

THE CHALKBOARD

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BRIDGING THE GAP: HOW DO WE PREPARE FOR THE REALITIES OF CLASSROOM TEACHING?

Feature Articles Contributed By:

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Greetings from the Dean

Deborah Shanley,
Dean, School of Education

This issue of *The Chalkboard* addresses a fundamental issue in teacher preparation, that of "bridging the gap" between theory and practice. Because it goes to the very core of teaching, this topic will also be the subject of the summer *Chalkboard*.

Professor Siegel introduces the insightful work of distinguished educator and writer Mike Rose. Rose's book, *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*, combines education critique, with a classroom level portrayal of awakening the potential of "failing students.". Professor Siegel illuminates his work by engaging her education students in reading the book and participating in a dialogue with him. Their questions reflect the challenges that they face in their classrooms, seeking his insights in striving to make a difference.

Professor Taubman addresses the ongoing debate on the tensions between theorists and practitioners and the need for educators work together in the same context. Most faculty recognize that we must improve teaching and learning in our schools in an effort to close the achievement gap, and at the same time, provide multiple contexts. Part of the dialogue is the need to assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teacher education. The renewed focus on student outcomes further fuels the debate.

As a school of education, we respect our different perspectives while focusing on the same outcomes—closing the achievement gap. If we continue to partner with schools, there will be new possibilities. We stand by our mission to prepare socially responsible critical thinkers who are collaborative and reflective educators. We accept the responsibility and act on our belief that all children can and will learn.

Lives on the Boundary: A Conversation with a Practical Thinker

Jessica Siegel
Assistant professor, education

How do we build bridges between our classrooms and the outside world to link what we and our students are discussing with what others are doing and thinking? Our students go out into New York City schools, often complaining that our classrooms have the mustiness of the Ivory Tower, even though we sit in the middle of Flatbush. How do we expand our conversations and make our classroom activities more relevant to their experiences in the real world?

We all have devised ways of making some of this happen. For me, it was giving my students an opportunity to talk to Mike Rose, a wonderful writer, insightful educational thinker, and master teacher, who started out very much like many of the children my students are encountering in their own classrooms.

Rose's book, *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*, is part memoir, part education critique, and part classroom level depiction of what is possible. Published in 1989, this classic in education literature has been through twenty printings. Rose, associate director, UCLA writing programs, grew up in a poor, working class Italian-American family in south Los Angeles, the son of a father who dropped out of school in Italy before the third grade and a mother who dropped out in seventh. He uses his life to bring readers inside the heads of students labeled "at-risk," "educationally disadvantaged," "remedial," or "slow." He also shares stories of students he has taught at every level of the education system and, armed with both insights and a broad knowledge, skewers myths along the way. He calls *Lives on the Boundary* "a critique of the way we treat folks who don't do so well in school and an argument for trying to think in different ways."

In my Advanced Theories and Practices of Composition class we integrated the discussion of the book, chapter by chapter, over many weeks. I thought about ways for us to escape our classroom and have a conversation with Rose, whom I have gotten to know well over the last several years. Based at UCLA, he couldn't take the subway to see us. So I arranged a conference call between Rose and my students. Following are excerpts from that conversation:

NICK PHILOCTETE: Would you favor the constructivist approach or the traditional approach to teaching.

ROSE: What do *you* think I would favor?

PHILOCTETE: Probably the constructivist approach.

ROSE: You're pretty much right but let me qualify it a little. It's pretty undeniable that human beings develop cognitively and make sense of the world to the degree to which they are able to somehow work with stimuli that are coming at them. Obviously that implies a certain kind of pedagogy—you set things up so that students have to engage materials; you ask questions, you involve other people in the discussion, so there's the white heat of an intellectual discourse. You do all those things. That's absolutely true.

At the same time, I am a little bit of a traditionalist. I also believe in a fair amount of structure and I don't think this is really a contradiction to the constructivist approach. For much of my teaching life I have tended to work with kids who were like me, who did not come from privileged backgrounds, and who had a lot to learn about how to think critically and work with difficult material. Some constructivist teachers believe in a free form, discovery form of learning, where you set out all the materials and let them to go to them themselves. I tend not to do that as much. I tend to provide structure in which people can discover and learn things and process information for themselves. Based on my own experience and my experience as a teacher, I know that too much of that kind of freedom of requiring students to make sense of everything themselves can quickly overwhelm and paralyze them. Especially if they're not confident of their abilities. They can panic and shut down.

