

The Master Teacher Program: A Case for the Evolving Practitioner¹

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Abstract

In this qualitative study I explored six CEGEP teachers' perspectives on teaching and learning over a two-year period, as they completed the first four courses in a professional development program, the Master Teacher Program (MTP). Repeated, semi-structured interviews were analyzed, using the dual processes of categorizing and connecting (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). Results converged to reveal four patterns and three major dimensions. The four patterns that emerged described a process of evolution from teacher to learner-centeredness. I used the four metaphors of awakening, stretching, exercising, and shaping to represent these four patterns. Three major dimensions related to teacher perspectives were also evident. The participants reported that they had become more aware of the learner and the learning process, more intentional in curriculum planning and teaching, and they increased in self-knowledge, and in particular, in their sense of identity as teacher professionals. Reflection on practice over time emerged as the major factor underlying changes in perspectives.

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Situating Myself

The impetus for me to begin this study, five years ago, originated with some questions I had concerning my own practice. I had been teaching psychology at the CEGEP level for almost 30 years. While I enjoyed teaching my discipline and received favourable feedback on student evaluations, my knowledge of pedagogy was founded on years of accumulated classroom experience. Essentially, this amounted to a privatized, trial and error self-assessment of my teaching, which was largely based on my own experiences as a learner. My practice was neither particularly reflective, nor was it informed by current findings in the field of education. Through my involvement as a course consultant in the Master Teaching Program (MTP), I began to explore the educational literature on teaching. In particular, I wanted to further investigate the two domains of professional development and reflection in higher education, and to reflect on this knowledge, in light of my own practice. The PAREA grant which I received through the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport during the 2007-2008 academic year, has enabled me to complete this study.

Review of the Literature and Research Question

Decades of research have established clear links between the quality of teaching and student learning outcomes. However, much of this research has focused on primary and secondary teacher education, where the emphasis is placed on pedagogy. The situation is different in higher education, where teachers are disciplinary experts, and, in spite of a lack of grounding in pedagogy, they are expected to be able to teach effectively. Beaty (1998) has referred to this assumption as double professionalism. According to the author, current research suggests that expertise in how to teach is as important as expertise in one's discipline.

Over the past few decades, teaching has assumed an increasingly central role in higher education. The heightened status of teaching has been fuelled by developments such as Boyer's (1987) Scholarship of Teaching movement, and by the changing landscape in higher education (Nicholls, 2001), that is, the increase in student numbers and diversity. Factors such as these have led to demands for greater accountability in the areas of both teaching and student learning. In

spite of these demands, the fact remains that the idea of learning to teach in higher education is a relatively recent phenomenon that has met with considerable resistance (Brew, 1999).

Christopher Knapper (2005), Professor Emeritus at Queen's University, maintains that this resistance can be linked to a lack of formal preparation for learning to teach in higher education, the absence of accreditation for minimum levels of competence, and the lack of faculty involvement in continuous professional development. New teachers are particularly vulnerable. Emerging from disciplinary-specific, research-oriented training in graduate school and faced with an overwhelming teaching load, they resort to survival mode in their teaching. The combination of these factors does not foster teaching practices that develop complex levels of thinking in students (Saroyan & Amusden, 2004).

Colleges and universities have responded to the challenge to improve teaching by offering support for faculty that ranges from workshops to courses to longer-term programs. Many of these initiatives have been critiqued for not meeting teachers' needs. These needs include the fact that learning to teach is a developmental process that evolves over time and is enhanced through interactions with competent peers. As well, such professional development initiatives need to be embedded in relevant theory and research, so that teachers can establish a clear link from theory to practice and from practice to theory (cited in Sprinthall, Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996). Programs that integrate these criteria need to be developed, implemented, and evaluated.

One area of particular importance that underlies the process of teacher development concerns faculty perspectives or beliefs about teaching and learning. These perspectives act as filters and play a critical role in decisions that teachers make (Saroyan et al., 2004). At the pre-college level a significant body of research on teacher perspectives exists. In contrast, at the college level, very few studies have been conducted into how these perspectives might influence teaching practice (Fang, 1996). Hence, this has emerged as an important area of investigation.

