

Ten Common Assumptions about Teaching: Reflections on Taylor and Miller

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The purpose of this article is to reflect further upon a number of issues relating to theory and practice in teacher education that have been touched upon by G. D. Taylor and P. J. Miller in "Professional Course Work and the Practicum: Do Good Students Make Good Teachers?" (*CJE*, 10(2), 108–120). While the research conducted by Taylor and Miller clarifies certain areas in practice teaching, many questions about the practicum remain unanswered. The article discusses ten issues in the light of current assumptions surrounding the practicum component of teacher education.

Le but de cet article est de continuer la réflexion commencée par G. D. Taylor et P. J. Miller dans leur article: "Professional Course Work and The Practicum: Do Good Students Make Good Teachers?" (*RCE*, 10(2), 105–120) sur la théorie et la pratique de la formation des enseignants. Alors que la recherche de Taylor et Miller éclaire certains aspects de la pratique de l'enseignement, il en reste encore plusieurs à étudier. L'article considère dix questions que l'on examine en vue des opinions courantes touchant à l'aspect pratique de la formation des professeurs.

G. D. Taylor and P. J. Miller correctly claim in the conclusion of their recent *CJE/RCE* article that their data "raise fundamentally important questions about the underlying rationale and organizing principles of professional education and, specifically, the training of teachers" (1985, p 119). Their study investigates an expected relationship between student teachers' performance in professional course work and their performance in the practicum in a professional year program for prospective elementary teachers. The findings confirm those of other researchers who have discovered little, if any, relationship between theoretical course work and student teaching performance. However, their research triggers many interesting questions regarding the relationship of theory and practice to teacher education.

This article will consider further issues touched upon by Taylor and Miller, relating to theory and practice in teacher education, and will raise more general concerns arising out of a framework of common beliefs about theory and practice. Here, as in Taylor and Miller's Introduction, *theory* will refer to "formal academic studies" (p. 105), and *practice* will

refer to "the actual performance of the professional in the field" (p. 105), that is to say, the practice teaching component of teacher education. The issues which follow will be considered from the point of view of ten common assumptions regarding theory and practice and their implications for practicum programs within teacher education.

Assumption 1: It is regrettable when theory and practice don't go hand in hand.

An important value of theory, both within and beyond teacher education, lies in its freedom from the immediate limitations of practice. Taylor and Miller in their Discussion (p. 118) refer to the need to separate theory and practice to interpret legitimately their data in terms of the "discreteness or separateness" of the theory and practice components of teacher education. Theory that is not separated from practice, at least at some stage, is not theory at all. And many good ideas have died prematurely because of an undue concern that theory and practice diverged. Such practical limitations on theory turn theory into undirected practical, if not impractical, experimentation or tinkering. Sometimes undirected practical experimentation turns out *by chance* to be valuable; when it does, its value will be judged according to a theoretical perspective. Sanders and McPeck consider this reversal of the normal justification of theory by practice in their discussion concerning the "obligation on the part of practioners to provide theoretical justification for existing educational practices" (1976, p. 192).

Practice merely for the sake of practice is neither good nor bad in and of itself; its value emerges only in the light of underlying theoretical aims and well thought out goals. Equally, without these theoretical perspectives there is no way of judging whether one type of practice improves upon another. In other words, terms such as *practical* or *impractical* are vacuous concepts until seen in the context of overall goals. It is much better when theory is freed from too close a connection with practice, for frequently it is when theory operates free from practice that it serves most effectively. For example, botany teachers will be more successful if they have a clear theoretical understanding of photosynthesis prior to teaching students about the importance of the normal practice of exposing plants to sunlight.

Assumption 2: Practice is the yard stick (or metre stick) by which to measure theory. Practice is, so to speak, "the proof of the pudding."

This assumption resembles the first, but here it is often believed that the value of a theory lies in its practical implementation. Theories which are

troublesome in their application are frequently dismissed out of hand as useless. However, when practice is used to measure theory, what “works” in practice soon becomes the directing force. Taylor and Miller urge their readers to “consider ... a view of teacher education which runs counter to the ‘practice-driven’ perspective” as one possible way of conceptualizing teacher education (p. 116).

