An A+ Teaching Experience

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From August 1996 until August 1998 I was enrolled in the Cincinnati Initiative for Teacher Education (CITE) program. By the time I graduated, I had spent two full years in the classroom, collaborating with others and experiencing what it meant to be a teacher. The year long internship (August 1997—June 1998) is an experience that I will never forget.

The CITE program at the University of Cincinnati requires an intensive two year commitment from participants. The first year is spent in three different school settings. Each quarter, CITE students are required to be in the classroom at least fifty hours and teach a minimum of seven lessons. This year is known as the “teaching associate year,” and CITE teaching associates, except for the seven required lessons, are for the most part observers getting their first introduction to the teaching profession. I had quarter-long experiences at the following institutions:

- University of Cincinnati—basic math
- A Cincinnati public high school—junior English
- A Cincinnati public middle school—multisage reading and communication arts.

At the completion of the teaching associate year, CITE participants move on to a year-long internship position. This experience is often completed at one of the schools at which the student taught during his/her teaching associate year. My internship year was spent with a six-person team at Shroder Paideia Middle School, where I taught seventh grade reading and communication arts.

Looking back on my teaching ability at the conclusion of my teaching associate year, I now realize how much of a disservice I would have been to students if I, like many new teachers, had simply been given a full-time teaching position. Although I had more classroom experience than many new teachers do at the completion of their student teaching, I knew that I was not yet prepared to be left alone in a classroom for the next school year.

During my internship year, I was the teacher of record for one class and coached two other classes every day. I was also assigned mentor, career, and lead teachers to assist in my development. The internship gave me one year to work with my own group of students. I had the opportunity to experiment with new concepts, learn solid pedagogical practices, and develop sound instructional patterns under the guidance of an experienced teacher.

The best part of the internship was that I was not simply left on my own; I had people to support and help me during the long and often frustrating year. I shared a classroom with my mentor teacher, who provided me with all sorts of ideas, suggestions for successful lessons, planning techniques, and resources. I cried, was confused, and wanted to celebrate, and all along my mentor was there to support my development as a beginning teacher.

I also worked closely with my career teacher, who kept me up to date on changing educational trends and helped to complete my résumé. I was also assigned to a professional practice school coordinator who worked between Shroder and the University of Cincinnati. She was always there to offer support and listen to my frustrations and concerns. Finally, I worked steadily with a University
of Cincinnati liaison, who was a constant objective supporter of my development.

In addition to the course and internship requirements, CITE participants are required to complete a portfolio based on their experiences throughout the program. My final product is a 325-page documentation of my first year of teaching. Had it not been for the support of and constant collaboration with the educators to whom I was assigned, I doubt that I would have successfully completed this extensive project. I am still amazed when I review the contents of this portfolio and see where I started and where I am today.

Throughout the internship I was observed so often that I lost count. My students became so used to the observers that they rarely gave them a second glance. The observations helped me to reflect upon and change areas of my teaching that may otherwise have become bad habits had I not had the constant feedback from the observers.

The internship experience laid the foundation for my teaching practices. Had I not gone through this experience, I honestly doubt that I would be teaching today. I will always be indebted to those experienced educators who helped me to become the teacher I am, and my students will forever reap the rewards of an A+ teaching experience.

Support Is Essential

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For decades, educational reform initiatives have targeted the education of teachers as one of the most important components for change, the belief being that better teacher education will result in better teaching. Your “A+ teaching experience,” Julie, reinforces this principle. You were fortunate to have had such a multifaceted, supportive environment in which to develop as a teacher. Working with a diverse group of participants in a variety of teaching situations requires flexibility. Learning to adapt to varying personalities and philosophies is a challenge in itself and perhaps the most important characteristic of an effective teacher.

You indicated that during your internship year there were opportunities to experiment with educational concepts and lessons. I wonder whether you also had the same latitude in experimentation during the teaching associate year, particularly with the seven lessons you taught. In other words, did you design those lessons or follow another teacher’s plan? I ask this merely out of curiosity, not from any judgmental stance. At this preparatory stage, I believe that any opportunity to lead a class is beneficial, even if it is simply to convey another teacher’s lessons in your own style. This is another important characteristic of effective teachers—the ability to modify lessons to fit their own style of teaching.

Regardless of the richness or length of the experience, student teachers need to have continual support from knowledgeable, seasoned professionals.

Your concern with the potential disservice to students had you taken on a full-time teaching position brings up another issue for me and possibly for other teacher educators: How much student teaching is enough? How many weeks or months does it take to fully prepare teachers? It’s that old quality/quantity controversy—Is the value of the experience more important than the amount of time put into it? Student teaching for fifteen weeks in a classroom with twenty-five students from ten different ethnic backgrounds (many of whom may speak English as a second language) may be more challenging than teaching a homogeneous class of ten students for a year. I have known student teachers who have had more challenges in one class than others have had in five classes for the same amount of teaching time. You, however, certainly seem to have had a reasonable balance of both time in the classroom and variety of experiences.

Regardless of the richness or length of the experience, student teachers need to have continual support from knowledgeable, seasoned professionals. As you indicated, Julie, your community of mentors helped you ride the roller coaster of emo-
tions that all teachers, preservice and inservice, must learn to negotiate. We can all probably remember those times when we were reluctant to return to school after a weekend, but also those times when we were equally reluctant to end a dynamic class discussion. Knowing that others have “been there,” too, is comforting, but those who never have this opportunity for collegial commiseration may end up dropping out of student teaching or leaving after the first year or two.