A number of theoretical frameworks can shed light on the process of change in teacher perspectives in higher education. Prominent among these are Ramsden's (1992) theory of teacher thinking and Mezirow's (1981) theory of transformative learning. As well, several researchers including Kember (1997) have described a progression in teacher perspectives from a teacher-

centered to a learner-centered orientation. What is missing is a description of the process, within individuals, that underlies this change in perspectives from teacher to learner-centeredness. Further, the amount of time it takes to bring about this change in perspectives needs to be investigated.

In this study I tracked college teachers' changing perspectives over time, in response to a professional development program, the Master Teacher Program (MTP), in which over 100 Anglophone CEGEP teachers are currently enrolled. The overarching question that guided my research was *How does reflecting on teaching and learning throughout the first four courses which cover a two-year period in a professional development program (MTP) contribute (or not) to teachers' changing perspectives on teaching and learning?*

The Master Teacher Program

The MTP is a professional development program tailored specifically for Anglophone college teachers within the Quebec CEGEP system. The program is unique in that its curriculum has been designed and is taught by well-reputed CEGEP teachers, many of whom have been instrumental in building the college system (Bateman, 2002). From its outset, the MTP has sought to embody a sense of mutual ownership. A Consortium of Anglophone CEGEPs was established to oversee the program. A steering committee, composed of local representatives from member CEGEPs was created, and meets regularly to administer the MTP. Affiliated with the Performa Program at the University of Sherbrooke, participants can earn either a Diploma in Education (DE) after accumulating 30 credits or a Master's in Education (M Ed) after 45 credits.

According to the program's curriculum coordinator, Dr. Dianne Bateman, the MTP seeks to promote the scholarship of teaching by providing CEGEP teachers with the requisite knowledge, competencies, and personal qualities that effective teaching at this level requires. In particular, the program aims to "develop in each new teacher the ability to simultaneously observe, monitor, analyze, and adjust when necessary the complex intellectual, psychological and emotional processes that occur in their respective classrooms" (Bateman, 2002, p. 2 of 6). In offering direct and practical assistance to new teachers, it aspires to shorten the time it takes to

evolve from a novice to a master teacher (Bateman). The MTP's strong academic component is based on contemporary theorizing about how people learn (Bransford, Brown, Cocking & Donovan, 2000), and in particular, how adults learn (Mezirow, 1992).

The first four courses form the core of this program. These courses include College Teaching: Issues and Challenges, Psychology of Learning for the College Classroom, Instructional Strategies, and Assessment. These courses are compulsory for all students and are taken in a sequential fashion. Through these courses, teachers are encouraged to reflect on their perspectives on teaching and learning, and to reconsider these, in light of current findings from cognitive science. In this study I tracked teachers' perspectives on teaching and learning as they completed these four core courses.

Methodology

I was granted permission by the Steering Committee that oversees the MTP to recruit participants for my study. The cohort that I selected began the MTP in the fall of 2005. Six female teachers agreed to participate in the study. They were from a number of CEGEPs, with teaching experience ranging from one to twenty-five years in a variety of disciplines. They taught in both pre-university and professional programs. To ensure anonymity, the six participants were given pseudonyms. I interviewed each participant after she completed each of the first four courses in the MTP, and a fifth time for a retrospective interview. In addition to collecting over 25 hours of interviews with the six participants, they also sent me their concept maps and journals. I used their reflections from these three sources that covered a two-year period to assess their perspectives on teaching and learning over time.

