

**Ready, Set, Action, Camera!**

**The Making of “The Cooperative Cooperating Teacher”**

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### Abstract

In response to the problem that cooperating teachers failed to attend orientations, the author attempted to solve the problem by researching effective practices of cooperating teachers and sharing them in a video format, thereby taking the orientation to the teachers. A background to the problem and procedures for determining the themes eventually included in the video are described. The resultant themes include: a) Welcoming the Teacher Candidate into Your Classroom, b) Co-Teaching with Small Groups, c) Communication with Constructive Criticism and d) Style Issues.

## **Ready, Set, Action, Camera!**

### **The Making of “The Cooperative Cooperating Teacher”**

Within the past year, I enjoyed a book so much I required the pre-service teacher candidates in my Language Arts Methods Class to read a chapter. In his book entitled *Imagine: How Creativity Works* (2012), Jonah Lehrer posits that because “the act of invention is often a creative process – we are inspired by other people – it’s essential that we learn to collaborate in the right way” (p. xix). What, I might argue, is more creative than the teaching process? Secondly, in programs of teacher preparation, is there anything more important than the need to establish collaboration between a cooperating teacher and the teacher candidate? At my university, we became frustrated when we held orientations for our cooperating teachers and, due to varying circumstances, they couldn’t attend. Therefore, I thought of a way to take the orientation *to* the teacher. I found funding and created a movie version of an orientation for a cooperating teacher. The final product, which runs for 30 minutes, can be viewed through my college’s resource page (Author, 2012b).

The purpose of this article is to explain the procedures and rationale for this project. I will begin with the background to the problem, which explains the importance of collaborating with the cooperating teacher, followed by an explanation of the procedures for creating the video, and conclude with an explanation of the emerging themes presented in the video. Lastly, a checklist for cooperating teachers to use for self-assessment is provided.

### **Background of the Problem**

In teacher education, we know that the role of the cooperating teacher is critical for a student's success (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Goodlad, 1990; Goodlad, 1994; Zeichner, 2010). The role of the university in establishing partnerships whereby the cooperating teacher flourishes and mentors the teacher candidate cannot be understated. It is vital that cooperating teachers understand what is expected of them and how to proceed not only with mentoring but also with helping the novice teacher to bridge theory and practice. Thus, they need to have a clear understanding of the course work the teacher candidate is studying and, therefore, trying to apply.

To effectively partner and engage in the type of simultaneous renewal that develops better teachers, better schools, and better teacher candidates, we must continue on the path of best practices. As Linda Darling-Hammond stated, the hard work that began over two decades ago is in peril, as she fears that all of this good work "will be hijacked or waylaid and that we will continue sliding down the slippery slope we have been on as a nation since the 1980s" (2010, p. 35). In the current climate where resources are scarce, we must, therefore, seek innovative and creative solutions to our most pressing concerns.

Ken Zeichner (2010) echoed the concern of Darling-Hammond as he wrote of a disconnect between what students do at the university and what happens at their school placements. He maintained that "it is very common for cooperating teachers with whom students work during their field placements to know very little about the specifics of the methods and foundations courses that their student teachers have completed on campus" (p. 91). In a review of the research of strong teacher education programs, it is evident that

the apprentice model of a capable cooperating teacher is vital to the program's success.

"One thing that is clear from current studies of strong programs is that learning to practice *in practice*, with expert guidance, is essential to becoming a great teacher of students with a wide range of needs" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 40).

To summarize, we have known for decades the importance of placing teachers in clinical teaching settings with cooperating teachers who can ably mentor them through the process. However, these unsuspecting cooperating teachers are often besieged by demands which, in the current climate, have become even more daunting. If the university wishes to utilize the services of these well-meaning, yet overtaxed, cooperating teachers, we need to make it easier for them to participate. That is, if they can't come to the orientation, we take the orientation *to them*. Solving problems such as this is exactly the type of innovation and creativity Lehrer (2012) wrote about.

We notice an incompleteness and we can complete it; the cracks in things become a source of light. And so the mop gets turned into the Swiffer, and Tin Pan Alley gives rise to Bob Dylan, and a hackneyed tragedy becomes Hamlet. Every creative story is different. And every creative story is the same. There was nothing. Now there is something. It's almost like magic. (p. 253)

### **The Process**

While I am not saying that the video is magical, I do believe it is helpful for providing an orientation to cooperating teachers. So, for anyone who would embark on either creating their own movie or borrowing parts of mine, the structure is organized into four major parts: a) welcome from the dean b) information regarding students' orientation c) testimony from four teachers and one principal and d) a final checklist for self-assessment.

Please note that throughout this article, the terms student teacher, student intern, and teacher candidate are used synonymously.

