the boards?" As my experience deepened, the kinds of support I sought changed as well; in my development as a skater, I took charge of my own learning and was proud of the progress over the course of the winter months. And like a beginning teacher, one of the most profound lessons I learned as a beginning skater was that I would need to find ways to continue to improve my skating over the remaining years of my life. Learning to skate—all learning—is a long-term commitment.

Program Features

On August 22, 1997, the Faculty of Education at Queen's University began the general implementation of its restructured, extended year Bachelor of Education/ Diploma in Education (B.Ed./Dip.Ed.) Consecutive (i.e., post-baccalaureate) program. The program described in this article also comprises the final year of the Concurrent Education program. In the Concurrent program, candidates enroll concurrently in Arts and Science courses and in Education over a four- or five-year period, with Education courses only in the final year.

The program begins with an orientation in August (paralleled by the orientation that my skating coach gave me as he was lacing up my skates: "Push off as you get on the ice, don't worry about falling—I'll be right there—and have fun"). Teacher candidates then join an Associate School, beginning on the first day of school in September. By starting an extended practicum of 14 weeks at the opening of the Fall Term, we are recognizing that people who are ready to become teachers are understandably eager to get in the classroom, just as people who are ready to skate are understandably eager to get on the rink. But just as the skating example included guidance by a learned friend, so too does the extended practicum involve guidance—beginning teachers need direction as they learn to observe, to plan lessons and units, to manage groups of children, and to extend the use of inclusionary practices in their teaching. This guidance comes from experienced teachers, from administrators in the school, from faculty members, and from peers—other beginning teachers who are struggling with similar issues. (I learned just as much by watching other beginning skaters as I did from the instructions I was given.)

The program structure marks a radical shift from our prior program in that the

emphasis is on field-based experiences in schools and in other educational settings, rather than on university-based classes where ways of teaching the various curriculum subjects are explored and short practicum experiences are inserted throughout the year. Indeed, many other universities are now shifting from the master-teacher model of teacher education that has been prevalent for the past three decades to one that is more experience-based. For example, the consecutive program at York University, Canada, also includes a practicum beginning on the first day of school, with intensive reflection and guidance throughout the Fall Term back on the University campus.

Because of Kingston's size, many of our teacher candidates secure placements in Associate Schools some distance from Queen's—placements extend from the Waterloo region west of Toronto, through Toronto, north to the Peterborough area, and east to the Ottawa school districts. Thus frequent returns to the Faculty of Education are not possible during the Fall Term. The practicum, however, is bracketed by the August orientation and a consolidation week in early January, and is punctuated by a two-week on-campus session at the Faculty of Education in mid-term. Also, faculty liaisons visit Associate Schools once or twice a month, and maintain contact with teacher candidates by telephone and through electronic mail. In this way, the practicum experiences are guided by faculty liaisons, in partnership with associate teachers and administrators in the Associate Schools.

There are several other fundamental program features worthy of mention. In addition to the extended fall practicum, teacher candidates have two additional practica, one in mid-winter, and one in May. The mid-winter practicum is associated with a Program Focus course. The Program Focus courses allow candidates to pursue issues of interest that cut across curriculum and division specialties. The 23 Program Focus courses include such topics as International and Development Education, At-Risk Youth and Young Adults, Teaching the Gifted, Outdoor and Experiential Education, and Artist in Community Education. Accordingly, practicum settings for the program foci include museums and art galleries, group homes, outdoor centers, hospitals, and a host of other learning environments. In the spring practicum, candidates have the option of returning to the school setting or to an alternative practicum setting related to their Program Focus course. In this way, the three practica combined allow candidates to experience both the depth and breadth of learning environments, reinforcing the view that not all learning happens in schools.

