

## **Navigating the Waters of Teacher Induction: One Beginning Teacher’s Journey**

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*This year-long qualitative case study explores the ways in which one teacher intern reflected upon her knowledge and experiences within two sometimes dichotomous domains: the elementary school classrooms in which she taught and her university coursework. Data collection took place over a period of eight months and consisted of twenty-two weekly email journals assigned as part of graduate coursework during a fifth year internship program. Detailed analysis of these entries revealed the power of reflection and independent thinking in negotiating the complexity of influences on this teacher’s beliefs about teaching and learning.*

In an era of teacher accountability, scripted programs, and standardization, many new teachers are encouraged to believe there is a recipe for classroom success: bulleted lists and step-by-step procedures that when implemented lead to student success. We disagree. While schools of teacher education are under attack for insufficiently

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preparing teachers with the content knowledge necessary for ensuring student learning (Walsh, 2006), we believe that our responsibility as teacher educators is to foster the well-rounded development of complete teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2001). It is our position that schools need knowledgeable teachers who are able to think on their feet to adapt and develop practice that encompasses appropriate decision-making about instruction based on the needs of students (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Morine-Durshime, 1989). As such, in our efforts to support new teachers, we work to push our students to “acknowledge uncertainty and to take professional responsibility for their own knowledge base,” (Dressman, Graves, & Webster, 1999, p. 449).

However, the responsibility for scaffolding new teacher growth does not fall to university teacher educators alone; it is shared with mentor teachers, school administrators, and intern supervisors. Even when these critical players believe they are sending similar messages, we have little insight into the thinking processes behind how fledgling teachers make sense of these various influences in establishing their own beliefs about teaching. A common byproduct of these varied influences is that many beginning teachers struggle to reconcile knowledge gained in teacher education coursework with the teaching practices they see modeled daily in the elementary classrooms. Corcoran (1981) described the struggle of new teachers to transfer what they learn in university coursework to their classrooms, describing a transition period of shock and paralysis. Larson and Phillips (2005) demonstrated how one teacher struggled to negotiate two competing authoritative discourses: university coursework and a school district’s mandated reading program. Long et al. (2006) found that beginning teachers attempted to bring their teaching ideals to reality and defeatedly blended into the status quo during their first year in the classroom. Valencia, Place, Martin, & Grossman (2006) shared similar findings: during their first three years, beginning teachers negotiated their own knowledge, district mandates, curriculum materials, and professional development when making instructional decisions, often blending into the norm of the school, whether it was in-line with previous university coursework or not.

Given that new teachers are often faced with navigating various conflicting perspectives and experiences about teaching and learning in combination with their own previously held beliefs, the task of supporting the skills for this negotiation typically falls on teacher educators. Within teacher education programs, a common vehicle for fostering the development of thinking teachers is reflection. There is a good deal of teacher education literature related to the cultivation of thinking, reflective teachers (See Bolin, 1988; Risko, Roskos, & Vukelich, 1999; Schön, 1983; Zeichner, 1994). Schön posits that professional knowledge can only go so far in that the situations encountered in professional practice are complex, uncertain, and continually evolving. In essence, knowledge alone cannot sustain professionalism since it cannot keep up with the demands of practice. Thus, he argues, reflection must be established as a legitimate form of professional knowledge. Furthermore, he points out that teachers in particular are often isolated in their own classrooms and such isolation works against reflection in action.

In working toward fostering this type of teacher reflection, reflective journal writing has been found to be effective in helping students become deliberative about their teaching (Bolin, 1983). Many beginning teachers have been and are asked to both formally and informally reflect on their teaching at various stages. Reflection has become an accepted part of most teacher education programs (Kasten & Padak, 1997) and was a primary focus of the program at the center of this study.

As the graduate professor and intern supervisor charged with both teaching and supervising 14 interns over the course of two semesters, we implemented an electronic dialogue journal requirement in an effort to increase communication and encourage reflective independent thinking. Acknowledging that beginning teachers are faced with the task of making sense of many varied experiences and influences related to teaching and learning, we anticipated that some interns might benefit from being provided a space to describe their thinking and receive feedback in written form from two seasoned educators.

