

The Blur of Preservice Teaching

This article contains an essay titled “The Blur” that was written for a larger study on the process of becoming a mathematics teacher. At the time of that study, the authors¹ were a mentor (Marianne) and a preservice teacher (Samuel). As part of that study, the authors worked together with nine other preservice teachers to create various written forums to document practice teaching from the preservice teacher’s perspective. The result of this effort was a collection of essays on the preservice teaching experience written *by* preservice teachers *for* preservice teachers.

Samuel chose to write “The Blur” to document the complex and overwhelming feeling that is sometimes experienced when novices begin teaching. For those mentors whose preservice teachers are feeling overwhelmed, we reproduce the essay below with the hope that reading (and talking) about these feelings will better serve novice teachers as they learn to negotiate the multiple demands of the classroom.

The first few weeks of student teaching, and to some extent the whole ten weeks, do not stand out clearly in my mind. Even at the time it was difficult to remember what happened in a particular class or on a particular day. When people would ask, “How is student teaching going?” I wouldn’t know what to say. It was going, well or badly, I did not know. This is what I mean by the “blur” of student teaching. Incidents seemed to run into each other and get mixed up. Both individual classes and whole weeks were landscapes without contour, murky areas where you see only what is close by and what passes in an instant.

The blur effect seems most commonly experienced by teachers in particular classes. So much happens (from the teacher’s point of view!) in a single class that it is difficult to sort it all out on the spot: Where’s the overhead? Oh,

OK, don’t trip on the cord. “Yes, I had a very nice weekend. And you?” Where’s that transparency? There sure aren’t many of them here yet, and it’s time for class to start. What should I be doing now? I would start, but what’s the point when I’ll just have to repeat it for the ones still coming in. “All right, time to get started. Get out a piece of paper and try this exercise.” Those numbers weren’t very well chosen, were they? Why isn’t Yvette doing anything? Who’s that talking in the back? Is it about the problem? How much time do they need? How much time should I spend going over it? They won’t all get it though, and they need to know this for the lesson today. What’s happening as I write on the chalkboard? Can they hear me? Can they read my handwriting? Am I even doing this problem right? I wish I could see them. I’m sure Tamara and Mary are giggling about me right now. I should have worn better pants; these are really scruffy.

The stream of consciousness becomes a raging torrent, or so it seems. If I had a moment without anything pressing and urgent to do, I felt sure something was wrong. Doing a math problem gives you certain things to think about: What is the best way to solve the problem? Can I generalize this method? What the heck do I do from here? Speaking in front of a group gives other things to think about: Am I being clear? How is my posture? What am I doing with my hands? Is my eye contact good? Am I getting my point across? Writing on a chalkboard or overhead introduces more thoughts: Can they read this? Turn off the projector before you erase. Will this make a screechy noise? Don’t wipe chalk dust on your nose. Then there is the class to observe and keep in order: What is Francis doing with that ruler? Who was talking

1. All names in the article are pseudonyms.

over there? Are they getting this? How many are paying attention? Who should I call on? Why is Jackie the only one putting her hand up? Can I call on Charles without making him look stupid? Finally, the teacher has to think about the class period as a whole: How much time is left? Do they know their homework? When will I give back the quizzes? Should we spend more time on review, or are they ready to go on?

It's a lot to think about. Besides all that is going on inside the head of the teacher, she is supposed to figure out what is going on in twenty-five other peoples' at the same time. For me as a new teacher, there was sometimes so much to keep track of that I had no way of ordering, prioritizing, making sense of it all. Keeping track of the "big picture" is very hard when so many details feel so important. Of course, the "big picture" is "Are the students learning as well as possible in this class?" Getting an answer to that is already a challenge; figuring out what to do about a "no" is an even bigger one.

. . . I had a dream last night. Kerry, my main cooperating teacher, was introducing me to two university professors of mathematics I knew and admired. "They were watching you student teach," she said. "You know, through the window in the side of the classroom. They were very pleased. They know about the doubts you had, but they thought you were very dynamic and would make an excellent teacher."

—Mike Arney and Eileen Fernández

What Are the Benefits of Mentoring?

Research has shown that mentoring can have a positive impact on the preservice teaching experience and can be a powerful influence on the behavior and practices of mentees (Kuzmic 1994). Mentoring can increase employment retention of the novice teachers in cooperating schools (Odell 1986). Boyer (1999) found that attrition among new teachers who were mentored was significantly less than among nonmentored newcomers. Also, research has shown that teachers who were trained under the auspices of a mentor were more likely to use teaching strategies associated with effective instructional practices (Darling-Hammond 2000). In addition, mentoring programs produce mutual benefits for all participants. The mentee is given instructional and noninstructional supports, and the mentor has valuable opportunities for critical and constructive reflection on practice (Odell and Huling 2000).

—Hosin Shirvani

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