One of the important features of course work is that some issues have been embedded in the core offerings of the B.Ed./Dip.Ed. program. Thus all candidates examine issues such as special needs, gender, culture, use of technology to support learning, classroom management, and the connections between policies and practices. These core courses are offered in conjunction with the extended field placement in the Fall Term. Candidates work in school-based groups on individual and group assignments throughout the Fall Term, using their experiences in the

Associate Schools to grapple with fundamental issues in education, as they begin to craft their views of themselves as professionals, and as they learn to reflect on their teaching philosophies and practices.

Research Supporting Experience-Based Learning

Evidence from a number of diverse sources indicates that experience-based learning is an effective way of learning about a new discipline or subject or of becoming attuned to the characteristics of a particular culture. Jean Lave (1988, 1991) speaks of the importance of joining communities of practice, showing how learning occurs through apprenticing with others who are already part of a particular culture or community. In the early part of the 20th century, John Dewey (1938) argued strenuously in favor of learning through experience. Since that time, educators have been debating the merits of learning by doing or, as Donald Schön (1983) would say, learning from experience (Hutchinson et al., 1995). All of these researchers and theorists—Dewey, Lave, and Schön—claim, in one way or another, that there is a need to gain contextualized experiences before it is possible to abstract from or about such experiences.

Recent work in teacher education has embodied this perspective: in order to talk about experiences of teaching, one has to have experiences to talk about. Gary Fenstermacher (1992) provides powerful arguments for extended field experience *prior* to formal course work. These arguments have been substantiated through research. A number of recent books indicate that extended experience prior to course work makes for teacher candidates who are more confident, reflective, and demanding of their instructors than their counterparts who have not had extended field experience (Russell & Korthagen, 1995; Russell & Munby, 1992). Others demonstrate how extended experiences in schools contribute not only to the professional and skill-related aspects of teaching, but to the overall socialization process as well (Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

Of course, we do not have to limit ourselves to looking at literature describing other people's experiences to find the directions for reform. As we engaged in reform, we also recognized that there were already some powerful models for teacher education thriving in the Faculty of Education. These included some that had been operating for several decades, such as the Outdoor and Experiential Education program, the Artist in Community Education program, and the Early Primary Education program. There were also some relatively new programs, such as the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program, which began in 1989, and the collaborative program in science teacher education between Queen's University and Waterloo University which began in the early 1990s (Munby & Russell, 1994). All of these programs shared three characteristics that are now embedded in the reformed program: (a) extended experience in carefully selected placement settings that reflect the program goals, (b) distinctiveness, and (c) attention to establishing

small and cohesive communities. As a result of these characteristics, participants in these programs came to know one another well, both personally and professionally, and engaged in significant and influential discussions about their roles as teachers and learners in educational settings. The new program has several structures that include these characteristics. The Program Focus course (limited to 25 candidates for each Program Focus) and the small Associate School groups (four to 12 teacher candidates per Associate School) are two examples.

Planning and Development of the Program

A quarter century ago—as many teacher education facilities were being established in universities throughout Canada—Seymour Sarason (1972) wrote a book titled *The Creation of Settings and the Future Societies.* In it, Sarason described the importance of the formation of core groups in the creation and reform of institutional settings. Sarason's work strongly influenced me as I began my role as dean of the Queen's Faculty of Education. I read carefully the sections that described the formation of core groups, and Sarason's views and experiences reinforced some of the views I had formed as a faculty member in the nine years before I became dean.

The most important core group I formed in the early tenure of my deanship was made up of four faculty members (including me) who took on the task of steering the restructuring of the teacher education program. This group came to be known as "C4" for "Committee of Four," since we were not officially sanctioned for the first seven months of our work. (At a meeting of Faculty Board in September, 1995, we were given official sanction as the "Special Task Committee on Restructuring," but we never lost the C4 label.) My desire to create such a core group stemmed directly from the frustrations I had encountered as a faculty member in the two years prior to my becoming dean, when a committee of 27 people had attempted to restructure our teacher education program. I found myself asking, in a way similar to that suggested by Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles (1996a), how 27 people could actually *reform* our program, and not merely *respond* to the financial pressures, thereby doing nothing more than "getting through another year"? Indeed, I wasn't even a member of that committee, because I couldn't imagine how 27 people could meet and accomplish anything of significance. In fact, a former member of the 27-person committee commented to me that:

> I don't think any member of the 27-person committee was satisfied with the result. Prior to the final vote [for an interim program in 1994-1996], members of that committee went to pains to extract from the Acting Dean a promise that program revision would be re-opened the following year. Hence there was a widespread expectation in the faculty that program re-structuring would continue, and in some important ways, this prepared fertile ground for C4.

Thus while the 27-person committee did not succeed in reforming our pro-

gram, they did create the expectation that the program would be reformed. Even so, the creation of the C4 core group was bound to be controversial, given an institutional history that included many divisions amongst faculty members (the presence of these divisions was one of the reasons the former program revision committee had become so large).

My task was to create a small and manageable committee that would represent faculty interests in a broad way. Accordingly, I decided to share my criteria for selection, offering faculty members and staff the chance to comment on the criteria, but not on the final choices of committee members. These criteria included choosing (a) faculty members I had not worked with closely in the past, (b) faculty members who did not necessarily get along with one another (!), (c) faculty members who would still be with us once the new program began, (d) equal numbers of men and women, (e) tenured faculty members, (f) faculty members who were committed to program reform, (g) faculty members who would work hard and could be relied on, and (h) faculty members who would bring qualitatively different perspectives to the reform process. Once the criteria were set, filling in the names of the committee members was a relatively simple task.

The first task of C4 was to participate in a retreat for faculty members. At the retreat, held in May, 1995, the following fundamental question was posed: "What do we want the graduates of our program to be like?" From this question, several other questions naturally followed, including: "What characteristics must be demonstrated by applicants to our program?" "What kinds of experiences would support their development?" and "What kinds of characteristics and knowledge must faculty members possess to contribute to such a program?" The unstated but significant effect of asking questions like these was that we abandoned our "old" program in its entirety. We would not have abandoned our old structure had we asked questions like "How can we modify our program to meet current needs?" The questions we asked were reform-minded, as opposed to response-minded, a distinction made by Cole and Knowles (1996b) and others (e.g., Kerr, 1986).

But being reform-minded meant much more than asking the right sorts of questions. It also meant following through with a process that included constant re-forming, re-framing, and re-visioning as the details of the program unfolded. For example, with each draft of the program that C4 produced, we asked for feedback not only from faculty members, staff, and students, but from the school administrators, teachers, community members, teachers' federation representatives, and colleagues outside our own institution. In our soliciting of responses, we asked people to provide answers to three questions: (a) tell us what you liked about the proposal, (b) tell us your concerns, (c) describe your proposed solutions to those concerns. This form ensured that the responses we received were positive and constructive: in the thousands of responses we gathered, there was not one that dismissed our work or the proposed program.

Further, we took the view that merely *inviting* feedback, in whatever form, was

not enough. Consequently, if we did not receive a response from a faculty member, for example, one of the C4 group members would send an e-mail or telephone that faculty member, asking for reactions. If we sensed significant hesitations about some aspect of the proposed structure, one of us would spend time with the faculty member—an hour well spent in the development of the program saved countless hours later in the process, as we all came to better understand and incorporate one another's positions. Over time, people came to know that if they did not fill out the response sheets, we would nevertheless seek their input; and within six months, every member of our community made comment on our work. Much of this commentary happened through an electronic listserv: every member of faculty and staff had access to the listserv, and discussion on various issues was lively (Upitis & Russell, 1996). We also conducted over a hundred meetings over an 18-month period, with both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of various sizes. Attendees to these meetings included past and present students, associate teachers, administrators, officials from the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, regional and provincial teacher federation executives, faculty members, adjunct instructors, and staff—in short, representatives of all stakeholder groups.