In our experience, it is rare to find young teachers who are not only able to succinctly articulate their struggles in moving from student to teacher, but also who are willing to honestly discuss them with those in positions of power (Loughran & Corrigan, 1995). Some interns may seek affirmation from us as authoritative mentors, resulting in less than honest or shallow articulations of their experiences and thoughts about teaching and learning. Additionally, many teachers may reflect merely at the factual level, describing experiences, reporting learning, and asking questions to seek clarification (Risko, Roskos, & Vukelich, 1999), rather than “digging deep” and thinking about what their learning means for their teaching and for themselves as developing educators. However, we soon found that one of our interns, Dana, was able to communicate her thoughts through the weekly email journal entries she sent to us, and thus emerged as the focus of this study to explore how teachers might navigate their first year of teaching.

Dana clearly articulated her ideas, frustrations, joys, and breakthroughs in the weekly email reflections she submitted to us. Even in the first weeks of the school year, Dana’s reflective and honest writings piqued our interest and led us to speculate that deeper analysis of her experiences may shed light on the process through which some beginning teachers work in order to effectively develop their own sense of educational identity. More specifically, this study was guided by the following question: What can careful analysis of one beginning teacher’s email journal entries tell us about the influences on her thinking and knowledge about teaching and learning as she navigated her internship year?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to explore the influences on a beginning teacher’s teaching and learning during her first year, we turned to Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule’s (1986) theory of women’s ways of knowing.

Belenky et al. (1986) provide a way to examine Dana's perspective on knowledge—where and who it comes from. Belenky et al. identify five categories that emerged from their in-depth interview research with women of all ages and backgrounds. The first category, silence, includes those who gather knowledge from an external authority and the knower has no voice. The second category, received knowledge, describes knowers as having a role in gaining knowledge from an external authority and the ability to replicate it, but the knower does not participate in creating the knowledge. Subjective knowledge is described as the knower feeling the knowledge. In other words, the experience becomes the focus and little value is placed on authoritarian advice. Within the procedural knowledge category, there is discrimination between opinion and authority. The knower can make her own choices while considering the perspective of others. The final category, constructed knowledge, is characterized by conflict and the knower refuses to give up the complexity of constructed knowledge in favor of simplicity. Belenky et al. caution against conceptualizing these categories in progressive stages and identifying one as inherently better than the others.

Belenky et al. found that the various ways of knowing reflect how women see themselves and approach the world. Their work provides a lens for analyzing the ways in which Dana thought and gained knowledge throughout her internship year.

## SUBJECT AND CONTEXT

Dana was one of fourteen preservice teachers in a cohort group completing their internship in a professional development school setting in order to fulfill requirements for a fifth-year Master's program and initial teacher licensure. She came to the program with no family history of teaching, and, in fact, when she started her internship, her school experiences were limited to her own education and the 48 hours associated with the single field experience class required by the program. She spent most of her internship year in a fifth grade classroom at a large, suburban elementary school, but had additional experiences in both second grade and kindergarten classrooms. In both her Master's coursework and in classroom experiences in which she was a coteacher, we found Dana to be both friendly and shy, mostly keeping to herself.

As part of the Master's program, graduate interns were considered full-time students, taking 12 hours of coursework and 12 hours of practicum over the course of the school year. However, in reality they were virtually full-time coteachers, as well. During the fall semester interns spent four days a week fully immersed in a single classroom and one day a week in an on-site seminar with university faculty. In the spring, most interns spent four and half days a week in second and possibly third classroom placements each at differing grade levels, before ultimately returning to their original placement. They continued to spend a half day in the on-site seminar. In partial fulfillment of course expectations, all interns were required to write weekly

reflections and submit them to us in the form of an email journal. In the roles of both professor and university supervisor, we responded to these emails separately, creating something akin to a more traditional dialogue journal.