In this qualitative study, I applied the dual processes of categorizing and connecting to the analysis of the data (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). When used together, these two procedures can provide a more holistic understanding of the results. To categorize the data I used the constant comparative method as outlined by Maykut and Morehouse (1994) and by Charmaz (1998, 2000, 2005). Over a period of approximately 15 months, I manually coded every line of 418 pages of transcribed interview data. I also examined other data sources including two sets of the

participants' concept maps on teaching and learning, and approximately 360 pages of their reflective journals. I did not code the concept maps and reflective journals but rather used these materials as evidence to corroborate the findings from the interview data. After categorizing the interview data, I used a connecting strategy to construct three narrative summaries that were based on a more contextualized analysis of each participant's story. The three participants that I selected for the narratives differed in terms of years of teaching experience, disciplinary background, and type of program. Therefore, they represented a purposive sample. I applied a methodology known as holistic content analysis as outlined by Lieblich (1998) and Seidman (1998) to identify major themes for the summaries. I also used a technique known as ghostwriting (Rhodes, 2000), whereby I constructed the narratives in the first person, using the participant's own words as much as possible. I sent the stories to the participants for their feedback; therefore the narratives became jointly constructed products. Throughout the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation I wrote analytic memos. These memos helped me to remain aware of my biases, as well as the particular lenses, including that of researcher/teacher, through which the data were filtered.

Results

Four Patterns

The process of evolution in the six participants' perspectives on teaching and learning over two years was revealed through four major patterns or phases. These patterns emerged as a result of coding the interview data. I represented these patterns through the four metaphors of *awakening*, *stretching*, *exercising*, and *shaping*. The use of metaphors suggested a new approach to data analysis that provided me with an understanding of the complexity of the phases. The particular kinesthetic and emotional qualities that these metaphors evoked allowed me to view the phases in a qualitatively different way. As thematic pieces of a process, these metaphors provided me with a lens through which to view the data in a more complex, integrated fashion. In the following paragraph, I describe the procedure I used to arrive at the first metaphor of awakening.

When I analyzed the first set of interviews, three major conceptual themes emerged. First, the participants had become aware of their original perspectives on teaching and learning, which

placed the teacher in a central role. They also encountered evidence which challenged these perspectives, and they began to shift their beliefs. I examined these three themes, and in an effort to make this process more explicit, I asked myself, “What does this remind me of?” The themes evoked the image of someone being roused or *awakening* from earlier ways of thinking and starting to view things differently. Thus, the metaphor of awakening provided a way of thinking about what became the first major pattern. Although the participants expressed enthusiasm for the new ideas they encountered, at this time they were uncertain as to how to integrate these ideas into their practice, as revealed in the following excerpt:

I wasn't really implementing a lot of what I was learning. I think I felt very invigorated and realized there was a lot to learn here and I enjoyed what I was learning, but I wasn't feeling comfortable enough to initiate a lot of new changes in the classroom. (Anne, interview 1, June 2006)

When I conducted the second set of interviews, the participants had completed the second course in the MTP, Psychology of Learning. Findings revealed that the participants' knowledge of the learner and understanding of the learning process had expanded. However, several regarded the course material as challenging, and they experienced difficulty making cognitive links between theory and practice:

It raised a lot of questions in my mind and I have some answers, but I don't know if I have a lot of the answers. I think the psychology of learning is pretty complex. (Ella, interview 2, June 2006)

I represented this phase through the metaphor of *stretching*. The MTP classroom milieu, in which ideas about learning were shared among teachers from various disciplines, was mentioned by several participants as an important component of their learning process during this phase.

In general, it was only during the third set of interviews, after participants had completed the third MTP course, Instructional Strategies, that they reported feeling confident enough to implement new instructional strategies in their classrooms. These strategies were designed to

promote active student involvement. The participants also demonstrated an enhanced capacity to critically reflect on their practice. If classroom activities did not go as planned, they were able to call upon tools of analysis that enabled them to evaluate the situation, adjust the strategy, and try again. I referred to this phase as *exercising*. Their background knowledge on how students learn was activated, and it influenced both their preparation and use of class time. There was a movement away from covering the content:

The thing that I've learned more than anything else is to not sweat the content quite as much as I used to. Give them the tools to go to the next level; let them be learners and find the joy in it. (Fran, interview 3, January 2007)

