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Training Adaptive Teachers

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During the summer of 2020, I began planning the field experience course that launches our English Language Arts teacher candidates' year-long school placements. As I reflected on the skills most valued in the middle of the pandemic, adaptability rose to the top of the list. Education reporting has covered the myriad ways teachers have adapted: changing classroom routines, revising curriculum, and figuring out new modes of instruction, often while facing uncertainty about their schools' plans (Fielding; Schwartz). A spate of online advice for teachers has echoed refrains of adaptability, such as this one: "Be nimble, and make changes along the way" (Tate). It was highly unlikely that field experiences would begin on time, if they would begin at all, but candidates needed to start gaining pedagogical experience. How could I design an assignment that helped candidates start to develop adaptability before beginning their field experiences?

1. Defining Adaptability

It's undeniable that adaptability is a cornerstone of teaching. Individual learners present strengths and challenges, schools themselves are "highly dynamic and fluid working contexts" (Collie et al. 127), and "change, variability, novelty, uncertainty, and transition" are embedded within any school day (Martin 696). Danielson's Framework for Teaching, used by school districts and educator preparation programs, names "demonstrat[ing] flexibility and responsiveness" as a feature of effective instruction, and the Council of Chief State School Officers' Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium's

(InTASC) standards list "adapting" as a performance indicator: "The teacher designs, adapts, and delivers instruction to address each student's diverse learning strengths and needs and creates opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in different ways" (7). In other words, adaptive instruction, what Parsons et al. call "an awesome balancing act" (206), is how teachers differentiate for individual learners (Mascarenhas et al. 3-4).

In their efforts to understand the role of adaptability in effective teachers, Collie et al. utilize Martin's three-pronged definition (Collie et al. 130). Adaptability can be cognitive (a change in thinking), behavioral (a change in actions), and emotional (handling emotions in a way that allows for challenge and newness) (Collie et al. 130). All three types are related: for example, when a teacher faces an unexpected occurrence in the classroom, cognitive adaptability can pave the way for emotional adaptability. Along these lines, Sutton found that teachers who used "reappraisal" while experiencing negative emotions in the classroom (i.e., looking at a situation from a different perspective) were more likely to stop, think, and regulate their emotions (268). In this case, rethinking (cognitive adaptability) allowed for emotional change (emotional adaptability) and new actions (behavioral adaptability).

These definitions primarily see adaptation as a way to respond to specific circumstances, however, missing an implied but important first step: teachers must first recognize the need to respond. When we colloquially talk about "teachable moments," for example, we refer to seizing

an unexpected moment to teach a lesson that we did not anticipate. For teachers to be highly adaptive, they must continually recognize the possible ways they might shift instruction or approach in order to enhance their students' learning. Anders et al. put it this way: "the best teachers are successful because they are thoughtful opportunists who create instructional practices to meet situational demands" (qtd. in Mascarenhas et al. 5). When we adjust our definition of adaptability to include being on the lookout for reasons to change instruction, adaptability becomes more of an outlook, not just a way to weather unpredictability.

2. Reflection and Revision

What types of assignments might teach this approach to adaptability? Mascarenhas et al. suggest using vision statements, as their research indicated that adaptive teachers have a strong vision for their instruction (8-9). They also recommend close ties between coursework and field experiences (11), and Collie et al. encourage purposeful reflection so that teachers can reconsider how they handled situations in the classroom (133). NCTE's 2020 position statement on methods courses also cites "opportunities for structured conversation and reflection" as integral to effective field experiences (Gallo et al.). Dewey would connect this practice to the particular properties of reflection: "reflection upon experience gives rise to a distinction of what we experience (the experienced) and the experiencing—the how." Once we can better see the how, or the "method," we can imagine other possible methods (hence, revision). Reflection could also give teacher candidates the space to develop an adaptive viewpoint overall, helping them use their knowledge of their students to seek opportunities to impact their learning.

As I planned for Fall 2020, I thought about the ways our program already utilizes

reflection. Narrative reflection helps our candidates "lear[n] to live within the particular cultural, historical, and cyclic situation of each classroom" (Clandinin 139), critical reflection helps them "identi[fy] and chec[k] the accuracy and validity of [their] teaching assumptions" (Brookfield 3), and reflection on their instruction helps them think through the impact of their instructional choices. I sought a new assignment, however, that required candidates to reflect on adapting instruction to a new situation.