Frequently, past practices sanction a conservative continuation of more of the same in the future, and theory ceases to be important in challenging and improving traditional patterns of operation. The circular justification for more of the same is simply that such practices have worked in the past. Moreover, decisions about what does, or does not, work in a practical way can often be made prematurely. One need only reflect upon the initial practical problems that required solving before many worthwhile theories in the area of modern science could be implemented. Atomic theory, genetic theory, and electronic theory are a few examples of theories which, in the long run, resulted in a plethora of practical applications, such as computers, telephones, televisions, and modern medicines. It would have been very easy to dismiss such theoretical perspectives in their early development since no practical applications were immediately obvious in the initial stages. Even if one were to accept, for the moment, the practical measuring stick as the only way to evaluate theory, there is no “practical” way of knowing what applications may develop from a given theory.

Assumption 3: Practice teaching is synonymous with first-hand experience, and first-hand experience is the best teacher.

Under the best possible conditions, practice teaching provides an approximate representation of the type of teaching done on a regular basis in normal classrooms. Under the worst conditions, practice teaching bears little or no relationship to regular teaching. While Taylor and Miller are undoubtedly aware of the differences between practice teaching and regular teaching, they tend to regard Practicum Progress Reports as evidence of “competence in the normal classroom environment” (p. 108). However, there are many reasons why practice teaching provides an artificial view of teaching. First, the student teacher is primarily responsible to the associate teacher and to faculty advisors. The associate teacher, on the other hand, is responsible to the school system, the school principal, the children’s parents, and, most importantly, to the children themselves. Second, the associate teacher teaches the children for at least one year, while the student teacher teaches for a comparatively short time. Third, the associate teacher is often responsible for classroom manage-

ment and discipline, even while the student teacher is teaching. Fourth, children regard the associate as their regular full-time teacher, while they may tend to view the student teacher as an interesting short-term diversion from regular school work. Fifth, student teachers are expected to impress the associate teacher with stimulating introductions to lessons, a generous supply of concrete teaching aids, novel ideas, and an inexhaustible amount of patience for each child. The associate teacher, on the other hand, is expected, particularly by the children, to bypass many of these instructional techniques and proceed to regular teaching, that is, to cover as much curriculum as quickly as possible. Sixth, the student teacher is expected to both complement and compliment the associate teacher on teaching techniques. However, the associate teacher is expected to criticize the inadequacies of the student teacher while offering controlled praise and encouragement from time to time. Seventh, the associate teacher normally has information concerning the children's academic backgrounds, their home environments, possible health problems, and other matters pertinent to their learning. Student teachers, on the other hand, if they work hard to do so, may know most of the children's names and very little else.

Even assuming that practice teaching constitutes an accurate representation of regular teaching, the second half of the assumption is open to question, that is, that "first-hand experience is the best teacher." Often the lessons learned from first-hand experiences are remembered clearly because they were costly, time-consuming lessons, learned from mistakes that we would avoid repeating and, if possible, would never have made in the first place. In common language, people refer to first-hand experience as "learning the hard way." With reference to practice teaching, such learning is inefficient for the student teacher and, at times, unfair to the children taught. In any case, life is simply not long enough for learning by first-hand experience all that needs to be learned about children, schools, curriculum, education, and teaching.

Assumption 4: There is a much closer correlation between practicum experiences and good teaching than between theory and good teaching.

Not unlike the third assumption, this one is commonly held by student teachers – and not infrequently by faculty members – with little research evidence to support it. One practical difficulty in accumulating such evidence lies in obtaining accurate measurements of competence among regular teachers after departure from Faculties of Education. Follow-up studies of student teachers after five years in regular classes are subject to many difficulties. For example, as regular teachers, they are evaluated in

many different ways by different school jurisdictions. Some are hired to teach grades and subjects for which they were not originally trained while others are employed in situations that they would consider ideal. Even if it could be shown that student teachers' success in practicum courses and/or theoretical courses correlated positively with later success, causal relationships would still have to be assumed rather than demonstrated. In the end, there is little, if any, evidence to confirm or deny the assumption which must continue to exist on the basis of speculation and wishful thinking, if at all.