Once the shell of the new program structure was approved by our Faculty Board and by the University Senate, we set ourselves to the difficult task of filling in the details. At this time, some unrest surrounding the program change emerged. As people began to understand the implications of the new structure and how it would affect them personally and professionally, there was an understandable wish, for some, to return to the "old way." My reaction to this was to involve everyone who had such concerns in one of the many subcommittees that were struck to hammer out the details. Thus a person who was worried that students would not find accommodation for the winter months became part of the "Pragmatics Subcommittee"—a group charged with dealing with such issues as travel costs, residence, student loans, and extended library privileges to students living off-campus. People who were unsure about how elementary curriculum courses would work in the new program were invited to join the "P/J (Primary/Junior) Curriculum Subcommittee." Of course, people who were enthused about each aspect of the program also joined the subcommittees. In this way, faculty members, staff, and students worked together for an additional eight months, providing suggestions for course outlines, schedules, Associate School partnerships, evaluation forms, and other program details. Each of the 11 subcommittees had one C4 representative; in this way, we were able to keep communication flowing.

Over the course of the past two years, we have had colleagues from many sister institutions, in both Canada and from abroad, visit us and inquire about the process of program reform that we have undertaken. A colleague from Manitoba described the process in this way:

> We talked with C4 about the process used [for program reform]. There seemed to

> be a mix of dean directiveness and faculty input. I got a strong sense of the dean keeping a very steady hand on things. I think that she may be prepared to step in if needed, and be directive. The eleven subcommittees to figure out certain aspects of the change appeared to put negative energy to work in positive directions—nice action—get things done and get people thinking along different lines.
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> The model for change has been allowed to emerge, it is change that is being worked for, not any particular model. Many of the faculty we talked to felt that something they were passionate about had been included in the model—so ownership was broad-based and that is likely a large part of the explanation as to the desire on the part of many to see this model succeed. Certainly the model for teacher education is quite different and at first glance, quite chaotic. This may be its power as a generator of considerable support and apparent lack of sniping—its very iconoclastic nature, growing out of the interests and strengths of this particular Faculty.

After the details of the new program were determined (reducing some of the chaos in our lives!), the Faculty of Education launched a full-scale pilot project for 62 of our teacher candidates in the 1996-1997 year. Other articles in this issue describe the results of that pilot from the teacher candidates' points of view. Changes that have been incorporated as a result of the pilot experiences, and as a result of planning meetings with teachers and administrators, are also discussed.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article I have highlighted the ways in which our teacher education program has undergone a radical transformation. But it is important to take into account that while we are still in the midst of reform, we are also in the midst of preservation. One of the potential drawbacks of fundamental change is that some of the good features of the "old" are often thrown out to make way for the "new." Although we have reformed our teacher education program, we have nevertheless reinforced some of our deeply held views about teaching and learning and, in the process, we have preserved some of our unique programs as well. These programs include Artist in Community Education and Outdoor and Experiential Education—two programs I mentioned earlier as containing some of the seeds for reform. We have also reaffirmed our dedication to research and development, beginning with research and development on the teacher education program itself.

Another aspect of the change process that we have come to acknowledge and understand over the past two years is that program reform, like learning, is a continual process. If we had not been willing to acknowledge the difficulties of the kind of reform we have undertaken, we might have given up on the process itself—a process that was certainly more intense than the 27-person committee for Program Restructuring that was once in place. This means that we also recognize that we will never have a "final program" or a "definitive program." Instead, our program reflects our commitment to education in the broadest terms—terms that recognize that not all learning happens in school, that learning takes a long time and is often

marked by struggle, and that the best learning involves the body, mind, heart, and soul.

At the end of the 1996-1997 pilot year, one teacher candidate wrote that she had confidence that the Faculty of Education would treat every year as a pilot (Marwitz, 1997). I too am confident that we will.

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