CHIOMA OKORAFOR: In *Lives on the Boundary*, you describe how you tutored children in a veteran teacher's class when you began your teaching career. The children weren't hostile to meet with you. Is that because they were in the

fourth or fifth grades? Do you think it would have been different in the higher grades where they knew they had been labeled? How would you have approached them?

ROSE: That's a good observation. The longer kids are in school, the more they find out how schools work, how labels get applied, and what all that means. They understand the symbolism of it all very well. Sometimes, they become hostile, oppositional. Labels put them into a position that's uncomfortable, and sometimes they will just withdraw.

Whenever I've been confronted by hostility or the silent treatment, I operate in a dual way. I give people a little bit of space and then slowly try to get myself closer to them. Don't try to become someone's pal but rather stay the course and slowly make the connection.

WENDY RICE: I teach third grade, and for the past four years I have been working with students in the bottom exponent. I observe the system setting these children up for failure. When they get to high school and college and can't succeed, the blame is being passed back to us. But our hands are kind of tied. My children are seeing specialists all day but there is no glue holding all the information together for them. They receive services from various places but there is no continuity and their education is fragmented. Every week I'm getting a new child, so whatever I do to push them a little ahead gets pushed back. But the attendance numbers have to be there because the program is funded by the federal government. I think it's all about dollars and cents and not about the children at all. I'm going to lose them. Do you have any suggestions?

ROSE: What you're describing is a familiar scene in a lot of urban schools where there are multiple resources that are not necessarily coordinated. Their setup and finding are organized in such a way that many of these kids get pulled in so many directions without any coherence.

Teachers are called upon to just do their best, and find any opportunities in the system to forge the coherence that you feel is necessary. You are also an agent for change. Maybe the opportunity can come up in staff meetings or where people come together as a small group. It is through the public raising of the issues within the school that perhaps people will start to think about them in a somewhat different way.

SHAUN LEE: In your book you talk about "binocular vision" and the ability to assess students and try to figure out a way to help them in them in their particular situation. Do you think this is an innate ability or something that something that teachers can acquire? What are some of the things they can do to perfect this vision?

ROSE: Beautiful question. You're getting to the heart of what teacher education programs ought to be about. I absolutely think it can be acquired and developed. The tough question is how does one acquire it.

A lot of kids in our classrooms come from pretty tough circumstances—from poverty, difficult living situations, a violent environment. For whatever reason, they haven't had a very good education by the time they meet you. In the past people automatically associated all those problems with mental deficits; they assumed that if someone is poor, they're not only economically impoverished but intellectually impoverished. That's a very dangerous thing.

"Binocular vision" is the ability to simultaneously see the difficulties that the child emerges from as well as the potential, promise, or possibility that rests within that child. Developing binocular vision is a challenge. One way to develop it is through really good mentoring and watching good teachers work. One important thing for teacher education programs is making sure that students are connecting with teachers who operate with that kind of complex understanding of human realities. We have to appreciate the difficulties people have gone through, make various kinds of allowances for them, and tailor things accordingly. At the same time, we must assume that they are capable of much more, and we need to set standards. Our expectations have to be appropriate so that we help all students rise to their highest possible level.

A second way is to find the right kind of literature. If a book like *Lives on the Boundary* helps people see that, then that's terrific. There are other fiction and nonfiction books as well as movies that would enable young people entering the teaching profession to understand not only how complex human reality is, and that people often face grave hardship and even danger that makes them defensive, shy or withdrawn or angry, but also that these same kids have a great deal of potential.

RACQUEL GOODISON: I teach the seventh grade and reading *Lives on the Boundary* helped me get through my ambivalence over whether I wanted to continue teaching, because I often feel overwhelmed by the task that is in front of me. Your book made it more acceptable for me to think of it as incremental progress, that I probably will not transform my kids entirely, but rather move them one step beyond where they were when I met them. Do you have suggestions for other writings that can help when you feel overwhelmed?

ROSE: I have two quick quotes to give you. The first is from W.E.B. DeBois. This is from *Souls of Black Folk*, which was written in 1903. "Education "is a matter of infinite experiments and frequent mistakes." The second is from a book I wrote after *Lives on the Boundary* called *Possible Lives*, a travelogue of sorts across the country where I sat in on good public school classrooms from kindergarten to twelfth grade and watched really great teachers teach. One of the educators said something that floored me. She said, "Let's face it, education is fraught with failure."

These two quotes really sum up what an exceedingly difficult job teaching is and how, no matter how experienced you are, how good you are, or how on top of your game you are, you are going to fall on your face. You're going to miss some kids, you're going to say the wrong thing, you're going to miss a cue that came your way, and you're going to do the wrong thing when you think you're doing the right thing. Some kids are going to be receptive to you and some won't be. I think teaching, like many of the helping professions, is a human enterprise.

