

# ON THE HORIZON

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## Teach Like a Human

### The Reality Gap in Educator Preparation

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You can't ever reach perfection, but you can believe in an asymptote toward which you are ceaselessly striving.

—(Kalanithi 2016, 115)

If you haven't read Paul Kalanithi's remarkable memoir *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016), you must, for as it speaks about his untimely death, it also speaks about life, education, relationship, reality, and the role of uncertainty, which interfaces with all these elements. I have found this narrative of Kalanithi's life especially meaningful in reframing educator preparation.

You see, during my graduate work at Teachers College, I was fortunate to listen to the words of the magnificent and quirky educational philosopher Maxine Greene at a time when educational philosophy was still part of pedagogic preparation. Greene advocated for the potency of the question starter, "What if . . . ?" So while I learned how to set up exploration stations for science content, how to design math games to teach fractions, and how to encourage students to imagine sights, sounds, and feelings to find words to express personal stories, I was also trained to enjoy, and have my students delight in, the process of wondering without immediately regurgitating a correct answer in a proscribed formulaic fashion.

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Last semester a student of mine in our Educator Preparation Program (EPP) described her fieldwork in a New York City public school where she saw the following objective posted by the elementary art class bulletin board: “The learner will draw a pumpkin using crayons.” “Now we know the Common Core has gone too far,” the senior student teaching cohort rightly responded. “Is that a meaningful educational outcome?” they asked. Clearly, that our national curriculum is a topic of conversation among teacher candidates is a good thing. No doubt the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) have generated positive discussion regarding what is important for our nation’s students to know and be able to do. And, as countless others have argued, unless we have accountability measures such as tests to measure student performance and progress, we are depriving parents, teachers, and taxpayers valuable information about actual learning mastery with respect to the standards. The naysayers bemoan the diminishment of the arts, STEM problem-solving initiatives, teachable moments, and overall teacher professionalism with top-down strictures that threaten to strangle good teaching and learning. I understand both sides. But I also understand the reality gap of educator preparation and education in general, and I think education policy makers need to be mindful of what they actually know and have experienced in their own lives as they make impactful decisions going forward.

Here are a few points to ponder: Educator preparation will always be incomplete. Preparing for the future without living in the moment is illogical. Research-based effective strategies will not work for everyone at all times.

Educator preparation, like preparation in many fields, relies on simulation and approximation. Football players practice plays, and their coaches offer targeted feedback. Actors rehearse lines and block scenes, while directors offer critique and guide refinement. Yet almost no one would argue that practice or rehearsal is an authentic substitute or stable predictor for the live game or performance. Similarly, those learning to become teachers begin by teaching model lessons in higher education classrooms, leading to full-semester student teaching practicums through clinical partnerships with local public and nonpublic schools. Educator preparation programs are exceedingly grateful to those institutions for opening their school communities to our teacher candidates to learn from their master educators. But let’s face it, there is nothing like the new teacher’s first years. And, as much as educator preparation programs can work to align content, skill, and technique with what is happening in school classrooms, there is always a gap. Until the new teacher has to stand on his or her own without the support of the cooperating teacher and be responsible for everything from management to supplies, from prepping the instructional sequence to handling the

tears, he or she will not know exactly what it is like to be a teacher. I cannot weave that reality check into the EPP. Schools need to address this phase of educator preparation, and states need to fund comprehensive teacher development programs for first-year teachers. It is unrealistic and illogical for new teachers to be ready to go on day one as master teachers without having the experiences of the first few years. And these learning experiences are vital to the establishment of the educator's sense of mission and connection to children and school communities.

I think our recent graduates are ready for their first year in the classroom. However, they are not as good as they will be by their third year in the classroom. And, truth be told, I know some of what they will face, and I know that I don't know some aspects of what they will encounter. Yes, we know the technology will break down, which is why we teach our students to plan for that contingency. *How else could you teach this if the projector is not working?* Yes, we know some students will not understand what the denominator represents and how to address the misconception of a larger number always meaning more. *Which math manipulatives will support conceptual understanding for this child at this point in time?* We practice lock down drills and encourage character development with socio-emotional skill development. *How can we show Barbara that we are actively listening to her?* Yet, we, in educator preparation programs, are not prophets who can see far down the road to know that coding is necessary for everyone to master or that cursive handwriting is passé.

I think it is important *to teach like a human*. We all want to help children have the best and widest platform to access opportunity, to have a satisfying, productive, and meaningful life, and to feel fulfilled when they reach their end of days. John Dewey, one of America's most preeminent educational philosophers, in his classic work *Experience and Education*, asserts, "How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them?" (Dewey [1938] 1997, 26). Teaching is a complex and fascinating profession because every day is different, every year is different, and mornings in classrooms are so different from afternoons. Teaching requires balance and perspective, teaching requires fluidity and stability, and teaching requires competence and care. Teachers need to expect the unexpected while simultaneously crafting detailed plans, minute by minute. But they also need to make learning stimulating, imaginative, and alive. They may need CCLS math review packets, but they also need to consider how some leaf patterns map the Fibonacci series. They need to turn students on to the excitement of learning by integrating the cool things in the world now with

those that may be of interest to them in the future. These practices cement relationships between teaching and living, between learning and life, and between one human being and another.

Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College* details 49 strategies to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning. According to one of our EPP's recent graduates, this book governs instructional practice in the charter school where she is currently teaching. While some of the techniques described by Lemov (2010) are quite similar to those included in other popular classroom management texts (Thompson 2013; Wong and Wong 2009), such as "Do Now," "Check for Understanding," or "Exit Ticket," others are problematic when implemented at the lower elementary levels. For example, students may echo answers via Technique 23, "Call and Response," without comprehension. Earlier this year, when I visited this graduate's classroom, I observed the following lesson: "The grade 1 low-ability students were learning about 2D geometric shapes, and the teacher is holding up a small plastic trapezoid. 'This is a trapezoid, a what?' she asks. 'A trapezoid,' they answer. 'A trapezoid has two parallel sides,' she continues. 'A trapezoid has . . .' She pauses. 'Two parallel sides,' they answer. 'How many sides does a trapezoid have?' 'Two,' answers the class" (Field notes).

As this example illustrates, echoing answers in choral response form is not always an effective teaching strategy. (A trapezoid has four sides with two of them parallel.) The students in this class were parroting responses without thinking, and the teacher was mindlessly following her scripted lesson plan even though the questioning sequence was confusing. Teaching techniques and strategies must be tempered with first-hand local knowledge of the particular individuals involved and their unique learning needs and assets rather than followed blindly.

Thus, while the title of my essay was inspired by the "Teach Like a Champion" mantra, I am somewhat conflicted about compiling a list of techniques to address the perspective of "Teaching Like a Human." How many more lists, rubrics, guidelines, principles, standards, and benchmarks do we actually need? Yet it does seem important to set some margins and make connections with scholarship that textures our profession in order to balance out the data-driven high-stakes corporate assessment measures of educator preparation. As a starting point, I advocate four intersecting dimensions. First, I propose that teaching like a human includes risk-taking. "Indeed, the ideograph from the Chinese language that represents opportunity is the very same symbol as that which represents danger" (Barth 2001, 217). I created a coupon for my preservice students adapted from

Barth (2001, 216) that states: “I blew it. I tried something new and innovative, and it didn’t work as well as I wanted. This coupon entitles me to be free of criticism for my efforts. I’ll continue to pursue ways to help our school/classroom be successful.” In our teacher education courses, I privilege the phrase “trying something new” in order to minimize the heroic and earth-shaking stress induced by the term *risk*, but the message is consistent. New teachers must put on the “oxygen mask of learning” (Barth 2001, 214).

Next, there is the related component of acknowledging missteps. Beyond the cute coupon lies the foundational ethics of owning up to incorrect factual statements and inappropriate emotional reactions. Unlike the Billy Collins (1999, 87–88) poem, “The History Teacher,” where “The Stone Age became the Gravel Age, named after the long driveways of the time,” teachers should not err because of inadequate preparation and must take care in modeling authentic remediation of misspeaks and missteps. “We are fallible, and should not pretend that we are anything else” (Sizer and Sizer 1999, xviii). Honest admission of error can be empowering for us and our students:

Since conveying accurate knowledge is one of the chief aims of teaching, errors of fact or interpretation must be candidly confessed, better methods than those previously used ought to be presented, and the significance of both should be explained. Not only is learning thus promoted and honesty exemplified, but perhaps more important, teachers themselves can be seen struggling to overcome the natural difficulties of learning, and their students can thus grow in understanding. (Banner and Cannon 1997, 112)

Third, new teachers need to tread the adopt/adapt pathway (Posner 2005, 24), recognizing the interplay between planned curriculum, enacted curriculum, and experienced curriculum (Gehrke et al. 1992). Planned curriculum resides in the curriculum guides, lesson plans, curriculum maps, and the teacher’s mind, while enacted curriculum refers to the way the curriculum is “enacted by teachers in the classroom, although one is left with the quandary over whose account of enactment—students’, teachers’, or observers’ to believe” (Gehrke et al. 1992, 55). The experienced curriculum reflects the way the curriculum is received by the students, honoring their individual and personal experience of the teaching and learning process. This reflective cycle encourages the development of the habitual practices of mindfulness and gap analysis across planning, implementation, and assessment processes.

Finally, teaching like a human will require Greene's "wide-awakeness" to the world around us during the time in which we live. In this piece, I consciously mirror Greene's approach of interleaving works of art and literature along with personal experiences as exemplars of how to let the world and our encounters with its manifold creations be sources of inspiration, curiosity, and wonder.

We see it as part of the human effort (so often forgotten today) to seek a greater coherence in the world. We see it as an effort to move individuals (working together, searching tougher) to seek a grounding for themselves, so they make break through the "cotton wool" of dailyness and passivity and boredom and come awake to the colored, sounding, problematic world. (Greene 2001, 7)

Encouraging personal connections and imaginative relationships between the arts and life nurtures identity and community.