Assumption 5: The "how to do it" courses, such as general methods and curriculum, correlate with practice teaching more closely than do theoretical courses such as philosophy, psychology, and school administration.

Assumption 5 is much easier to investigate than Assumption 4 since evidence can be more readily obtained on this matter. Nevertheless, current evidence does not support the assumption. For example, Taylor and Miller's review of the literature on this matter cites numerous research efforts concerned with whether the "desired and expected relationship between theoretical course work and professional performance" actually exists (p. 106). Taylor and Miller present evidence of "only a weak linear association" (p. 115) between performance in practice teaching and the professional, or theoretical, components of the student's studies. However, the strongest association appears not between the curriculum and instruction courses and the practicum but, rather, between the more theoretical study of educational administration and the practicum. Similarly, some studies have shown a stronger association between educational psychology and the practicum than between the practicum and other courses more usually perceived as practical, such as curriculum and instructional methods (Emerson, Elford, & Scaldwell, 1983, p. 76). In any case, the evidence is, to say the least, quite inconclusive. Moreover, as seen earlier, even with some courses correlating closely with practicum experiences, this relationship indicates neither their correlation with success in regular teaching nor the quality of the practice.

Assumption 6: Getting ready for teaching and "surviving" in the classroom requires that student teachers study specific educational techniques whether or not these techniques are closely related to good teaching in the long run.

This statement possesses enough truth to allow the assumption to

persist. Associate teachers expect student teachers to operate film projectors, prepare materials for overhead projection, have a working acquaintance with standard lesson plans, use tape recorders, and master other how-to-do-it techniques. Given these expectations, the prudent student teacher will become familiar with such techniques in order to survive in the classroom and avoid creating an initial negative impression on the associate teacher.

However, when specific techniques become too closely connected with the methodology of good teaching, the picture is obscured by "the myth of right methods" (Combs, 1979). As Combs says, "we are still unable to isolate any method or technique that is clearly associated with either good teaching or bad" (p. 191). While such a suggestion may seem preposterous to those committed to the sixth assumption, consider for a moment a few of the relatively recent fads in education. Among these are open classrooms, open schools, teacher aides, teaching machines, phonics, contextual clues and lack of phonics, television instruction, behavioural objectives, PPBS systems, various audiovisual techniques, computer-controlled instruction, the project method, the basics, and the new math. Those strongly committed to the importance of "the right methods" are usually less willing to accept the inconclusiveness of research results concerning competing methodologies (Hamachek, 1968). In this connection, Combs' conclusion should be noted: "Without hard evidence of good and bad methods, teacher training institutions have had to rely on the experience, hunches, or philosophical bent of their particular faculties to determine what methods they will impart to their education students" (p. 192).

To the extent that there is some truth in Assumption 6 – that is, that student teachers do require how-to-do-it techniques to succeed in evaluations by associate teachers – the emphasis on overly rigid, short-term techniques appears less than helpful to the cause of education.

Assumption 7: We can improve the quality of teacher education by including longer periods of practice teaching.

Research results concerning the value of longer as opposed to shorter periods of practicum are rather ambiguous. For example, Covert's research at two Canadian universities led him to conclude that "it might be argued that while the student teacher develops a better self concept as a teacher in the longer program the predispositions towards teaching decline significantly" (1984, p. 15). What does seem clear, however, from Covert's work is that the particular purpose of the practicum experiences influences its value more than does the length of the sessions. For example,

where specific measurable objectives are established in advance, the possible achievement of these objectives can be determined. Where clear objectives are lacking, the length of the practicum session has an indeterminate effect on the value of the session. While these statements are hardly surprising, they do suggest the need for a clear rationale or theoretical perspective concerning practice teaching objective.

