

A Review of *Teaching as a Moral Practice*

Edited by Peter C. Murrell Jr., Mary E. Diez, Sharon Feiman-Nemser, and Deborah L. Schussler

Review by Barbara S. Stengel

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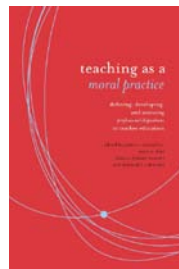
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AS THE DIRECTOR OF A SMALL SECONDARY-EDUCATION preparation program, I am hot on the trail of a program slogan for our students' lanyards as a way of tying them to a set of intellectual, pedagogical, professional, and personal dispositions. We want them to bear a concrete reminder of best practice as they—with habits only partly formed and lessons only partly learned—are challenged by kids, curriculum, context, or circumstance.

Peabody College's secondary-education program is grounded on the idea that "practice guides research and research guides practice" (Peabody College, 2010, p. 1). We steer our students toward noticing, indeed, foregrounding, their own future students' thinking about specific content in the classroom and then leveraging that thinking to enable their students' learning. We look to a diversity of ideas and experiences as opportunities for growth rather than problems to be managed. We focus on learning in and through practice (in the form of legitimate peripheral participation gradually increasing in complexity and responsibility). We highlight teaching to and through the academic language that shapes each school subject, making explicit and scaffolding for the cognitive demand that these discursive structures impose. We encourage both a set of habits (core practices) and a way of responding when habit fails (pedagogical response-ability). And this set of priorities is bound up with our official list of dispositions: professional conduct, professional habits of mind, expressive and interpretive communication, capacity for collaboration, commitment to the learning of all, and reflection and continuous development as a professional. To be a good teacher is to be a recognized and accepted member of a dynamic community of practice,



marked by habits and by characteristic ways of responding when habits fail. That community has identifiable, though malleable, mores and expectations (including values and principles) for its members. As new members are socialized into the community, and bring new knowledge and experience, the community of practice is itself transformed. This is complicated stuff, hard to think about at the program level. This is the stuff that dispositions, required by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), intend to capture. Enacting this research-practice nexus is difficult, to say the least. Coming up with a slogan (rather than a thesis!) that says something central to our mission without being too limiting or too useless is a daunting task, and we have not yet succeeded.

I have been thinking about that effort as I've read, appreciated, digested, critiqued, and been frustrated by the work of Peter C. Murrell Jr., Mary Diez, Sharon Feiman-Nemser, Deborah L. Schussler, and other colleagues at seven teacher preparation institutions (all a part of colleges and universities). *Teaching as a Moral Practice: Defining, Developing and Assessing Professional Dispositions in Teacher Education* (2010, Harvard University Press)

BARBARA STENGEL is a professor of the practice of education and the director of the program in secondary education at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, where she and her colleagues are trying to build a teacher-education program of distinction around the wisdom of practice, the best of empirical research findings, and sophisticated, defensible social and philosophical theory.

takes a broad look at programmatic efforts to make the dispositions that are inspired by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) and required by NCATE mean something and, in particular, to mean something ethical and moral. As the director of a teacher education program, I'm most interested in the seven case studies that richly describe the constraints and affordances that accompany any particular set of dispositional commitments. I want to know how each campus team articulates and assesses dispositions, what it does with the data amassed, and how it reconstructs its programs when the data suggest that something is amiss. As a philosopher of education, I'm interested in the ways that editors Murrell, Diaz, Feiman-Nemser, and Schussler pull the case studies together while conceptualizing the task at hand.

From the perspective of NCATE compliance, the book succeeds admirably in fulfilling its subtitle's promise of "defining, developing, and assessing professional dispositions in teacher education." It is less successful in saying something useful about the title claim: "teaching as a moral practice," primarily because the authors are caught in the limiting conceptual web of dispositions and rarely break out to a richer understanding of teaching and teacher education as social practice, one that might convey or create common moral and professional ground for the teaching profession.