It's important to realize that because it helps you understand that your goal needs must be lofty yet modest. You need to understand that change comes slowly with people. Sometimes you'll work closely with someone for months and months and you see nothing happen but then there's a click. Sometimes the effect you have on students may not be felt until after they've left you and you won't even hear about it.

If you go into a classroom thinking you are going to reach every student in a perfect way all the time and see miracles happen like Hollywood movies, you'll be disappointed. You're going to despair, you're going to lose faith, and you're going to want to retreat from that classroom because it's not living up to those expectations. If on the other hand, your expectations are appropriately tempered, you will understand how human and frail you are--but you won't lose hope. This is not an excuse for not doing a good job. You want to maintain a high level of hope and commitment but realize that all of us fall on our face in this work. And that is part of it.

In *Possible Lives*, you'll see extraordinary teachers hit these moments of despair when they're not sure what they're going to do, where they realize they made a wrong move. It is part of the work.

This is why it is so important for young teachers especially to develop some sort of network- somebody at the school or someone at another school, or someone who trained as a teacher. We definitely need at least one other colleague who we can go talk to and cry to and yell and scream to about the work we're doing. Otherwise it can become very lonely work. You need to have at least one good person in your life who understands the work intimately, someone with whom you can talk, exchange ideas, decompress, or vent. You can fall apart when you need to.

Debating the Practical vs. the Theoretical

Peter Taubman
Associate professor and program head,
adolescence education

One of the most frequently heard complaints by both education students and working teachers is that education courses and professors of teacher education are too theoretical and don't address the realities of life in schools. Even within schools of education there are those who believe their colleagues don't give students the nuts and bolts or don't teach the how to of teaching. Conversely there are those on the other side who think their more practice based colleagues are not as thoughtful or critically reflective as they should be.

There are several explanations for this split between theory and practice and the accompanying valorization of one or the other. Rather than touch on all of them here, I recommend Nicholas Lobkowitz's *Theory and Practice* for a historical overview and Richard Bernstein's *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* for a sociopolitical analysis of the

theory-practice split. One of the primary reasons for the split and accompanying complaints that I would like to address lies in a misunderstanding of both practice and theory. Simply put, the practical is often confused with the technical, and the theoretical is often confused with the doctrinal. What do I mean by this?

It is not unusual for students or teachers to think of the practical in terms of a prescribed set of skills, behaviors, techniques, and/or methods. Such an overly concrete view is supported by terms often employed in teacher education--methods courses, classroom management techniques, teacher training, and best practices. We often equate practice with the mastery of objectified tasks. Nor is it so unusual for education professors, particularly new instructors or those without much experience teaching in elementary, early childhood, or high school settings, to present various theories as doctrine. For example, we talk about the ideas of Foucault, Piaget, Vygotsky, John Dewey and Paulo Freire as if they were once and for all fixed and removed from the very desires, fears, and problems that inspired them and that exist today, although in different forms, or we present the history of education as if it had no connection to the schools in which we work. In both cases, that is, when we confuse the practical with the technical or when we confuse the theoretical with the doctrinal, we sustain a dichotomy that weakens our theorizing and practice and prevents us from appreciating our students' and colleagues' concerns.

Let me first address the confusion between the practical and the technical. Like the political theorist Jurgen Habermas, I would argue that the technical translates "all problems of action into problems of technical control and manipulation" (Bernstein, p.188). The technical gains force when knowledge is identified solely with science, and when measurable results and products are identified as the criteria of success. The practical, on the other hand, focuses on critically understanding a situation and on thinking about what is right and only in that situation. When the practical and technical are confused, the ethical, political, and aesthetic dimensions of the former disappear into the procedural logic of the latter.

Anyone who has ever taught grades K-12 knows there are various approaches to organizing a classroom, lesson, curriculum, discussion, demonstration, or presentation. As teacher educators we should be offering as many of these as possible to our students. When we present them, however, as empirically verified and research-tested strategies that are not context specific or influenced by the personalities of the teacher or the students, then we are confusing the practical with the technical.