Moreover, student teachers who complete their teacher education courses with excellent practicum ratings are usually the same students who began with excellent evaluations in their early sessions of practice teaching. The case is even clearer with students who end their training with poor practicum evaluations (Scaldwell, Emerson, & Frame, 1984, p. 89). That is, these poorer students tend to begin with poor evaluations and to end up the same way. To a considerable extent, failure breeds failure, and success breeds success. This trend suggests that increasing the length of the practicum does little, in and of itself, to enhance the quality of teacher education. It simply permits more time to confirm the initial practicum evaluations. Surely this confirmation is an insufficient reason for expanding the practicum when weighed against additional expenses and the additional hours that children must act as experimental subjects for aspiring teachers. Of course, good student teachers can benefit the children they teach, but poor student teachers are likely to have the opposite effect.

Assumption 8: Practice teaching distinguishes the potentially good teacher from the bad. It separates the “sheep from the goats” when it comes to who will be successful teachers later on.

This commonly held assumption is dear to many associates and student teachers alike. Unfortunately, the assumption is suspect on a number of counts. The files of practice teaching offices frequently indicate that, when associates are completely free to do so, they are likely to evaluate a large proportion of their graduates as very successful or outstanding in their practicum performance. In fairness, it should be noted that some Faculties of Education attempt a greater spectrum of evaluations, ranging from poor and unsatisfactory through to excellent and outstanding. However, on the whole, the term “outstanding” could be more appropriately applied to the relatively few students who are rated as unsuccessful than to the greater number of students who are given extremely positive evaluations.

When large percentages of student teachers are considered outstanding and many more than 50% are rated above average, one must question the associates' ability to evaluate objectively. Note that this accusation against associate teachers is not synonymous with a claim that faculty

members are any more objective in their evaluations than are associate teachers. However, Taylor and Miller's research (Tables 2 and 3) does indicate that associate teachers (cooperating teachers) tend to give slightly higher ratings than those given by faculty members. Nevertheless, Table 4 of Taylor and Miller's work indicates strong correlations between faculty and associate gradings.

Another difficulty with this assumption is the problem that practice teaching offices encounter in handling evaluations received. Frequently supervisors of practicum report that one must "read between the lines" in order to understand associates' comments. Such ambiguity in associates' reports will likely result in inconsistent decisions concerning student teacher success or failure.

Finally, with these problems overcome, the overriding problem remains to determine the relationship between success or failure in practice teaching and competency in later regular teaching.

Assumption 9: An idea may be all right in theory but not in practice.

Perhaps this is the underlying preconception which appears to legitimize all the rest. Our schools reflect a glorification of the practical while the term *theoretical* tends to carry certain negative connotations (Dewey, 1944, p. 262). As educators, we must help student teachers understand how good theory relates to good practice so that our students will not need to teach for ten years before realizing the professional need to respect both.

Whenever a colleague of mine tells me that my ideas may be all right in theory but not in practice, I know I am in trouble. First, it means that we are using language in two different ways. For me, good theory necessarily implies good practice and vice versa. For my colleague, theory is one thing and practice quite another. Second, it means that we are likely to engage in one of those long discussions that leaves us at the end just where we began. Third, it usually means that we have some degree of suspicion and doubt about each other's motives and methods. He is impatient to get the problem solved – to "do something," to stop the endless talk, and to get down to practical solutions. On the other hand, I am concerned about activity that lacks direction. I want to ask why one course of action is better than another and what the underlying principles are that make it so. In the end, I am often puzzled and pleased to find that despite disagreements we end up solving the same kinds of problems with much the same kinds of solutions. When this happens, I conclude that my colleague was more able to cope with theoretical difficulties than I imagined. He, in turn, decides that I had a somewhat more practical bent than I was willing to

reveal. However, in spite of our ability to act in concert, we remain just as far apart in our principles.

In discussing their research, Taylor and Miller correctly note that in studying the relationship between theoretical studies and practical training it is valid to consider “their discreteness or separateness” (p. 118). However, Taylor and Miller do not suggest that practice and theory are at odds with each other, as Assumption 9 implies.