Although Dana was not verbally extroverted, these journal entries revealed that she was thoughtfully articulate when writing to us. While most of her colleagues were indicating that they weren't sure what to write about or reporting a particularly interesting incident in their classrooms, Dana was comparing what she was seeing in her classroom with what she had seen in other classrooms, wondering what might happen if a situation had been handled differently, and critiquing both her mentor's and her own instruction. In just her third email journal of the year, Dana begins:

I am witnessing one of the few constructivist activities I have seen in the fifth grade this week in Science. The response has been amazing, and I cannot count the number of times I have heard how this has been the only time where science has been fun. While I see constructivist principles put into place and I do agree with the rationale behind the project, I can see some areas where this idea can be improved upon. I say that with great timidity though, because I am the first year teacher.

Another early (October) journal entry demonstrates how Dana moves beyond reporting the events associated with a three-day outdoor education experience organized by the school when she writes:

In a world where grades on individual tests and homework is so important, it is good for kids to be put in circumstances where they have to rely on each other to get things done. That is hard to teach in school, but definitely something that they need in life. I am glad I teach at a school where the principal sees this as an important use of three classroom days and where teachers work so hard to make all the details happen, especially with all the new [district] regulations on field trips.

Although Dana seemed to aptly fit into what Steffy and Wolfe (1997) call the "Apprentice" phase of the life cycle of a teacher, characterized by working through integration and synthesis of knowledge, pedagogy, and confidence, she appeared to be able to articulate her thinking in a way that many other beginning teachers do not.

## METHOD

After Dana completed her internship year, we approached her to ask if she would be willing to allow us to re-examine her electronic journals for research purposes; she readily agreed. Data included a total of twenty-two journal entries written by Dana that were submitted to us via email on a weekly basis from August 2004 through April 2005. Entries ranged in length from 300 words to 790 words.

Adopting an interpretive perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we engaged in the constant comparative method of analysis, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Individually, we read through all journal entries in order to get a sense of the data. As we encountered relevant incidents in each entry, we compared them to each other, looking for patterns, consistencies, discrepancies, and anomalies. Individually, we identified initial themes related to Dana's journey through her first year teaching. We then worked together to refine themes. This process was then repeated using the refined themes. To ensure trustworthiness, we shared the themes with Dana, in an effort to verify their interpretations. She coded them independently and then met to re-examine the coding in collaboration with the researchers. In the few instances that Dana's coding varied from our interpretations, it was recoded based on Dana's clarification and insight.

## RESULTS

Seven themes were identified from analysis of Dana's journal entries. They can be best conceptualized in pairs of two, with the exception of the final category. The first two categories include instances in which Dana described seeking advice from university faculty and those in which she described seeking advice from school faculty. The second pair of themes includes instances in which Dana described how her coursework did not match what she observed or experienced in the classroom and those in which her coursework did match classroom observations. The third pair of themes includes instances in which Dana described how her coursework informed instructional practice and descriptions of how school experiences informed instructional practice. The final theme includes instances in which Dana seemed to be thinking independently, or going beyond individual influences. She seemed to blend information and experience in a way that was meaningful to her. Six of these themes (three pairs) seemed to be the opposite sides of the same coin, while the seventh was much more fluid in terms of focus, although clearly consistent in terms of process. Themes and frequencies are included in Table 1.

**TABLE 1.** Theme frequencies over time

Theme	Fall semester (13 entries)	Spring semester (9 entries)	Total
Advice from university faculty	3	4	7
Advice from school faculty	3	2	5
Coursework doesn't match classroom	6	4	10
Coursework does match classroom	5	1	6
Coursework informs practice	10	5	15
School experiences inform practice	7	3	10
Independent thinking	19	14	33

## DISCUSSION

Our analysis of Dana's email journals resulted in the development of seven themes that describe this first year teacher's influences and the ways in which she negotiated knowledge related to teaching and learning. Here we discuss these themes, which are conceptualized in four categories: seeking advice, linking coursework to classroom, experiences informing instruction, and independent thinking.