The following is used with the hot link to introduce the video through the Resource tab on our College of Education and Human Services website:

This 30-minute video can serve as an orientation for a cooperating teacher who seeks ideas for becoming a cooperative cooperating teacher. With slides prepared by the Office of Partnerships and Field Experiences that are provided to student interns during their orientation to their field placements, the CT will know what the intern has been told about attendance, dress and other critical issues. Secondly, the video also contains footage with advice from four seasoned cooperating teachers about how to welcome the WSU student and how to coordinate course requirements with field work. Finally, a checklist is provided for the CT to self-assess his or her readiness to become a cooperative cooperating teacher. (Author, 2012a)

In the rest of this article, I will discuss the third and fourth major parts of the video as the first two, the dean's remarks and the slides from my university's office of field experiences, can be viewed online (Author, 2012b). Therefore, I will explain how I collected and analyzed the video interview data and the self-assessment checklist that I developed after sharing the results of my interviews with colleagues and students.

### **Getting Started**

Once my project was approved for funding, and a student from the film school was hired to accompany me on my interviews, my first task was to identify the stars for my movie. While I have met many outstanding cooperating teachers during my 15 years at my university, it was difficult to narrow it down to just a few. I solicited names from my

colleagues and eventually settled on five people that would be reliable, responsive, and say just the types of things that I wanted our cooperating teachers to hear. That is, the themes that emerged as a result of my interviews with the teachers were guided by my knowledge of the challenges and the issues with teacher candidates adjusting to an urban environment (Delpit, 1995), personality clashes between teacher and teacher candidate (Cochran-Smith, & Lytle, 1999), and my own personal experience, as a methods instructor, of cooperating teachers not knowing what is expected of their teacher candidates. The four teachers and one principal that I selected to interview have worked with me through many of these issues, and as the themes that are portrayed in the movie will show, they did not leave any stones unturned.

I interviewed the subjects once, and on two occasions, I interviewed two together. Using a semi-structured interview (see Appendix), I ensured that the interviewees knew the purpose of my interview, and I e-mailed the questions prior to the interview. All interviews were video-taped and transcribed, resulting in 21 pages of single-spaced data. As a qualitative researcher, I was experienced in weeding through transcripts so it was easy for me to identify the emerging themes that I would highlight in the movie. Thus, four major themes represent a major part of the movie: a) Welcoming the Teacher Candidate into Your Classroom, b) Co-Teaching with Small Groups, c) Communication with Constructive Criticism and d) Style Issues.

### **Welcoming the Student Intern**

Writing the script was, of course, the most difficult part. However, once I wrote the introduction to a theme, I simply matched the dialogue from the interview from each

subject. For example, in the section “Welcoming the Student Intern into Your Classroom,” I began with, “Note how he offers advice on welcoming the student to the building and how to create a calendar to help the teacher candidate complete course work requirements” (Author, 2012b). The teacher, who also serves as an adjunct in our middle level program, discussed how he gives the student intern personal space, supplies, and directly asks the student about the requirements from the corresponding university course work; together, he and the student create a calendar listing the requirements and due dates.

After his clip and explanation, I then followed up with advice from the two teachers in an urban setting with this introduction, “Two teachers from . . . an urban school not only address their approaches to welcoming the student, but because they work in an urban environment, they broach the topic of teaching those whose backgrounds may differ” (Author, 2012b). They explained how to avoid a culture clash by pointing out the similarities as opposed to the differences. As one teacher explained,

Any student teacher that comes in, they [sic] are usually from a different background, and I let them know that these [urban] kids have and want to have many of the same experiences that the student teacher has. After a few weeks, they [sic] will be able to share different experiences like ‘I read that book’ [too]. (Author, 2012b)

### **Co-Teaching with Small Groups**

The second theme is also critical as we highly recommend that our cooperating teachers abandon the old model of leaving the teacher candidate alone most of the time as we favor the co-teaching model to advance better student outcomes (Cook, & Friend, 1995). As the principal in this video points out, co-teaching is a “best practice” and student



teaching in an inclusive setting provides for a “very good and very rich experience” (Author, 2012b). Most of our partner schools have attended in-service workshops on co-teaching, which have been provided by two of my colleagues.

If the cooperating teacher is accustomed to using small group instruction, the teachers and I recommend that the teacher candidate should start teaching small groups of students before determining if the candidate is ready for whole-group instruction. This is particularly true with a student who may lack the confidence and ability to work with a large group of students; as one urban teacher stated, “As they get their feet wet, they will become more adjusted” (Author, 2012b).

### **Communication with Constructive Criticism**

As the saying goes, when too many cooks are involved, the broth is often spoiled. I sometimes refer to this as “Mama’s Family,” or that scenario when two women reside in and rule over one household, resulting in chaos and hilarity (Clair & McMahon, 1983). Thus, when a cooperating teacher, a teacher candidate and the university supervisor all convene for the sole purpose of instructing a room full of children, harmony and cohesiveness become a challenge. The only way to create a climate where all can accomplish their respective goals is to open the lines of communication. In the video, a teacher explains how she opens the lines of communication with time and opportunity by setting aside a particular time each day to discuss any problems, issues or concerns. While this is not easy, a teacher explains how she sees it as an obligation to our profession or her way of “Paying it Forward” (Author, 2012b).