The editors describe this work as "a set of *cases* that are, we believe, an authentic picture of the kind of work being undertaken in teacher education around issues of conceptualizing, developing, and assessing teacher dispositions" (p. 5). I agree these cases are authentic, that they represent accurately the kind of efforts teacher education faculties make on a regular basis to meet their accreditation requirements, and sometimes to inspire professional pedagogical action. However, I worry that these cases are too rooted in business-as-usual, that these are exemplary cases of the kind of deliberating we are doing in teacher education but perhaps are not the kind our own practice calls us to do.

Murrell et al. present seven institutions: the University of Denver, Winthrop University, the University of Cincinnati, the University of Southern Maine, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, the University of North Carolina Wilmington, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. These institutions represent a range of the kinds of places where teachers are educated (university-based programs), including public research universities, public institutions focused on undergraduate and masters-level education, and one liberal arts environment. I consider the seven cases in the order of the text before turning to consider the volume as a whole.

The title of Maria del Carmen Salazar, Karen Lowenstein, and Andra Brill's chapter focused on the University of Denver's Boettcher Teachers Program is both provocative and expressive. "A Journey Toward Humanization in Education" is "an in-depth examination of one candidate's performance in a series of assessments designed to guide candidate growth as well as to document candidate progress" (p. 28). The authors describe how they assisted this candidate to "confront issues in his understanding of learners

and build skills in advocacy for them" and also "where they missed chances to use assessment as a support to his growth" (p. 28).

On its face, it is hard to argue with "humanizing dispositions" (p. 29) as a target or to deny the Boettcher Program's specific commitment to "the notion that students' cultural, linguistic and familial roots are essential to their academic achievement" (p. 29). The faculty nurture the humanizing dispositions through a series of performance assessments that are themselves educative: a personal-education history, a child study, an analysis of a teaching-and-learning project, a praxis project, a critical case study, and collaborative critical-action research. The authors provide a rich window into their own thinking about and response to candidates through the experience of one they refer to as JH, revealing not only the skills teacher-educators must develop in novice teachers (e.g., building relationships with students) but also the dispositional challenges for the teacher-educators themselves (e.g., patience needed as JH comes to understand from a constructive rather than deficit framework a student who is "other"). The humility with which the authors reflect on their experience with JH is refreshing. I suspect that their own process of "kid watching" a teacher candidate was educative for them, the result of collaborative critical-action research.

Since the Winthrop University authors nest their work in the principles of the Goodlad-inspired National Network for Educational Renewal, one would expect a focus on democratic schooling, and Lisa Johnson and her colleagues do not disappoint in "Disconnection as a Path to Discovery." The focus of their ongoing self-study is not the way in which their program manifests democratic markers and outcomes but the disconnect between teacher-candidates' stated moral commitments and their actions.

The Winthrop experience is a model of the kind of self-study and redesign cycle that accreditation is intended to spark. Questions emerge from performance data and are studied with an eye toward professional, programmatic, and ethical commitments; program structures are reviewed and renewed in light of that study; assessment tools themselves are subject to redesign to be sure that the data gathered are answering the emerging questions. And particularly important, the web of those contributing to the design cycle is woven in widening circles to include teacher educators from across the university.

Still, the Winthrop effort seems flawed by the choice of guiding theory: James Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT), based largely on Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning. Kohlberg's interesting conceptualization of moral decision making has always had one significant limitation: subjects' scores with respect to reasoning never matched up with their moral actions. So it is unclear how this theoretical base can do the work the Winthrop team wants it to do with respect to bridging stated commitments and actions.

Chester Laine and his colleagues at the University of Cincinnati are "Moving [their students] from Reaction to Reflection." Starting from the education-unit mission that is admittedly "ambiguous and ambitious, the faculty settled on a program that they believed would prepare teachers who were committed, caring and competent" (p. 74). The discrepancy for the

University of Cincinnati team was between “our espoused values and our observations of our candidates in the field” (p. 74). Ruth, Henry, and Brady are composite characters representing candidates who failed to live up to commitment, care, and competence. What is most impressive is the Cincinnati’s faculty ability to see their candidates’ missteps as a function of the program’s failings. Rather than blame each student for some character flaw, the faculty set to work to create the context that would support and guide the candidate’s development of the expected dispositions.