### Seeking Advice

While they were not a major focus of Dana's reflections, she was quite balanced in seeking advice from both her university professors and her mentor teachers. It is evident that she valued both voices in helping to determine her own. Again, references to these kinds of requests, "If you [professor and supervisor] have any suggestions on how to improve writing or how we can better help the children think of topics...that would be helpful," and, "I asked [Mentor Y] what she usually does..." didn't show up until the eighth journal entry, but then appeared from time to time for the rest of the school year.

Interestingly, though, the types of questions changed over time; her questions became deeper, and almost rhetorical as she entered into the second semester of her internship. Her February 22nd entry is a good example of such elevated questioning. Dana integrated her question into a reflection on a lesson she taught, saying:

I think it was a good idea, just overwhelming to them. I could tell even the high kids were having trouble. I guess I just wondered how early is too early to start doing this type of thing?

It appears as though her purpose in writing this entry was more to articulate her own thinking processes than to pose a question that requested a definitive answer.

### Linking Coursework to Classroom

It is noteworthy that Dana began two of her first three journals by noting consistencies between her coursework and classroom experience. She quickly discussed the link between the emphasis on integrating technology in her university coursework and the fact that her school and classroom were not only well-equipped with computers, but that her mentor used them consistently. She explained:

I have been in many educational classes where they supply us with many reasons to implement technology in the classroom. But, I have seen few examples of this being done until this year. [Mentor X] uses

computers and brings in the laptop cart three or four times a week... I really saw technology being used with purpose and I saw the effect it had on the kids who were enthusiastic about what they were doing.

In another example, Dana wrote about a science lesson that included constructivist activities including social interaction and collaboration among the students, as discussed in her coursework. She described this consistency:

I am witnessing one of the few constructivist activities I have seen in the fifth grade this week in science... And, they are working in a group, allowing for collaboration and social interaction that is so beneficial in education.

It was not until later that Dana brought up any discrepancies between coursework and what she was observing. In her fifth journal entry in late September, she described a situation in which there was discordance between what she was learning in her university coursework and what she observed in the classroom. She seemed surprised that teachers weren't doing what research reported as effective practice as she described a conversation among a group of mentoring teachers who were discussing their use or nonuse of supplemental reading materials and assessments. Dana wrote:

I just kept hearing how unrealistic it was for teachers to make time to meet with one to two small groups per day and listen to them read. They just kept saying that they didn't have the time or see the point. To me, it seemed the general feeling was disgust that [the district] would require teachers to attend a workshop explaining how to teach reading when they thought they had been doing a pretty good job at it.

Later in the same entry, she refers to how her coursework presents the information, as she says, "I thought back to the whole class on running records and IRI's and thought that none of these teachers had probably used any of that information that I thought was so valuable."

By January, Dana appears to have gained some insight into the stance of these teachers. In a journal entry dated January 24, she explained, "...I definitely see the need for seizing reading activities that are personal and engaging and that meet each child's level...but I just don't know how there is time for it all." In light of this January understanding of the teachers' issues with time, it is most interesting that six months later, when Dana met with us to review the data, she stopped at the September entry and identified the experience as a key point in her development saying, "It never occurred to me that people wouldn't do what I was taught and then say it's stupid. They didn't even want to consider it."



## Experiences Informing Instruction

Dana's entries often reflected how her experiences in both university classes and classrooms shaped her instruction. In her eighth journal entry, Dana noted, "They (the students) were so eager to share their stories, and I thought to myself, 'this is what reading should be about.'" She went on to discuss how she built background knowledge for the story from the basal reader, and how, by allowing the students to talk about their experiences, they were much more involved in the instruction. Since Dana's university coursework at the time explored the importance of tapping into students' background knowledge, this entry indicates how she used that knowledge to inform her planning of the reading lesson.

In her next journal entry, she turned around and described her thoughts on why her first independent day of teaching did not go well:

I guess...that these kids don't take me very seriously because, though I do like to threaten with pulling cards and the like, I seldom follow through...I have seen that kids, even the pretty good ones, are going to try to push the limits and test whoever is in front of them.