Once rapport is developed and the lines of communication between the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate have been opened and solidified, the cooperating teacher should proceed with offering constructive criticism. As two teachers suggest, this usually happens best when the teacher candidate's lesson doesn't proceed "quite as smoothly as one would like" (Author, 2012b). Helping the teacher candidate admit a lesson has room for improvement and discuss what that improvement might look like is the next logical step. Of course, this must be done in a positive light, as three teachers agree, and the principal chimes in to opine that principals are wise to become involved in coaching teacher candidates as if they are in the position to hire any new teachers, the vetting process has already begun.

### **Style Issues**

Most would agree that there is not a once-size-fits-all style to an effective teacher. Therefore, the teachers and principal in the video explain how they approach a teacher candidate whose style might differ from their own. The most veteran, and now retired, teacher of the group explained how he worked with a teacher candidate whose style was quite different from his own.

I don't want a bunch of 'Mini-Me's' running around. I want them to come in and be quiet or loud. I've met a lot that are definitely not my style and they do a great job, so I don't think my style is the best style. I think it's important to let the student teacher evolve into who they want to be. (Author, 2012b)

Style differences are rarely more apparent than when one stops to consider issues surrounding classroom discipline and classroom management. When a student struggled with classroom management, a teacher explained his approach. "Discipline is something

that . . . you grow into it, you acquire it, you find your own style of what works for you”

(Author, 2012b). He explained further:

When I have an intern that is struggling with classroom management, we just try and talk about it everyday, and I try to encourage them to reflect on it. I try real hard to let them know that it is not their fault that maybe kids are misbehaving. We try different strategies with them, and to try to encourage them that you have to find what works best for you , you know, how I discipline may not be how you discipline. Sometimes I think that the best way at times is for me to walk out of the room. (Author, 2012b).

The principal in the video, who always included the teacher candidates in every facet of the classroom teachers’ roles and responsibilities, maintained the belief that students will develop a sense of style and real-world appreciation by partaking in committee work and professional development. As she maintained, “It’s a richer experience for them to see what happens in the real world” (Author, 2012b).

### **Final Checklist**

The video concluded with me stating that the ideas presented “are by no means an exhaustive list of what it takes to be a cooperating teacher. It may take years, or you may just naturally take to the idea and practice of becoming a mentor and coach” (Author, 2012b). For some, the metaphor of cooperating teacher as coach is one that resonates, so I took that opportunity to sneak that in. Finally, the cooperating teacher for whom this video is intended is encouraged to self-assess his or her ability to begin the process for serving as a cooperative cooperating teacher. The following is provided:

Do I know the program requirements for attendance? Days or Hours?  
Do I know when I will have an initial meeting with my student intern?  
Do I know whom to contact regarding issues for using the university's electronic assessment system?  
Do I have a plan for welcoming my student intern to my class and to my building?  
Have I created a designated area or prepared a desk for the student intern to use?  
Have I considered how I will handle a visitor to my classroom whose style and demeanor might differ from my own?  
Have I thought about how I will co-teach with the student intern and have the student start teaching with small groups?  
Do I have a plan for transitioning the student to teaching the whole class?  
Lastly, have I thought about my ability to offer constructive criticism so thstudent teacher will grow and improve? (Author, 2012b)

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In my work as a Literacy Coach who has been helping teachers adjust to the demands of changes in state standards and the use of formative assessment and formative instruction, a book that has helped me look at change in a new way is entitled "*Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*" (Heath & Heath, 2010). The authors shared numerous success stories and strategies for overcoming obstacles and leaping barriers. This, the obstacles, barriers, and change, is something we face daily as teachers. I found the advice and strategies to be very enlightening and helpful. One particular piece of advice, however, hearkens my call to help our cooperating teachers: "Find a bright spot that shows it can work" (Heath & Heath, p. 263). I think that, in the form of this video production, I have shared some of the bright spots with future cooperating teachers. It can work. It must work. Future generations of teachers are depending on it.

In closing, as this video is used with cooperating teachers, I hope to study its effects by determining what is helpful and how it has helped the relationship between the teacher

candidate and the cooperating teacher to evolve. By asking questions about style and communication issues, I hope to delve into types of questions raised by other researchers about the best way to prepare teacher candidates in a clinical setting (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Zeichner, 2010) Secondly, while I hope that they find the checklist a good start for self-assessment, I expect that cooperating teachers will offer suggestions for revision. Finally, the so-called proof will be in the type of teacher candidate our programs ultimately produce. Will they be able to reflect back upon an experience in which they have enjoyed a fulfilling and worthwhile lead-teaching apprenticeship? Only time will tell. Stay tuned for more developments.

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Appendix :  
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. In your view, what defines the effective cooperating teacher?
2. What do you do to welcome the student?
3. What do you do to help them develop their own personal style? How do you handle a student whose style is unlike your own?
4. How do you help the student intern to connect what is going on with their studies at the university with what is going on in the classroom?
5. What are the best practices that the student intern sees that are modeled in your school?
6. What are the most satisfying moments of working with a student intern?
7. What are the challenges of working with a student intern?
8. What advice can you give for providing constructive criticism and feedback?
9. What tips would you offer to help other cooperating teachers?
10. When you think of the word "Partnership," what words come to mind?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?