

Supporting Grass Roots Response to Change in Teacher Education: Engaging Cooperating Teachers in the Improvement of Student-Teaching Experiences of English Education Majors at Illinois State University

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Between September 2003 and May 2004 eight cooperating English teachers, the Director of English Education, and the two principal investigators of the SoTL grant that funded our research, met for four day-long sessions to discuss all aspects of the student-teaching clinical experience in English Education. We planned the format for a Cooperating Teacher Orientation Program (CTOP) to be provided to all English Education cooperating teachers and designed to enhance the student teaching experiences of ISU undergraduate English Education majors. We also reported the results to the National Council of Teachers of English 2004 Annual Convention in November 2004. We are writing an article about the program for submission to the national, peer-reviewed journal *English Education*. The sessions and main topics were as follows: Sept. 13—cooperating teachers' roles for fall clinical experience; Jan. 10—cooperating teachers' roles for spring student teaching semester; Mar. 6—assessment of student teachers; and May 15—evaluation of the pilot CTOP and plan for the next CTOP's format.

Sept. 13

In the first session we introduced ourselves, previewed the topics for the year, began reading *Working with Student Teachers: Getting and Giving the Best* (Michael A. Morehead, et al., 2003, Scarecrow Education), discussed the fall clinical experience, and revised the letter sent out to cooperating teachers in the fall.

Cooperating teachers gave various reasons for participating in CTOP: More support and recognition for cooperating teachers; a chance to grouse about the student teachers and air questions and concerns about the direction of the education program; addressing the high of turnover of teachers and preparing the next generation to meet the demands of the discipline; develop better relationships and better communication with the university supervisors (university supervisors); keep up with English Education theory; how to help student teachers who “hit the wall”; help student teachers bring in new ideas in teaching, but also understand the culture of the school and of the students and their communities.

During the general discussion that followed, several major issues about student teaching emerged: teaching literature, English Education methods, teaching with state tests in mind vs. teaching with developing literacy skills in mind, and the length of clinical experiences.

Over lunch we read and discussed a selection from *Working with Student Teachers*, which provided the background for our afternoon discussions. Throughout the year we continued to read and refer to this book. It provided a useful background and guidelines to our discussions, and all agreed that this book would be beneficial to everyone in the program to read.

In the afternoon we considered these questions: What are the needs, concerns, roles, rights, and responsibilities of cooperating teachers during the fall clinical experience? and What should be included in the letter to cooperating teachers this fall?

We discussed how cooperating teachers could be more involved in placing student teachers, and how the English Education faculty might get to know the student teachers before their senior year, as faculty now does. Participants gave suggestions about what student teachers should do in the fall clinical experiences to be better prepared for their student-teaching semester. We discussed the two-day practice teaching unit, and had a lengthy discussion of standardized tests, levels of comprehension, kinds of test questions, meaningful assessments, and “authentic” assessments.

January 10, 2004

During this meeting we discussed what makes for an effective and supportive student-teaching experience: The role of the cooperating teacher; relationships in the triad; how many courses and planning periods student teachers should have; how long the student teachers should have to build up to a full course load, sustain the full-time load, and return courses to the cooperating teacher at the end of the student-teaching period; formative, summative, and evaluative conferences; and the assessment forms and process.

This was probably the most productive meeting in terms of our research, because in it we identified key issues and categories of issues affecting English Education clinical experiences. Tensions between the university and schools, and theory and practice, came out for example, in discussions about the canon—how to balance the need for content knowledge, including canonical, young adult, and multicultural literature, with the need for pedagogical skills for teaching literature and composition. We also examined the various perspectives on English Education and on teacher preparation that the cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and the director of the program bring to our interactions.

Another main theme was the preparation of student teachers, including the structure and length of student teacher experience; the need for adequate planning time for beginning teachers balanced with the need to give student teachers a realistic full-time teaching experience; preparation for crosscultural teaching and for teaching diverse learners; and preparation in how to teach language skills.

How to foster the best communication and relationships was a core issue. We looked at relationships and interactions among and between the cooperating teacher, student teacher, and university supervisor; how the student teacher, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor negotiate pedagogy, school culture, and curriculum; and relationships and interactions among the student teacher and students and the rest of the school community.