Data from the fourth set of interviews, conducted after the participants had completed their fourth course, showed that they had reached new insights about the meaning and purpose of assessment:

Back in the old days I would think, 'I'm teaching, now I have to do an evaluation; what a drag!' Now I know that assessment drives the learning. Students learn what they're going to be assessed on. (Barb, interview 4, May 2007)

Carly also significantly shifted her understanding of assessment:

Before this course, assessment was basically giving tests and marking them. Now I have a completely different perspective. Assessment is about collecting information and trying to determine whether or not students are learning. (Carly, interview 4, June 2007)

I would describe the participants' encounter with assessment as the most significant "group awakening" moment of the study. They viewed assessment as a benchmark of student learning. This not only impacted their perspectives, but also, according to their self-reports, it influenced their practice. They demonstrated a more integrated understanding of the roles of teacher, learner, and curriculum. I referred to this phase as *shaping*.

The four patterns that emerged as a result of coding the interview data also appeared, to greater or lesser extents, in the three individual narratives which I constructed, using the participant's own words. In her narrative, Deana describes her process of learning:

When I look back over the MTP, I would say I've gone through several stages. First I had to learn this new knowledge. Then I had to take ownership for it by connecting it to my discipline -I resisted this step. Finally, after careful planning, I tried new strategies.

The two other narratives suggest similar patterns, that is, that a change in perspectives on teaching and learning preceded changes in practice. In general, results indicate that it took at least one year before perspectives were sufficiently in place to enable the participants to feel confident enough to implement changes in the classroom. However, the more experienced teacher showed earlier signs of implementing changes in her practice, and this finding attests to the importance of including a more contextualized, narrative analysis. Themes such as learning in community, learning as a student, and becoming open to learning also emerged in these summaries.

Findings from the dual analytic processes of categorizing and connecting converged to reveal similar results. The four patterns showed that the participants' perspectives had shifted from a teacher-centered/content-focused orientation, toward a student-centered/learner-focused orientation. This shift from teacher to learner-centeredness has been described by several researchers (Kember, 1997; Kember & Kwan, 2002; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). My findings also showed that this shift was marked by three major dimensions: increased awareness of the learner and the learning process, increased intentionality to align the curriculum, and increased self-knowledge.

Three Dimensions

At the beginning of the program, the participants' initial descriptions of the learner revealed a number of misconceptions, which were often based on their own experiences as learners. As they encountered new information these perspectives altered, from viewing the student as a passive player, to one who learns best when actively engaged in the learning process. As well, there was a notable increase in their awareness of the individuality of student learning styles. Increased knowledge and awareness of the learner and the learning process have been identified as principal components of effective teaching in higher education (Beatty, 1998; Wilson, Shulman & Richert, 1987).

A second major dimension concerned the teacher and the teaching process. Initially, the teacher was viewed as the center, and the emphasis was placed on the delivery of content. As perspectives evolved, participants showed evidence of expanded pedagogical knowledge and a more critical outlook on their teaching. There were also signs of increased intentionality as they sought to align the curriculum by matching course objectives, learning tasks, and assessments. Their focus was on demystifying the learning process for students and orchestrating specific learning outcomes. They reported that they possessed a larger tool box that enabled them to problem solve more efficiently and effectively. Schon (1987) has referred to this process as “thinking on your feet”.

The third dimension, knowledge of self, is defined by Grossman (1995) as an awareness of one’s values, strengths, weaknesses, and pedagogical goals. It has also been identified as a key component in successful teaching. As the participants became more aware of what was transpiring in the classroom, they reached new insights about themselves as educators. They reported an increased enjoyment in their teaching and an enhanced feeling of confidence. This confidence was manifested in their sense of themselves as teacher professionals:

I’m much more confident in the classroom. I speak from a position of knowledge of teaching, as opposed to just my discipline. (Anne, interview 5, June 2007)

In spite of some of the challenges that participants had referred to throughout the program, such as balancing teaching responsibilities with their studies, an important outcome of the MTP appears to be an enhanced sense of identity as a teacher professional. The participants had shifted from viewing themselves uniquely as masters of their discipline, to viewing themselves as master teachers in their discipline. This suggests that knowledge of oneself as a teacher professional is a critical element of successful professional development programs. Knowledge of oneself as a teacher professional is also a critical element of self-knowledge, and therefore Grossman’s definition of self-knowledge, cited above, should be expanded to include this component.