The faculty interpreted Ruth’s failure to know and to interact generatively with her urban students not as elitism but as an inability to make sense of an environment alien to her experience. They properly read Henry’s failure to care for his special needs students as both ignorance and fear. Brady’s inability to respond to his new English language learner (ELL) student Cecilio confirmed that the teacher education program did not ensure experience with ELL students. So the program was revised to make it possible for students to act on their beliefs. These revisions included implementing early warning systems that identify fears and areas of ignorance, adapting methods courses, expanding field experiences, and engaging supervisory teams whenever candidates were in field settings. Still, I am left wondering, is this enough?

Catherine Fallona, Julie Canniff, and their colleagues at the University of Southern Maine are open to “Learning from Getting It Wrong.” They analyze the experience of two unsuccessful candidates, using their articulation of the issues to frame definitively desirable dispositions and instruments/strategies for assessing them. Patrick, who fails to live up to a “commitment to equitable and engaging learning” (p. 97) when he proselytizes in a letter home to students and parents, and George, who cannot break out of his “narrow concept of teaching possibilities” (p. 101), exemplify candidates whose dispositional challenges were evident to the program at the point of admission and whose subsequent development required both faculty support and firm, clear expectations.

Fallona and Canniff rightly insist on “the importance for our entire faculty to have a shared understanding of the *moral* dispositions we believe all teachers should express” (p. 115). Developing this shared understanding takes time, and “it has to be a priority for faculty to take the time to be together and talk and learn from one another” (p. 115). But there seems to be an implicit assumption that this shared understanding is something to be negotiated at the local level rather than lived out within a broader community of social practice. Can there be a profession of teaching and teacher education when the touchstone is primarily local?

At Wisconsin-Eau Claire, faculty began revisions of three apparently successful programs by “Putting Dispositions in the Driver’s Seat.” The dispositions now driving program decisions are clustered around the concept of “collaborative leadership” (p. 118). The authors readily acknowledge that this stemmed in part from an effort to “brainstorm characteristics of [their] graduates that represented [their] ‘signature’” (p. 118) and resulted in a “newly stated identity” (p. 119). This new identity required realignment of knowledge, skills, and dispositions across three programs with diverse theoretical foundations, behavioral, constructivist, and

critical pedagogy approaches. Would the faculty be satisfied with a common, but benign, motto (e.g., “Preparing Collaborative Leaders” [p. 118]) that did not challenge their diverse directions? Or would they hammer out substantive common ground around this slogan? What happened next is the substance of this chapter: Faculty encountered tough philosophical questions about the individual and relational dimensions of teaching practice as well as about identity, agency, and character.

Both the Southern Maine portrait and the Wisconsin-Eau Claire cases capture something that is bothering me about the state of teacher education. Too many programs seem to be seeking a brand (absolutely defensible) *at the expense of* diving deep into the common core of our practice (less defensible). What, if anything, can we *all* claim? And if there is nothing to claim in common, is there a practice at all? Is it a practice worth taking seriously?

John Fischetti and colleagues at the University of North Carolina Wilmington are acutely aware of how difficult it can be to motivate faculty to take disposition-based program changes seriously. Individual teachers carefully guard their own courses, their own piece of the credit pie, and resist considering changes that might divide the pie differently. So they seem grateful that the state of North Carolina stepped up with new Professional Teaching Standards that centered dispositions and made it impossible for faculty to bury their heads in the sand. Those new standards were the tipping point that motivated program revision.