We ended the meeting with a discussion of various issues involved with evaluating student teachers: critiquing student teachers; working with student teachers who resist criticism and/or lack self-awareness; ideas about what a good teacher is; working with our assessment instruments; student-teacher reflections, journals, and dialogue journals; the roles each triad member has in evaluation; and how to use a common language and common framework while still allowing for individual differences.

March 6, 2004

The objective of this meeting was to discuss what makes an effective and supportive evaluation process. We examined the draft of the English Education rubric that had been prepared by the English Education Committee during 2002-2003. We discussed the language that our standards should use—exceeds, meets, needs improvement, does not meet expectations—and the slipperiness of using the standards to evaluate student teachers; the need for standards to be clear to all; the need for student teachers to get the rubric in the methods classes, and cooperating teachers to get them in the fall, so they can become familiar with it; that cooperating teachers need a workshop on it to use it properly; how to prepare for the midterm and final evaluation conferences with the university supervisor so that the conference can concentrate on talking holistically, rather than having to focus on the assessment form; empowering student teachers to take an active role in their assessment; and how the student teacher's reflections can contribute to goal-setting for the second half of the semester.

May 15, 2004

The objectives for the final session were to plan the next year's CTOP program and assess the pilot project. We planned to bring all of the cooperating teachers, along with university supervisors and methods faculty, together for two day-long sessions. Goals for those sessions would be to:

- Clarify cooperating teachers' responsibilities as teacher educators;
- facilitate professional and productive dialogue among cooperating teachers, university supervisors, student teachers, and English education faculty, particularly concerning differing ideas about teaching and learning;
- provide opportunities for cooperating teachers to dialogue with cooperating teachers from other schools;
- encourage cooperating teachers to treat the semester previous to the student-teaching semester as an introduction to student teaching, engaging student teachers in the activities of teaching as well as guiding them towards the completion of their research assignments;
- determine how cooperating teachers can best support student teachers' observation and research during their pre-student-teaching clinical experiences;
- determine how cooperating teachers can best support student teachers to gain practical experience in classroom teaching, curriculum development, and other aspects of teaching;
- urge cooperating teachers to remain fully and appropriately involved in the student teachers' work, acting as a close mentor throughout the student-teaching semester;
- urge cooperating teachers to give student teachers increasing responsibility and autonomy over the first half of the semester, so that during the second half of the semester student teachers are able to spend a majority of their time in the classroom teaching solo; and
- advise cooperating teachers to negotiate curriculum content and pedagogical approach with student teachers through professional and productive dialogue, allowing student teachers to use alternative texts, teaching strategies, assessments, and classroom management techniques whenever possible within the constraints of the school's mandated curriculum and policies.

These objectives would be met in two meetings; one in August before student teachers begin their fall pre-student-teaching clinical experience, and one in December before the student-teaching semester. There would be two sessions each day. At the beginning of each session CTOP pilot program participants would introduce issues we identified through our discussions to everyone. Then the cooperating teachers would break into discussion groups, with one CTOP pilot participant facilitating each group. Each session would wrap up with reports given by each group. Every cooperating teacher would be given a copy of *Working with Teachers* to read before attending the meetings. We also planned to set up a listserv for all cooperating teachers, supervisors, and methods faculty so that discussions could continue throughout the year.

Participants wrote evaluations during the last hour of the meeting. Cooperating teachers wrote that their approach to mentoring changed, even though their basic philosophy did not. They used new strategies and refined old ones; benefited from understanding the English Education program's perspectives, curriculum, and constraints; allowed student teachers more room to experiment; and enjoyed improved relations with the university supervisors. The most significant finding was that the cooperating teachers became more flexible and open to new ideas emanating from student teachers and from the university, while the English Education faculty claimed new insight into and understanding of the cooperating teachers' positions and constraints.

This report ends on a blue note. Unfortunately, we were not able to secure funding to continue the program this year. Unless and until we are able to get the program funded, we will not be able to move CTOP forward, expanding it to include all cooperating teachers.