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Yet it’s not the “misery loves company” syndrome that helped you remain in the teaching profession; more importantly, you had people who gave you constant and constructive feedback on your teaching. They helped you to think about aspects of your teaching “that may otherwise have become bad habits.” Perhaps they gave you suggestions on classroom management or the pacing of lessons, two of the biggest problems that my student teachers encounter. Whatever their suggestions, because of their input and your openness to it, you allowed yourself to improve by accepting change, by trying a different, probably even a better, way. The willingness to learn from others, to keep doing what works, and to change what doesn’t are essential ingredients in the making of a successful teacher.

It is noteworthy that your support group also kept you focused on your professional portfolio, a task that seems overwhelming when it’s first confronted. With my own student teachers, the portfolio requirement is the last bump that often derails their progress. (Licensure in our state is contingent on completion of a portfolio and its evaluation by a review panel.) Given the rigors of student teaching, they set aside working on their portfolios until after they complete their internship. Once it’s completed, they just want to relax and gather their thoughts. Sounds like a good idea, but what typically happens is that these students lose the motivation (or self-discipline) required to complete what appears to be a mammoth piece of drudgery. Making matters worse is the reality of having to work on this project independently, without the daily encouragement of others. As you have discovered, the portfolio compilation is much less tortuous work while the goals are fresh in your mind and there are others to guide you through the process.

Although you don’t mention it, I suspect that you also had the support, albeit a different type, of the administration in the schools where you taught. Principals and vice-principals may not have the time to observe student teachers’ classes or to hear their daily travails, but they can offer support in other ways. Administrators who welcome student teachers and the innovative ideas they bring with them make a tacit statement about the kind of faculty they are apt to employ. Ultimately, they also make a statement about the degree to which they are willing to encourage creative teaching in their schools, another vital aspect of the educational reform picture.

You’re fortunate, Julie, to live in an area where teacher preparation is taken seriously and where there are initiatives, such as the CITÉ program, to invigorate it. You have participated in an enviable venture at restructuring teacher education. It is not surprising that you awarded your teaching associate year and internship an A+ rating. To their credit, these experiences contained all the features of a successful program: observation, collaboration, practice, critique, and reflection. I agree with you that the real winners are the students who will be the beneficiaries of your efforts.

Julie Responds to Elaine

Thank you for your insights and continuing support of strong teacher education programs. Sharing in your belief of support for new teachers is the Cincinnati Public School District, which spends a lot of time training and offering internship positions to new teachers. Recently, however, the CPS Board of Education cut more than 150 teachers for the 1999–2000 school year. Sadly, many of these
teachers were former CITE interns. Though some may be returned to their positions at a later date, many of these teachers, like me, will move on to new school districts. It is sad that the public education system has come to this end, with the students as the ultimate losers.

I look at the teachers in our district and in the surrounding districts and wonder what chance many students have. Lots of teachers are burned out, and others are still teaching as they were taught, never bothering to renew their instructional techniques, restructure their classroom management, and update their professional development. It is sad that the universities are attempting to educate and supply schools with the best possible new teachers, only to have them cut in the years ahead.

Elaine, you asked whether or not I had the freedom to design lessons or if I followed another teacher's plans during the teaching associate year. The answer is both. I was assigned to three teachers during my teaching associate year, and all of these teachers were eager to have me try out new lessons as well as share the ones they had already prepared. Initially, I felt more comfortable teaching the lessons they had prepared and that I had previously observed them teach. Of course, I was free to adapt them to my own style as I felt necessary. However, as time passed and I grew more confident in my teaching capabilities, I began designing and teaching lessons of my own. Thankfully, though, I was not left as many new student teachers are—alone with little or no support.

This inevitably leads into your next point about quality vs. quantity. I do not for one minute believe that one semester is enough teaching experience. Frankly, I still need support, even after the two year teaching program. Although fifteen weeks or four months may seem adequate to some, it is not really comparable to teaching a class for an entire year. The changes I see in my students and the classroom relationships that develop after working together for an entire year can never compare to a four month teaching assignment. Fifteen weeks is barely enough time to establish a classroom, much less fully experience all of the things new teachers encounter before taking on a class by themselves.

I learn new teaching strategies, techniques, and content every day. I couldn’t imagine being so swamped in the “new teacher fear stage” that I was unable to learn from these experiences. It was not until the middle of my actual internship year that I felt I even had a minute grasp of what I was doing and what control, for lack of a better word, I had in the classroom. I had to get over my anxieties and really learn to get in touch with the kids before I could refine what I was doing as a teacher. I learned more from my one year internship position than I did from all three of my teaching associate assignments combined. I fully support this long-term student teaching experience for obvious reasons: The teacher and the students benefit from such extensive exposure.

It is important to note that the administrators were supportive and truly brave to take on such a new and experimental teaching program as CITE. In time, I believe that more schools will realize just how beneficial a good teacher education program can be. I believe that good teachers start with ample training and firm foundations. As I said before, I could be a mediocre or even a burned-out teacher by now, if I had not received the support and guidance of the veteran educators who helped me to become the teacher I am today. As we enter the new millennium, we must work harder than ever to give students the skills they need to be successful in the coming age. As soon as school systems realize that this does not happen with minimally trained and qualified teachers, we will all be better off.