Reflection on Practice

Reflection on practice over time emerged as the major mechanism underlying changes in perspectives on teaching and learning. Although some participants had initially questioned the value of reflecting, they came to regard it as a key element of their professional identity. The process of reflecting helped them to link theory with practice. It provided them with tools to deconstruct what was happening in their classrooms, thereby affording them critical insight into their practice:

The MTP has taught me to take the time to reflect. If you don't reflect, you're not going to change. And what you're offering the students isn't going to change either. (Anne, interview 3, January 2007)

Journal writing served as an important medium for teacher reflections:

It's the process of writing that does the teaching. It helps you shape those ideas. I feel that I am embarking on a career as a connoisseur and it changes things entirely. I see with new eyes, sometimes things I have seen for years, and not really seen. (Fran, interview 4, June 2007)

Through reflection, participants reported that they were better equipped to examine the learning environment, assess the situation, and adjust their practice accordingly. As their knowledge base increased, their reflections became increasingly grounded in theory. By integrating critical components such as reflection, and situating these reflections within a sound pedagogical knowledge base, teachers emerge from professional development programs such as the MTP not as technicians, but as thinkers.

Discussion

Teachers in higher education often hold misconceptions about teaching and learning that can exert a negative influence on their practice. Hence, the importance of examining teachers'

perspectives was underscored in this study. The discourse on teacher perspectives offers an opportunity for radical change (Goodyear & Hativa, 2002). Professional development programs such as the MTP that address these perspectives represent a productive way forward.

Findings from this study provide empirical evidence for the evolution of perspectives among CEGEP teachers involved in the MTP. This evolution was demonstrated through the four patterns of awakening, stretching, exercising, and shaping. Additional signs of evolution as teacher practitioners were evident through increased awareness of the learner, greater intentionality in teaching, and enhanced self-knowledge. Moreover, the four patterns revealed that changes in the participants' perspectives preceded changes in their classroom practice, confirming one of the basic assumptions the MTP is based upon (see Bateman, 2002). In both describing a process of evolution from teacher to learner-centeredness through four patterns and three dimensions, and in specifying a time period of one year before perspectives impacted significantly on practice, this study contributes to the literature. Some contextualized differences with respect to this time frame became apparent in the narrative summaries, with novice teachers adhering to the four patterns and time frame more closely than the experienced teacher. It would appear that both experience and disciplinary background may influence the rate of progression through the four patterns. Further research is required to clarify this.

Teacher professional identity emerged as an important component of self-knowledge in this study. The participants' identity as disciplinary experts expanded to include that of pedagogic expert. To this end, several participants mentioned the importance of engaging in professional dialogue with colleagues. They also stated that, aside from programs such as the MTP, few opportunities exist for teachers at the CEGEP level to become involved in this type of exchange. These findings suggest that more opportunities need to be created in order to encourage a sense of teacher professional identity. Furthermore, if the CEGEPs want to promote teaching excellence, they must be prepared to invest in this process. Finding additional ways to support and reward teacher participation in professional development programs such as the MTP are therefore crucial.

Learning to teach in higher education has emerged as a complex process that evolves over time. The results of this study further challenge the assumption of double professionalism, that is, that disciplinary expertise entails a capacity to teach effectively (Beaty, 1998). I am grateful to my six participants for sharing their perspectives on teaching and learning with me. Their insights and reflections have provided me with much food for thought, and have helped to inform my evolving practice.

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