3. The New Assignment

As part of a new assignment, I asked candidates to respond to a change in conditions. First, candidates designed a lesson plan around a short text for their future face-to-face school placements. After they received feedback and revised these plans, candidates were asked to adapt and teach them in a virtual setting with their peers. They received feedback directly after teaching and then reflected again on the text as well as their planning process. Multiple stages of this assignment integrated reflection and revision in order to strengthen candidates' metacognitive awareness, their willingness to revise plans, and their ability to look for potential instructional alternatives (see table 1).

Table 1
Possible Adaptive Actions

Assignment Steps	Adaptability Types (Martin qtd. in Collie et al. 130)	How
1. Design a lesson plan around a short text.		
2. Peer review in class. Use feedback to revise the plan and explain changes.	Emotional Cognitive	Experience emotions in response to feedback. Recognize opportunities to enhance learning. Change lesson plan and articulate decision-making.
3. Adapt the revised lesson plan for a Zoom lesson in our class.	Emotional Cognitive	Experience emotions in response to changes in the assignment. Recognize opportunities to shift the lesson. Select changes and articulate decision-making.
4. Teach the redesigned plan.	Emotional Cognitive Behavioral	Experience emotions while teaching (i.e., nervousness, excitement, etc.). Recognize opportunities to veer from the plan. Make instructional changes while teaching.
5. Receive feedback on teaching from peers.	Emotional Cognitive	Experience emotions in response to feedback. Recognize opportunities to enhance learning.
7. Reflect on the process.	Cognitive	Rethink the text.

		<p>Reflect on planning and revising.</p> <p>Offer alternatives for future instruction.</p>
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4. Future Adjustments

By the end of this assignment, more than one candidate reached out to ask if they could create yet another version of their lesson plan after teaching it. Some made significant changes during each stage of their plan, pointing to specific feedback or moments that led them to those changes. All of these candidates seemed more likely to adapt instruction to the specific contexts of their field placements once they arrived. Others, however, minimally revised their plans. Still others needed the practice teaching experience in order to buy into revision at all. For example, a candidate taught with an undeveloped and unrevised plan, but after teaching, outlined several specific revision ideas for future instruction.

So, candidates were learning how revisionary thinking could enhance instruction, but I doubt they were thinking of adaptability as an outlook that embraces continual instructional reinvention. Why? Although “adaptability” was on my mind as I designed the assignment, I failed to explicitly name or define it. Furthermore, I did not ask candidates to consider the significance of adaptability in their evolving philosophy of teaching. As I contemplate adding these steps for next year, I keep returning to Sheridan Blau’s “performative literacy,” which could be a helpful corollary for talking about adaptive teaching. An “enabling knowledge,” performative literacy includes a “willingness to suspend closure—to entertain problems rather than avoid them” (19) and “a willingness to take risks” (19). Teachers with these same characteristics would be more likely to notice problems and possibilities in their students’ learning and to seize moments to

enrich it. Drawing on Blau, conditional language, such as “could” and “might,” could help teacher candidates practice identifying alternative instructional choices.

In fall, this assignment will include readings on adaptability as well as prompts to connect feedback, practice teaching, and learners in their placements to potential changes to instruction. For example, in the final reflection, I ask candidates to share what new textual insights they gained after teaching. Next time I will ask candidates to connect their new observations of the text itself to potential changes in how they could approach the text in their placements. A performative literacy framework would suggest naming more than one instructional direction and multiple reasons why teachers might choose one over the other.

Perhaps more than anything, teaching this assignment has made me consider how to integrate adaptability more explicitly into methods coursework. This assignment focused on a change in modality, a condition that I knew candidates would face in their placements this year. But an “Adapt a Unit” assignment could focus on identifying potential instructional adaptations based on contexts created by the instructor and/or the candidates themselves, such as the particular cultural and linguistic backgrounds of a class or interdisciplinary curricular opportunities. To foster adaptability through a collaborative case study approach, candidates could work together to create multiple instructional possibilities for each case.

Ultimately, English Language Arts teacher educators need to think about how we help candidates become “thoughtful opportunists” who can recognize and take

advantage of possibilities to enhance student learning (Anders et al. qtd. in Mascarenhas et al. 5). There are far more pieces to the adaptability puzzle than this assignment can address, but I believe an important start is recognizing adaptability as not simply a willingness to respond to change, but rather as a stance that values shifting to enhance student learning over and above the best laid plans.

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