Dana's in-school experiences influenced what she knew she needed to do in this situation.

Dana's journal entries often mentioned instructional time as a mediating factor in the types of things teachers are able to do in their classrooms. At the beginning of the year, one entry about her fifth grade classroom exemplified this growing awareness. She explained, "I am beginning to see how little instructional time there truly is...we [the students] have to take this writing unit test on Wednesday, so we won't get to do the personal narrative stuff I was so excited about..." In this example, it appears that her classroom experience was beginning to influence how she conceptualized instructional time. By March, however, while still occupied with the topic of instructional time, her thoughts indicate a much deeper understanding of the complexity of maximizing instructional time when she stated, "I just don't think I have really realized how little instructional time there is...you have to maximize everything you do and check and double check that lessons have objectives that are clear and match the curriculum." It is as if without this classroom experience, Dana might not have really understood the importance of maximizing instructional time.

## Independent Thinking

Finally, the most consistent theme to emerge from Dana's journals was related to her statements labeled "independent thinking." This category is eclectic in topic, but her writing within this category indicated that she was moving beyond reporting observations or teaching experiences. Each item shares the unique

characteristic of Dana blending information and experience in a way that was meaningful to her. For example, after discussing how she built background knowledge for a story in her eighth journal, Dana ventured into her own thinking stating:

I think kids think they have to be grown ups to make a difference. It is good to show them they do not. It would have been even more cool to be able to tie this story into some examples of real kid heroes or maybe have them write a story...

She continued this particular entry by asking her professors for advice on writing instruction.

Within the independent thinking theme, some of her entries consisted of only her own thinking, like the third journal of the second semester. She and her peers had listened to a former intern speak about teaching in an inner city first grade classroom in the university Friday seminar. On the following Monday, Dana's entry demonstrated that she had been thinking about this experience all weekend. She said:

I've always felt like inner city teachers have to put up a certain facade, one of intimidation that I don't really have. I guess listening to her made me realize that I do have a heart for those kids, it's just that I'm not sure I could go into that kind of environment right after an internship. Though I have grown so much, I just feel like there is so much I still do not know...

She continued exploring the possibility of following in the footsteps of the first-year inner city teacher, in a format akin to "stream of consciousness" for another two full paragraphs. She never asked for input, referred to the fact that the thoughts "...have been running through my head over the weekend," and ended with, "I am glad to see she is truly making a difference in so many little lives, and I'm glad she took the day to come talk to us about something she feels so passionate about."

It is through the lens of Dana's independent thinking that we gain direct insight into her transition from college student to teacher. On November 29th, Dana described her struggle to plan a reading lesson because she had several ideas and worried that her mentor might not support her ideas and/or the time they might involve. Her reference to the "real teacher" clearly suggests that she does not see herself in that role yet as she explains, "...that's part of what makes this internship hard, being in some control but always knowing the real teacher would probably do it a different way." However, toward the end of the school year, on April 25th, Dana seemed to become more solid in her beliefs when reflecting on a bully situation she observed. Rather than referring to someone else as the teacher, she puts herself firmly in that role, saying, "...if I were the real teacher I would handle it differently. I would definitely let the parents know what was going on and I would put a stop to it when I saw the bullying happen."

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Based on Dana's reflections, she appeared to be functioning well within the procedural knowledge stance, as identified by Belenky et al. (1986). Her journal entries indicate that she was consistently working to discriminate between opinion and authority; working toward making her own choices as she considered the perspectives of others. Unlike many preservice teachers who seem to take an either-or stance toward learning (either coursework or classroom; either professors or teachers), Dana was able to make sense of what was going on around her through reasoned reflection. She continued to look back and forth between her two primary sources of knowledge: university coursework and associated faculty and school experiences as she worked to make sense of her professional self. It should be noted that it is difficult to discern if Dana's ability to utilize both sources of knowledge was because she was given space to journal her thoughts and read responses from the two of us, or if she would have done so without this opportunity. We believe that the most consistent (and frequent) theme, independent thinking, was essentially a byproduct of Dana's stance toward creating knowledge; evidence of her ongoing negotiation of the conflict within the constructs of the internship.