That revision, like the effort at Eau Claire, was built around the concept of teacher leadership. In the UNC Wilmington iteration, the focus is on “leadership for diverse learners” (p. 142-143). Neither institution offers a theory of leadership, though one can get a idea of what it looks like as a program goal by considering the students who are held up as exemplars or struggling candidates. In the case of Wilmington, one can also see leadership in the commitments and behaviors of the authors who “took on the role of advocates” (p. 147) for the program revision, who brought specific moral commitments like Sonia Nieto’s “caring teachers” and a “passion for social justice” (p. 149) to the attention of their colleagues, and who sought to “weave profound experiences into our programs” (p. 152), who acted to “mobilize” (p. 156) their colleagues, and who took their efforts on the road to influence other UNC system programs. Fischetti and friends are articulate and impressive in their energy and commitment, but it is unclear whether their subsequent program changes really result in “profound experiences” (p. 152).

The final case study is the only solo-authored one, perhaps because “Making the Path by Walking” does not describe program change. Eleni Katsarou’s is a more bounded story of the creation, piloting, and revision of “a formative assessment tool directly focused on a set of dispositional domains and teaching practices” (p. 163). This collaboration between a university faculty member and group of long-term cooperating teachers resulted in the Development of Ethical and Caring Actions in Urban Teaching (DECA-UT), an instrument that at once makes concrete a vision of good urban teaching and provides data for candidate formation and program reform.

For Katsarou, this instrument of articulation grew out of her practice-based desire to have candidates teaching in urban settings

exhibit greater “pedagogical resourcefulness” and “cultural responsiveness” (p. 166). She and her colleagues sought both a way of identifying those candidates who could not or would not cut it in the urban setting and a way of supporting those candidates who wanted to succeed in an urban environment but did not yet have the wherewithal to do so.

The final version of the DECA-UT defines and outlines six dispositional domains, identifies three developmental levels for each disposition, and associates possible actions that concretize the performance indicator. Katsarou details how she and her partner cooperating teachers make use of the DECA-UT in student teaching, maintaining that the crux of the matter is in the structured conversations prompted by a shared vision of effective pedagogical action. And I wonder, where do these conversations take us?

I can pay this set of case studies one very strong compliment: They elicited for me a wide range of questions, possible responses, and potential critiques. For that reason alone, I commend this volume to any thoughtful teacher-educator.

Nonetheless, my predominant reaction to this collection is frustration—despite my sympathy for their overall project. I do support the efforts of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education’s TEAM-C, agree wholeheartedly that teaching is a moral craft, and have added my own voice to those trying to articulate teaching as unavoidably moral, so I’m not sure my frustration is with this book’s authors so much as it is with all of us who research and practice teacher education. Are we unable to limn teaching as a practice writ large? Are we reduced to negotiating local versions of the practice? How do we recognize each other as members of a common tribe (even with local variation)? What is at the core of the social practice of teacher education at present? And is this practice defensible and sustainable?

I raise these questions in response to *Teaching as a Moral Practice* because my own suspicion after 30 years in teacher education is that our practice is neither defensible nor sustainable, with or without the moral as its guiding light. Take the central feature of most programs: student teaching as the culmination of university coursework and university-directed early field experiences. This practice teaching is built on an epistemology of learning that is widely discounted and discarded (that one acquires knowledge and then applies that knowledge) and on an institutional feature of teaching/schooling practice (one teacher, one classroom) that limits differentiating teacher salaries, constrains professional roles for talented teachers, and yields unnatural practice instead of legitimate peripheral participation for candidates before tossing them abruptly into full-scale accountability.

This collection of essays seems to take the traditional practice of university-based teacher education for granted, tinkering with dispositions but never really making the changes that the practice itself—including the dispositions formulated here—seems to demand. It is not only that we teacher-educators are challenged by alternative licensure programs and dismissed by policymakers on the outside; it is that our own local musings about dispositions demand a radically different kind of practice that we do not (or perhaps cannot) deliver.

