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Teaching Teachers

Robert W. Barnett

Bringing Theory, Practice, and Reality Together in the Teacher-Training Classroom

Earlier this year I attended a luncheon at the University of Michigan-Flint on the future of education in Michigan and had the pleasure of sharing a table with several teachers from the Flint public schools. Their visions for the future were especially interesting to me because many of their students who pursue college degrees will likely come to the University of Michigan-Flint. And some of them will study to become secondary and elementary educators. One high school English

teacher pulled me aside and gave me a rather bold piece of advice for working with the latter group of students. She said, "You need to stop teaching so much theory and start giving these students something useful they can bring to the classroom when they become teachers." It may have been the tone of her voice. It may have been the mother-to-son manner in which she addressed me. Whatever the case, her comment has stuck with me as I continue to rethink how I teach research and theory, and perhaps more significantly, how I use the research paper in my classes.

I believe that good classroom practice is informed by a solid understanding of theory and that we as educators have a responsibility to incorporate this concept into the training of our students, many of whom will eventually become teachers themselves. I also believe the traditional research paper assignment does little to help reach this goal. It's not enough to expose our students to research that reveals what teachers accomplish in the classroom. We also need to help them see the **why** behind the **what**. I have discovered over the years that an effective way to merge theory and practice in the classroom is to immerse students in writing projects that allow them to bring the two together for themselves **and** to do so in a context which is real and meaningful.

Take my upper division composition courses. I ask students to write a Theory Into Practice Paper (TIPP), a major project that explores both

the philosophical and pedagogical aspects of a specific issue related to the teaching of writing. Through the examination and synthesis of a variety of voices—those of established theorists, practitioners at the secondary and post-secondary levels, their peers, and their own—students can better make sense of the theory/practice connection. They also take some responsibility for their own learning by placing their issues in real environments. In fact, I encourage them to choose projects that can actually be implemented into their teaching repertoire. Many of the final products also make their way into the students' employment portfolios, which I believe helps demonstrate their ability to think like teachers, a definite asset in their future job searches.

Christine, for example, wrote her project on the use of peer collaboration in the writing classroom and made it a part of her teaching portfolio. She interviewed for teaching positions the next semester and was hired by her first choice. Christine discovered, as she later shared with me, that her interviewers were looking for a teacher with experience in using collaborative learning strategies. She confessed that "What I learned from that TIPP experience helped me talk my way right into a teaching job."

Encouraged by Christine's success story, I decided to use the TIPP in my most recent writing course, Rhetoric and the Writing Process, designed for secondary education majors and En-

glish majors intending to pursue graduate studies. The course is divided into two parts: seven weeks of composition theory and seven weeks of practical application. The TIPP worked especially well because I designed the class so that its sequence paralleled that of the theory into practice project.

Here's how the assignment unfolds. As the semester progresses, I ask students to begin thinking about issues related to those discussed in class that they would like to pursue. For example, Mike proposed exploring meaning-making in the teaching of creative writing; Amy wanted to write about the use of journals and journal writing for grade school students; and Michelle expressed interest in maximizing the interaction that takes place in a writing classroom. Since the project actually begins at mid-semester, I frequently suggest ideas that surface in class discussion during the first seven weeks that would make good TIPP topics. Other students chose such topics as designing writing assignments for learning disabled students, teaching style and voice, collaborative learning, writing and teaching across the curriculum, and computers in writing.

Unlike the traditional research paper, the TIPP works to more thoroughly synthesize students' research with their own ideas about writing and teaching. The paper itself is created with three distinct sections: a two-page extended introduction; an extensive synthesis of theorists' views on the topic with those of the writer; and a practical application section, where the writer creates a new unit, assignment, or other project to incorporate into a writing class. The very act of juggling class material, research, and original, creative ideas empowers students to think for themselves and to make informed choices about their writing and about their future teaching in ways that a traditional research paper cannot. I would like to look at each of these aspects that make up the TIPP, following several students' projects in order to provide insight into what the students actually learn along the way.

The Introduction

My experience with large paper projects has shown that students often struggle to clearly spell

out their intentions in the introduction. The notion that the first short paragraph is sufficient space in which to set the stage for a twenty-page research paper has been ingrained in students' minds. As a result, they become adept at padding a six-line thesis statement with a few snazzy sentences that may or may not relate to their topics. Or, and this happens much more frequently, I read the most wonderful, informative, passionate introductions—in the conclusions of papers.

It was out of this very frustration that I created the protocol for the TIPP introduction, which allows students to think through their topics in somewhat of an I-search manner. Take Michelle's paper on embracing interaction in the writing process. She begins by presenting a broad view of the topic and its educational importance in the academic as well as social arena, and then funnels her topic into a more specific focus. By the end of the introductory section, the reader has been given a wonderful context for understanding the topic. Michelle drives her point home with this final statement:

Based on my findings, it seems clear that the success of a college writing course is not simply the predictable result of good instructors teaching good students, but the product of the interaction of five key classroom factors: the instructor, the individual student, the student group, the texts, and the writing assignments.

By posing specific questions for my students to ponder, I am asking them to move beyond the simple sentence/sentence/thesis statement introduction. The questions help create a goal-specific context in which they can address not only the topic, but secondary issues that are pertinent to it. The following list gives students a good starting point:

- Why is this topic important to the field of composition?
- Why is it important to you as a future teacher of writing?
- What are the theoretical implications of the topic?
- What gives this topic potential for becoming a part of your teaching?
- How will this topic affect the teaching of writing?

- What impact will it have on students' learning processes?
- What, specifically, do you intend to do? Why? How?