Dana's journal entries provide us with a window of insight into the challenges faced by beginning teachers as they move from the student mode into the teacher mode. Dana's thinking reveals the messiness of the navigation process and confirms that beliefs about teaching and learning are not formed in clear, predictable patterns and stages (Wiggins & Clift, 1995). This is inconsistent with studies that describe stages or phases of teacher development (Haberman, 1983; Piland & Anglin, 1993; Harrington & Sacks, 1984; Zulich, Bean, & Herrick, 1992). In analyzing Dana's journal entries, we hoped to uncover clear themes and paths in terms of first year navigation, much like our new student teachers who anticipate a recipe to follow when teaching students. However, in reality we encountered nonlinear writing that revealed the complexity of influences on a beginning teacher's journey. In her weekly writings to us, Dana chose to write about instances in which she sought advice from us and her mentor teachers, linked her coursework to classroom observation and experience, described how experiences within her coursework and in her classroom experience informed instruction, and integrated many of these ideas to think independently about teaching and learning. Most importantly, these ideas were not recorded in a linear or progressive manner, but were intermixed throughout the course of the school year.

We also believe this research supports the critical nature of bringing these struggles between coursework and classroom into the open; we cannot continue to ignore the fact that beginning teachers face different and potentially confusing views espoused by professors, supervisors, mentors, colleagues, principals, family members, and so forth. While Dana was able to meaningfully use these multiple sources to come up with her own ideas, we know that many beginning teachers

struggle to do the same and still others may be turned away from teaching altogether. Acknowledging the limitations of this case study, it is appropriate to highlight the need for teacher education programs to take responsibility for explicitly supporting thoughtful teachers who are able to make sense of, negotiate, and thrive as they navigate the various discourses they encounter on their journey to becoming classroom teachers. The notion of critical literacy, reflecting on teaching practice by purposefully attending to the social forces at work on understanding as well as “taking moral and ethical responsibility” (Leland, Harste, & Youssef, 1997, p. 385) for their positions, might be a valuable component in conceptualizing the preparation of thinking teachers.

### LINGERING QUESTIONS

The findings from this study indicate the power of reflection and critical, independent thinking for preservice teachers negotiating their internship experience. The weekly email dialogue journals served as a space for Dana to think through her coursework and classroom experiences, informing her personal educational identity and philosophy. After analyzing Dana’s journal entries, we found ourselves wondering about the impact of our responses to her. Especially in light of Belenky et al’s (1986) statement that “...in order to achieve the voice of reason one must encounter authorities who are not only benign but knowledgeable...” (p. 93), we questioned whether receiving responses to her journal entries from two different sources might have impacted Dana’s thinking. In other words, might receiving sometimes opposing responses to her thoughts from people whom she considered to be knowledgeable have helped to model the process of independent, critical thinking? Unfortunately, we did not retain our responses to Dana’s journals, so we could not investigate that aspect within the parameters of this case study, but it does offer a possibility for further investigation.

Zeichner (1996) indicates that “Unless the practicum helps to teach prospective teachers how to take control of their own professional development and to learn how to continue learning, it is miseducative...” (p. 217). In this case, the year long internship, accompanied by, among other assignments, an interactive dialogue journal, was not miseducative. Dana, now rounding out her third year of teaching, has continued to stay in touch with us and maintain her reflective thinking. In an unsolicited email to Amy in September 2006, she wrote:

I think a successful teacher is one who constantly evaluates their own lessons and goals for the students. I think they are the ones who integrate curriculum and who connect curriculum to real life experiences. I think a successful classroom is one based on a sense of community and respect for one another, and one in which dialogue and understanding concepts is restated and explored...

While it is evident that researchers have focused for quite some time on fostering thinking teachers who are equipped to negotiate the various discourses they encounter during their induction into teaching, it is evident that many teachers are still struggling with this journey. We must continue to investigate ways to support this process, so that we have more teachers like Dana in classrooms across the country.

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