This confusion has several consequences. First, it disempowers teachers, because it suggests a particular practice is "teacher-proof." Anyone can do it, and it can be used on anyone. Teachers therefore are interchangeable. Second, it suggests teachers need not attend to the social identities or personal idiosyncrasies of their students. The best methods or best practices supposedly work with anyone in any context. Third, it emphasizes de-contextualized methods and thereby limits teachers' and students' critical understanding of the larger picture. What counts is knowing how to deliver the goods, not why we should deliver them, what it means to deliver them or how we determine what the goods are. Fourth, it supports a routinization of work because it simplifies the activities of teaching and learning. Fifth, it colludes with the standardization and commodification of knowledge we see in the recent emphasis on testing because it articulates practice in terms of calculated, measurable tasks, that assume human beings will behave in a calculable manner. Finally, it reduces teaching, learning, curriculum, and life in classrooms to simple order, rules and categories that, because they ignore complexity and unpredictability, offer false promises.

The lure of the technical in a society spellbound by the scientific and the technological is strong, and it is understandable that our students long for the security of knowing "how to" teach. But I believe it's important that we don't support our students' confusion of the technical with the practical. On the other hand, it's important that we don't confuse the theoretical with the doctrinal either.

Too often, we teach important ideas, whether those of John Dewey or B.F. Skinner, as if we were teaching a general philosophy or psychology class, unconnected to the classrooms in which our students teach. Too often we teach the history of education, whether from a conservative or Marxist or feminist point of view, as if we were teaching a general history course. Either the theory is presented with little or no reference to life in classrooms or it is imposed on educational experience as if the theory itself were invulnerable to critique. It is paradoxical that teacher educators who frequently value the work of Dewey, Freire, Maxine Greene or Howard Winant don't trust that their own students' fears, anxieties, aspirations, and concerns can be addressed through the work of these theorists and therefore don't allow the theoretical to illuminate the everyday. Nor are students often encouraged to transform the theory in light of their

experiences. The test of "good" theory is not that it allows us to control practice but that it frees us from previous misunderstandings and allows us to reinterpret situations and reach deeper understanding, so that we may act more thoughtfully. When teachers and students confuse theory with doctrine, intellectual discussion becomes a substitute for practical analysis and informed action.

I believe our mission statement for the School of Education is exemplary in its understanding that the practical and theoretical are not the same as the technical and the doctrinal. We are committed to social justice, to critical self-reflection, to scholarship and research, and to teaching as artful and emancipatory. The more we help our students understand our mission--that is, understand what we as a school of education mean by the practical and the theoretical--the less likely our students will be to see practice and theory as inimical and the more likely they will find fulfillment in their work.

Bridging the Gap through Partnerships and Collaborations

Barbara Winslow
Assistant professor, education

Successful teaching and learning requires faculty members to form partnerships with our colleagues in other departments and programs, with our students, guidance counselors, librarians, and instructional technology and other support staff. As teachers of future teachers in New York City schools, we have the duty to foster in our students the skills needed to bridge the gap between pedagogy and practice. We also know that our teaching and learning is enriched if we work with organizations outside the walls of Brooklyn College--museums, public libraries, and arts institutions. Our students must be taught how to use these resources to enrich their lives and those of their students .

Most important are our collaborations with colleagues in the schools--the student teachers, teachers, assistant principals and principals. Many of us have developed relationships with schools and their personnel, sending our students into schools to do fieldwork. We observe student teachers in the schools, or we work with individual teachers or departments on joint projects. The secondary social studies program has begun to systematically develop partnerships with social studies assistant principals in the New York public schools. Last March, 2001, the secondary social studies program hosted the first meeting and conversation between faculty at Brooklyn College and social studies assistant principals. Assistant principals or their representatives from New Utrecht, George Wingate, James Madison, Canarsie and Lincoln High schools joined Dean Deborah Shanley, Professor Vincent Fucillo, interdepartmental coordinator of the graduate social studies program; Associate Professor Peter Taubman, secondary program head, and other adolescence education faculty in a discussion about our common goals and needs.

At the end of the meeting, we agreed that there should be more ongoing collaborations between the social studies assistant principals and Brooklyn College faculty, including faculty outside the School of Education. If possible, we hope that in the future, some faculty from the History, and Political Science Departments would also go into the schools in order to get a better understanding of what is being taught and how the college curriculum could both enrich and reflect the needs of the high school social studies curriculum and the teachers. The social studies program asked if we could host a Professional Development Day with faculty from the various departments and programs.

The results of that meeting are promising. On April 16, the secondary social studies program will be hosting an all-day Professional Development Workshop, with Belle Zeller Visiting Professor in Public Policy and Administration, Juan Gonzales and Assistant Professor of History Philip Napoli presenting. Faculty from the History Department and the School of Education have already visited high school history departments and addressed advanced placement classes on such topics as the abolitionist movement in the United States, US and global feminism, the war in Vietnam, and civil liberties after September 11.

