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Context

I teach in the STEP program at Stanford University. The STEP program accepts roughly 70 candidates a year from across the country. Our students generally have strong academic backgrounds in the subject matter, and a growing number of students are Stanford graduates. During their four-quarter program, students spend half of their days in local schools and come to Stanford in the afternoon for classes. I teach the Curriculum and Instruction in English class, the one subject-specific component of the STEP program. The C&I course is a three-quarter sequence of classes designed to prepare students to teach English to both middle and high school students. The summer quarter of the class addresses purposes for teaching English and the teaching of writing, the fall quarter focuses more directly on the teaching of reading, literature, and grammar, and the winter quarter targets unit-planning.

Since arriving at Stanford, I have chosen to team-teach this class with a doctoral student, as part of my job also involves preparing future teacher educators. This year, I will be teaching the class with Christa Compton, an English teacher with 9 years of experience teaching in South Carolina high schools. Christa received National Board Certification in Adolescence/English Language Arts and was selected as South Carolina Teacher of the Year for 2001. She and I will be working together this summer. The focus of our Carnegie work will be on developing ways of using K-12 CASTL materials in the fall quarter class on the teaching of reading and literature.

Issues

One of the central issues we face in teaching C&I has to do with how we prepare new teachers 1) to teach sophisticated reading strategies to all students, particularly to struggling readers, and 2) to organize discussions of literature in which students do the lion's share of intellectual work. I know that several of the K-12 scholars have wrestled with these issues, and I hope to use their materials, particularly artifacts and videotapes of their classroom practice, in preparing future teachers of English. We have already begun to use videotapes of student-led discussions of literature to help our students imagine the kinds of conversations students are capable of having around sophisticated literary texts. We would like to make the scaffolding that teachers do around discussion and the teaching of reading strategies more visible to student teachers.

In addition, we want our students to consider how this daily classroom work contributes to broader goals of teaching for social justice and enabling all students to reach their full academic potential. This summer, our students read Mike Rose's book, *Lives on the Boundary*, and Lisa Delpit's article, "The silenced dialogue" as a way of initiating a conversation of the ways in which teachers of English can serve as unwitting gatekeepers or gateways to academic success. We hope to connect our explorations of discussion and reading strategies to these broader issues.

Background to the issues

Although discussion is arguably the dominant mode of teaching literature in U.S. classrooms (Applebee, 1993), most discussions are anemic imitations of engaged conversations around literary texts. The primary mode of discussion resembles recitation more than it does an instructional conversation (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), a recitation in which the teacher asks most of the questions and does most of the talking. Yet discussion-oriented teaching has the potential of engaging students in the real work of the discipline—digging into and making sense of complex texts. The question we are grappling with is how best to prepare prospective teachers to teach using discussion in ways that enable students to develop interpretations, to use the text to support their interpretations, and to engage all students in academic discourse around literature. Such discussions, of course, build from the strategies students possess for reading complex text. Scaffolding for engaged discussion must also include helping kids learn strategies that can make them more powerful readers.

A secondary issue has to do with access to such discussions. In many classroom discussions, a few students do most of the talking, and these students are likely to be the higher-status students with regard to race, class, and ethnicity. These patterns of participation are just as likely to pervade small group discussions (Lewis, 1997). So a second question we want our students to consider is how teachers can promote more equitable participation in discussions.

Despite its predominance in the landscape of English instruction, relatively little work has been done on how best to prepare English teachers to teach using discussion (Williamson, 2003). We hope to explore ways of teaching discussions that use materials from experienced teachers who are successful in engaging students in challenging and equitable discussions of literary texts.

Initial thoughts about incorporating the work of K-12 scholars

In the past year, I used the materials developed by Yvonne Divans Hutchinson and Joan Cone in a graduate course on the Study of Teaching. Both of these scholars are English teachers, and both address issues of teaching all students strategies for reading and of engaging students in peer-led and teacher-led discussions of literature. Yvonne Hutchinson's website, in particular, portrays the ways in which students engage in a discussion of Willie Ruff's "A Call to Assembly" and includes glimpses of the scaffolding the teacher has provided both around reading strategies and around participation in academic discussion. We hope to use materials such as these in our fall class, having students analyze carefully the teacher's role in making this discussion possible, but have not yet thought about how to use the materials with prospective teachers. In addition to a focus on reading strategies and discussion, we plan to use the materials as a springboard to talk about the use of potentially controversial materials in a diverse classroom. In preparation for the fall, our students have already read the Willie Ruff piece.

References

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