The extended introduction liberates the writer from the micro-focus of a topic and allows her to more clearly and convincingly develop the ideas she will explore later in the paper. An interesting trend I see in TIPP introductions is that students begin with informative statements about their issue and then move quickly to an application/implication of that issue as it pertains to teaching and learning. The real surprise is that the voice almost always changes from informative to argumentative as the direction of the paper becomes more certain. For example, Amy wrote a TIPP entitled, "An examination of how journal writing increases confidence and self-esteem in children." In the opening paragraph she wrote that:

Journal writing can be a very useful and successful tool in making learning fun by teaching and showing children that they can not only write, but write interesting, funny, and rehabilitating stories, which were all created by them. Through encouraging and allowing students to write, teachers and parents can foster in children the belief that they can write, and write well.

Not only do these comments provide an early focus for the paper, something not always present in the traditional introduction, but this student ties several factors into the issue as it unfolds: journal writing, children, teachers, parents, encouragement, and confidence. This melding of information becomes significant in light of her comments that appear later in the introduction section:

Writing in journals can benefit children of all ages, but I feel the early years of education are the most influential and the best time for journal writing to begin. Journals have the power to get children to think, not with the aid of textbook exercises, but by using their own thoughts and ideas to find the answers. Journals disrupt the tendency to confine students' creativity by allowing them to write and create something unique to themselves....

The informative nature of the first excerpt creates a natural transition into the more specific details of the direction this paper will take. More important, perhaps, is that in addition to an

emerging thesis, a clear voice has emerged, that often under-represented element of good writing.

The Theory

The approach to this section, as with the introduction, is one of search and synthesize. This time, however, students are asked to find out what others have to say about the topic, to analyze those opinions, to compare them to each other, and, finally, to blend those views with their own argument.

The difficulty students frequently encounter with the theoretical aspect of this assignment is that what they have to say about the topic becomes overshadowed by the presentation of the outside sources. The focus becomes so centered on those voices that the writer's voice is no longer heard. One of my observations with research writing is that students are seldom given clear direction in terms of what to look for, how to dissect a source text, or how to incorporate information into their papers so that it supports what **they** have to say and not visa-versa. Michelle's theoretical discussion of the teacher's role in embracing interaction in the writing process is a good example. She writes that "Though Harvey Weiner notes that the instructor's lack of dominance during the class period tends to give the impression that he or she is idle, this conclusion is far from accurate." Michelle goes on to use other sources to justify her claim, showing that she is clearly in control of her presentation.

Throughout the drafting process of the theory section, I remind students to go back and review their introductions, because if they have constructed these well, then the voice and argument they have created will help keep them in control of their own text. To help make the theory aspect of this project a bit easier to digest, I offer students the following series of questions that help keep them focused as they incorporate sources into their writing:

- What do theorists say about your topic?
- Do they all agree on one approach?
- What are the differences of opinion you notice in the literature?
- What contributions have been made to the development of the topic?

- Are there areas of the topic not covered by theorists?
- How do these theorists' views fit with your own?

Each time I assign this project I add to the list of questions in such a way that it offers students a goal-specific approach to their research, an approach which values their voices as much as those of established theorists. Since they have been summarizing and analyzing readings all semester in class, students have had a good deal of practice pulling out significant ideas and concepts from composition articles. Combined with their interest in the topic, students often find the research for this section to be very valuable.

The Practice

In this final section of the paper, students create an actual writing unit, assignment, project, which grows out of and is informed by the theory which they have researched and synthesized. The practical application of the TIPP represents, for them, the most obvious departure from the traditional research paper assignment. Based on what they have presented in their introductions and what they have learned through the review of the literature, students are given three tasks for this, the most important section of the paper.

First, they need to offer a rationale for the inception of the activity and provide a detailed discussion explaining the significance of the assignment on the teaching and learning of writing. Second, I ask for a detailed, line-by-line explanation of how the project will be carried out. Since a lack of adequate detail can potentially derail an otherwise strong assignment, we spend several class periods crafting this portion of the activity. Third, students must provide a visual representation of the project or assignment, relying heavily on their creativity in order to develop an effective, understandable supplement to their narrative explanation. Eliot's project from another class, Seminar in Collaborative Writing Theory and Practice, is the best example I can think of. His topic was the noise factor in the campus Writing Center. After researching and analyzing the problems associated with the noise factor, Eliot concluded that we should reconfigure our Writing Center, with more space, to accommodate both open and private tutoring. After a discussion and rationale

for the change, he drew a new floor plan for the Center. As the Center's Director, I saw the importance of Eliot's project and I included his floor plan with a proposal for more Writing Center space, which is currently under consideration by the Dean of our college.

The TIPP ends with a final discussion of the implications this project as a whole might have if introduced into a classroom. As with the previous sections of this project, I ask students to reflect on specific questions to help stimulate their thinking. The lists of questions I provide are essential to the success of the Theory into Practice Paper because students are still in the process of learning to ask themselves the critical questions that can help control the direction and ultimate outcome of their writing. Such prompts nudge them into this self-reflective, self-questioning process and gives them a model they can use as a starting point for directing the development of their own ideas:

- What is the reasoning behind this assignment?
- Why is this an effective assignment?
- How will this assignment help students become better writers?
- How will it help teachers become better teachers?
- How will it fit into a larger unit/semester/assignment?

Summary

When students are allowed to reflect, explore, synthesize, and question as they write, and if we can create writing assignments that allow them to do so, then they will see for themselves the significance of theory and practice in the teaching of writing. The Theory Into Practice Project effectively illustrates the importance of balancing composition pedagogy and theory, a balance that will no doubt contribute to their development as future educators in our discipline. As Amy said at the end of the semester, "This is the most relevant research paper I have ever written. I feel like I've created something I will actually use when I leave here!"

About the Author

Robert Barnett is Assistant Professor of English at University of Michigan-Flint, where he also directs the University Writing Center.