

EDUCATION WEEK

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Teaching Toward Utopia

By **Julie Gorlewski**

One of the greatest challenges for teachers is preparing students to live in—ideally, to succeed in—a world that does not yet exist. In a democracy, teachers must prepare students to participate in the creation of that world. As teacher-educators, we seek to prepare our students to prepare their future students for this approaching reality—a world that they must imagine and construct, simultaneously.

Teaching future teachers, like standing in a mirrored room, is endlessly reflective. It is both fascinating and terrifying. This work involves more than transmission of content; it requires commitment to a future we cannot fully envision. It requires commitment to the people in front of us, materially and metaphorically.

A democratic society needs participants who think critically and act ethically. Teacher-educators, then, must model these characteristics. It is not enough to be compliant and obedient policy implementers; we must critically evaluate policies, advocate for our students and their future students, and work within the system to effect change. We cannot expect to cultivate thoughtful educators who are passionate about their craft and devoted to their students if we do not embody these qualities.

This is not linear work; it involves knowledge, skills, and the proper dispositions. It takes time and requires explicit attention to every decision we make. It cannot be standardized, nor can it be measured by a standardized instrument. Teacher preparation is a labor of love that cannot be reduced to modules in a training program.

Current reform movements aim to improve teacher education by, among other things, imposing a standardized final assessment for certification. Regardless of its particulars, this approach denies what decades of research have confirmed: High-stakes standardized assessments have detrimental effects on students and learning. Standardized

assessments promote competition, narrow curriculum, and focus on lower-level thinking. They undermine the trust that is essential to the relationship between student and teacher.

As teacher-educators, we confront a version of the dilemma that K-12 teachers deal with every day: How can we comply with mandates without modeling submissive obedience? Where is the space between cooperation and resistance? We cannot ignore required assessments. Because our students seek certification, we are obliged to participate. But, at the same time, we must model active citizenship, critical thinking, and advocacy for ethical practice. To do this, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to critical reflection and continuous improvement.

I began my career in the field of education as a secondary school English teacher. The experience of working with young people who hated school and resisted the attempts of their teachers to engage them made me wonder what had happened between kindergarten and 8th grade. Why had such eager learners become so disaffected? I earned a master's degree in elementary education, through which I learned a great deal about teaching, then spent over 15 years as a classroom teacher, discovering, but never perfecting, the craft of the practice. Still seeking to understand the interconnections among students, schools, and society, I earned a doctorate and entered higher education.

As a teacher-educator, I continue to wrestle with the same enduring tensions that I faced in my K-12 classrooms. These tensions involve big questions, such as: How can I develop meaningful, constructive relationships with students? How can I balance high standards with reasonable expectations? What knowledge and skills are essential, and what learning experiences will support these? How should student learning be assessed? My concerns extend as well to what seem to be trivial issues: Should attendance and participation count toward achievement? Are group grades fair? Do late submissions result in a lower score, regardless of quality? Does this moment call for pushing or patience?

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All these questions emanate from one guiding principle: How can I improve? Not how can I improve my students' scores, but how can I improve the process of teaching and learning, a process that is complex, multifaceted, social, and intensely human. To improve my practice requires critical, authentic reflection wherein I consider what worked, and what didn't, and why.

Authentic learning involves three dimensions: teachers, students, and content. Participants must be fully present and genuinely engaged in this pyramid, collaborating around content in relationships marked by trust and truth-seeking. Learning communities that flourish are fluid, flexible, and fun. Whether working with kindergartners or doctoral candidates, good teachers use their skills and talents to create such learning communities.

But creation is not formulaic; it cannot be standardized or broken into a set of replicable tasks. A project or presentation that ignites one group of students leaves the next group cold. A remark that forges a relationship with one student offends another. One teacher uses identical methods and materials with two classes, yielding wildly different assessment results. The same student that is angelic with one instructor is demonic with another. Why?

Reflective practice is a form of research; it involves asking questions and using data to answer those questions. Data saturate classrooms, and teachers sift through data every single day, considering and reconsidering the interconnections among students, content, and their own practice. Some forms of data

are easily quantifiable, but the most important consequences of teachers are neither quantifiable nor immediate. Transformative learning experiences, the kinds of experiences that are unforgettable and life-changing, are not revealed in a high-stakes test score.

Early in the semester, my students are disappointed by my propensity to answer their most pressing questions with two words: "It depends." They want to know what to do when students sleep in the back of class, refuse to do homework, or ask for their telephone numbers. They worry about the same issues, large and small, that I continue to grapple with daily. The answers, I remind them, lie in their questions. Consider the data you have, and then figure out how to get more. Ask questions. Talk to your colleagues, community members, and students. Most importantly, listen to them.



Teaching, at any level, involves making thousands of decisions. In many cases, we will be unaware of the consequences of those decisions. The only thing we can be certain of is our commitment to authentic reflection and continuous improvement for ourselves and our teacher-candidates. We must nurture them, so they will nurture their students. We must insist that they examine their own biases and assumptions, so that they will seek to understand their students. We must reveal our passion for teaching and learning. We must demonstrate our commitment to the future by inviting our students to adopt a critical stance toward their own experiences of schooling, including our own teacher-preparation programs.

If we want teacher-candidates to experience the discomfort of self-examination, we must suffer along with them. If we expect teachers to create a better world, we must foster imagination. We must push them, so they will know they can fly, but we need to abandon our parachutes and leap, too. Soaring together, we can imagine a future where all learners flourish and fly.

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