Program Updates

Science Beyond the Classroom: A Museum Opens the Door to Future Science Teachers

Eleanor Miele

Assistant professor, science education

The School of Education's partnership with the American Museum of Natural History continued this winter with a pre-conference workshop on "Using the Museum to Enhance the Education of Educators." Teacher educators from around the country who attended the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education in New York City heard presentations on creating and supporting partnerships between schools of education and the museum by Maritza MacDonald of the museum, City University Dean for Education Nicholas Michelli, and Lehman College Dean of Education James Bruni. Both Eleanor Miele, and Heather Sloan, of Lehman College, spoke about creating courses for teachers at the museum. Participants learned strategies for taking advantage of museums, discussed the use of the museum with CUNY faculty and administrators, and took a special tour of the museum's collections.

Assistant Professor Miele also led a workshop that explored teaching science content and used sea shells to examine the life cycle of mollusks. She discussed how these activities have been incorporated into science methods courses for elementary and middle school teachers at the museum, their relevance to the museum's temporary pearls exhibit and its permanent collection. Methods for integrating social sciences were also explored.

The Brooklyn College graduate education course Science Instruction Beyond the Classroom (Education 716.25T) will be offered at the museum this summer and in spring 2003 with faculty from the museum.

Special Opportunity for Special Education Students

Kathleen McSorley,

Assistant dean and assistant professor special education

Gail Gurland, *professor and program director*
Speech-language pathology and audiology

Recognizing their shared mission and faculty resources, the programs in special education and speech-language pathology have been working for the past three years to develop interdisciplinary educational tracks based on collaboration between teachers and clinicians who work with children with disabilities. CUNY's Workforce Development Initiative and the New York State Education Department have funded projects in assistive technology and autism spectrum disorders.

The assistive technology project, now in its second year, focuses on curriculum development and implementation. Nurtured by the ongoing collaboration with Premier Healthcare's Assistive Technology Center at Brooklyn College under the direction of Carol Schaeffler, a speech-language pathologist, it also offers hybrid on-line courses made possible through the funding from the Sloan Foundation. using Blackbaud technology,

The first course offerings, Education 750.4T (Curriculum Modifications for Teaching Students with Special Needs), and Speech 738X (Augmentative Communication), were piloted this semester. Project co-directors Kathleen McSorley and Gail Gurland are developing recruitment plans for the first cohort of teachers and clinicians to begin their training in Fall 2002.

The collaborative project on autism spectrum disorders was also piloted this semester with a special section of Education 763.54, Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Cross-Disciplinary Perspective. The initial cohort of students are certified practitioners, or those studying to become practitioners, in special education, speech-language pathology, school psychology, and occupational therapy. It is the first of a four-course sequence, developed in collaboration with an

advisory group representing professionals and parents in the field of autism spectrum disorders.

Addressing the serious shortage of teachers and clinicians who have knowledge and skills to work effectively for the benefit of children with disabilities and their families, these projects provide unique opportunities for students from different disciplines to learn and work collaboratively under the guidance of a cross-disciplinary team of scholars, educators, and clinicians. For more information please contact Kathleen McSorley, 718-951-5214.

The Early Childhood Center – Kingsborough Community College Collaboration for Technology-Enhanced Teacher Preparation

**Carol Korn, Associate professor and faculty director,
Carleton Washburne Early Childhood Center**

The School of Education's Carleton Washburne Early Childhood Center is working with Kingsborough Community College to develop digitized and streaming video, distance learning materials, and videoconferencing capacity at the center's preschool classrooms and infant and toddler rooms, which are scheduled to open in fall 2002. These resources will be used for teacher education by Brooklyn College and Kingsborough faculty to provide a base for further development in the area of early care and education.

Associate Professor Korn and Professor Delores Lowe Friedman of Kingsborough are also working closely with colleagues Carolyn Jarvis, Research Director and Gambi White-Tennant, infant/toddler specialist at New York University's Head Start Quality Improvement Center, to develop outreach projects addressing the professional development needs of Head Start and Early Head Start leaders and providers. Friedman, Korn, and Jarvis are participating in the Early Childhood Higher Education Faculty Initiative, led by Wheelock College, the Erickson Institute, Pacific Oaks, and Bank Street College of Education. They recently returned from a Faculty Institute seminar in San Jose, CA where they prepared a working plan for joint activities, including expanded career ladder opportunities for early care and education providers, and for a summer institute for leaders and providers in the field of infant/toddler early care and education.

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