The framework set for these case studies by Peter Murrell and Mary Diez in the introduction does little to challenge what we take for granted as university-based teacher educators. They begin with a definition of dispositions that tries to have it both ways: “habits of professional action or moral commitments that spur such action” (p. 9). I agree with Murrell and Diez that both are part of the fabric of the practice and that habits and moral commitments are separable for purposes of analysis but not in action. But this definition does not encourage clear thinking about what marks a good (potential) teacher nor, as Feiman-Nemser and Schussler note in the conclusion, does this definition shed light on how to recognize or develop those markers.

Murrell and Diez acknowledge that there are tensions in the very concept of dispositions and articulate them clearly. But because they do not root them in an explicit view of teaching as a social practice that candidates both enter into and reshape, the tensions have no power to explode what we take for granted about teaching or teacher education, that is, about who should do it, and about how, where, and when it can and should be done.

In their concluding commentary (a cross-case analysis), Feiman-Nemser and Schussler push the authors of the case studies to tease out how they think about dispositions and what dispositions have broader support. They highlight a commitment and capacity to teach all learners and a tendency to collaborate (note that the first is a moral commitment and the second a professional habit) as possible common threads. I agree that these are both desirable markers of teacher candidates (note that both figure in the Peabody College disposition list as well), but there is no much more that is missing. Where is persistent curiosity? Honesty in relationship? Attention to student thinking? Aren’t these (moral) dispositions that the very best teachers enact? Are we so busy creating our brand that we neglect to make conscious the most basic assumptions and responses that bind us as part of this social practice?

Feiman-Nemser and Schussler rightly point out that “teacher education needs a theory of disposition development” (p. 185). Like knowledge and skill, dispositions are not static character traits but dynamic aspects of persons-in-relation. There may be characteristics that cause us to screen candidates out or in (as, say, Teach for America does), but those are few, especially when working with undergraduates growing into themselves as well as the profession. For Feiman-Nemser and Schussler, the development of dispositions raises the problems of the preconceptions that get in the way of a vital view of what is possible, of the knowledge and skill that ground enactment of professional/moral commitments, and of the challenge of maintaining one’s moral compass when complexity—in the forms of institutional craziness, societal conflict, and political gamesmanship—impact teaching and learning. This is the place where this collection has the capacity to break out of business-as-usual. But for the most part, it doesn’t happen.

If we take seriously the problem of preconceptions, what kind of education must we offer candidates? Where do they have to go? With whom must they talk? Can a university-based education accomplish this? If we take seriously the simultaneous development of knowledge, skill, and disposition, then where can that occur? Isn’t this the impetus to get teacher-educators out of the

university and into both the public schools and the places where policy is made to create room for novices to enter the practice of teaching with graduated responsibility? If we take seriously the reality that teaching as currently constituted is demoralizing and soul-numbing work in too many places, should we not raise our voices in a chorus that says so, and then organize efforts to beat back the kind of policies recently implemented here in Tennessee that gut collective bargaining, make licensure unnecessary, and ever more tighten the accountability noose?

Maybe I am most frustrated with myself. I recognize the conversations in these cases and commentaries because I have participated in them—and I know that these conversations are not getting to the heart of the matter. Finding a slogan, though useful, will not substitute for constructive action that shakes teacher education to its core. This is not merely about partnership between university-based teacher-education programs and K–12 schools. As presently structured, staffed, and funded, both institutions are incapable of doing the work they must. (For the record, charter schools and alternative licensure programs are no better. They just have mirror-image limitations.) The only constructive path appears to be that teacher-educators and K–12 educators (and the policy-makers who constrain them) make common cause to reinvent

themselves together as a seamless system for the critical renewal of the social practice of teaching and for the renewal of the members of that community of practice.

To that end, I wish that the authors of these chapters had talked with one another, to recognize together that humanizing is rooted in culturally contested terrain, that widening the circle of teacher education strengthens our power and practice, that candidates' dispositions are situated in practice and program structures, that a social practice both informs and is formed by shared understanding, that slogans have to give way to substance, that political action is demanded by the nature of our shared practice, that identifying dispositions is just the beginning of a process of professional development, that profound experiences are too often not the currency of our current programs and, yes, that teaching is a moral practice.

References

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