In Assumption 1 the need to separate theory from practice was emphasized to avoid the premature dismissal of valuable theoretical ideas. However, in the long run, good practical ideas and good theoretical ideas go hand in hand. The self-contradictory assumption that something is alright in theory but *not* in practice is harmful to the advancement of practicum programs in Faculties of Education. It leads to the unfortunate and mistaken notion that practice teaching on its own is, in the familiar words of too many student teachers, very “relevant,” while theory on its own is very irrelevant.

Assumption 10: In the real world of classroom teaching, theory is soon forgotten, and it is the practical aspects of teaching that count.

If this assumption were true, then opportunities for teachers to investigate theoretical knowledge related to education would be limited to their relatively short time as pre-service students and graduates returning to Faculties of Education. On the other hand, there would be plenty of time during the 30 or 40 years of their teaching careers to perfect the practical aspects of teaching. In this light, the assumption appears at least as strongly in favour of theoretical inquiry in Faculties of Education as against theoretical courses.

However, the assumption is wrong, as many student teachers begin to discover even as early as their first interview for a teaching position. Prospective employers ask questions that are designed to probe the student teachers’ understanding of children, their attitudes toward education, their awareness of global educational issues, their philosophy concerning teaching and learning, and the overall objectives of school systems. It is on the basis of clear responses to these questions rather than the how-to-do-it techniques that interviewers assess the likelihood of long-term success in teaching.

Professors who instruct teachers in graduate and in-service education are often impressed with their high degree of respect for theoretical inquiry in contrast to the attitude of pre-service student teachers. The change in attitude reflects professional growth and a desire to know more about underlying foundations of education. While professors may un-

derstand the differences between student teacher thinking and that of mature teachers, this is scarcely a reason to accede to increased student demands for emphasis on the practical at the expense of the theoretical.

SUMMARY

The assumptions examined above arise, generally speaking, out of the mistaken notion that theory and practice compete, by their very nature, with each other. Some teachers may at different times in their careers be more strongly oriented either to theory or to practice. It is regrettable, however, when teachers view theory and practice as contradictory thrusts in education rather than as complementary or separate facets of good teaching. Faculties of Education have a particular opportunity and an obligation to assist their students to begin early to incorporate the best of both theory and practice in their teaching careers.

Many questions and assumptions regarding the role of practice teaching remain unanswered. Consequently, the author invites further comment from readers on these and other assumptions concerning the role of student practicum in teacher education.

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Die Absicht dieser Arbeit ist weiter eine Anzahl von Fragen bezüglich Theorie und Praxis bei einer pädagogischen Ausbildung zu betrachten, die von G. D. Taylor und P. J. Miller in

"Professional Course Work and the Practicum: Do Good Students Make Good Teachers?" *CJE/RCE*, 10(2), 105–120 ("Berufskursarbeit und Praktikum: Werden gute Studenten gute Lehrer?") angedeutet worden sind. Obwohl die von Taylor und Miller unternommenen Untersuchungen einige Aspekte des Praxislehrens klären, bleiben noch viele Fragen über das Praktikum unbeantwortet. Die folgende Arbeit untersucht zehn Fragen, die angesichts gegenwärtiger Annahmen, die den Praktikumsfaktor der Lehrerausbildung umfassen, besprochen werden.

El propósito de este artículo es examinar varios temas, relacionados a la teoría y práctica de la formación de maestros, que han sido tocados por G. D. Taylor y P. J. Miller en su "Professional Course Work and the Practicum: Do Good Students Make Good Teachers?" *CJR/RCE* 10(2), 105–120 (Trabajo de curso para el profesional y la práctica: ¿Son los buenos estudiantes los que hacen buenos profesores?). Mientras que la investigación de Taylor y Miller aclara ciertas áreas de la práctica de enseñanza, muchas preguntas en cuanto a la práctica misma quedan sin respuesta. El artículo que sigue examina diez temas que se discuten a la luz de las presunciones actuales del componente de prácticas en la educación magisterial.

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