I recently attended a town hall meeting with several members of the New York Board of Regents to discuss the New York State teacher certification examinations, which have arguably hijacked EPPs across the state as our candidates' pass scores not only serve to credential the particular teacher candidate but also serve as outcome measures for the EPP. Locally, in our program, like all programs, in addition to the New York State standardized measures, we evaluate candidates every semester on academic performance, professional dispositions, and pedagogic performance in the field. We receive feedback from cooperating teachers and fieldwork supervisors about the candidate's progress and document any concerns. We also privilege the all-important dictum from the Teacher Education Accreditation Council, by asking, Does the candidate practice "learning how to learn?" This includes: Does the candidate accept critique with maturity? Does the candidate evidence improvement across the model lesson sequence? Does the candidate communicate in a timely manner with professional academic language? We believe that teaching like a human means we can get better at what we do and that we do make mistakes from which we can learn a great deal about others and ourselves. We want our students to pass the New York State teacher certification exams, but we know those measures are inexact, inaccurate, and incomplete predictors of pedagogic prowess.

In fact, as previously noted, I want our teacher candidates to remember what it is like to not understand, to fail sometimes, or to grapple with a skill, so that they can help their own students with similar struggles. Yes, I want them to climb the asymptote to perfection, but I also want them to

enjoy the process of teaching and learning, and I worry a great deal that the pressurized environment of educational settings today derails strong prospective educators from entering the field and from staying in the profession. Ironically, teachers improve by teaching and learning. In my first position as an assistant teacher, I worked alongside a master teacher who posted the following quote atop the blackboard: “Learning is a life-long process.” Learning shouldn’t stop with schooling, nor should anyone want it to. What will be the next “gritty” concept or “growth mind-set” orientation to captivate our educational imaginations and restructure our pedagogic practices? We should really want educators to develop a disposition to try new strategies and technologies.

One of the lessons from the life of Paul Kalanithi, who trained years to become a neurosurgeon and neuroscientist and never got to work long term in the position for which he was educated, reminds us of the value of making meaningful choices day by day, despite the uncertainty of not knowing what the future will bring. Kalanithi’s life and the importance of his relationships with family and friends, as described in his powerful book, illustrate how the choices that determine our lives each moment can inspire others. Kalanithi’s oncologist repeatedly implored him to define his priorities, to determine his values. When education is not for some intended future, but is valuable in and of itself, right now today, this very moment and the one that follows, then we have a radically different understanding of education and life. And this is precisely where educational philosophy can inform educational policy. Teaching like a human means acknowledging limits while redefining aspirations in an uncertain environment. I wonder, *what if* we all gave this some thought? How can this insight infuse educator preparation with realism, dignity, humility, and humanity so our future teachers continue to want to learn how to educate more effectively?

In addition to the four aspects introduced earlier, allow me to conclude by offering two practical suggestions to initiate further application of what it could mean “to teach like a human” and how this orientation can inform educator preparation. First, teacher educators should consider integrating current events into teacher education courses so candidates have an opportunity to dialogue about pivotal and provocative events and issues swirling around them right now. Journell (2013) argues that more alarming than the overwhelming lack of civic and political knowledge by preservice teachers is the underlying dispositional limitation. “At the crux of these findings is an alarming lack of intellectual curiosity among pre-service teachers” (Journell 2013, 342). The nature of current events favors just-in-time, in the moment, working through real concerns with those who may offer competing per-

spectives. Current events discussions force teacher candidates to authentically reflect and examine their ideas against the backdrop of different opinions and emotions. Bafumo and Noel (2014) detail specific technology-based integrative strategies to enhance consistent current events learning by pre-service teachers. Learning how to dialogue, to listen, to empathize, to support claims with evidence, and to evaluate media bias, personal assumptions, and intuitive calculations is good “practice” for the vibrant life, global awareness, and democratic discourse we want to see in all classrooms (Haas and Laughlin 2000). As Dewey ([1938] 1997, 49) reminds us, “We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.”

Second, I recommend teacher educators encourage candidates to develop the gumption to reveal areas of weakness and find the language to ask their cooperating teachers for assistance. Feiman-Nemser (2012) describes relationships with colleagues as one of three aspects of school life especially salient for beginning teachers. She explains that as a result of the prevalent “sink or swim” first-year narrative in many bureaucratic school organizations, “teachers may feel reluctant to ask for help or share problems, believing that good teachers figure things out for themselves. Even if teachers do get together, they may not know how to talk about teaching and learning in productive ways” (Feiman-Nemser 2012, 158). If as candidates they can begin to feel comfortable identifying need and requesting guidance without fear of punitive devaluation or judgmental reprobation, then perhaps they will continue to seek support and resources in their first few years and those that follow.

Novices need opportunities to talk with others about their teaching, to analyze students’ work, to examine problems and to consider alternative explanations and actions. If novices learn to talk about specific practices in specific terms, if they learn to ask for clarification, share uncertainties, and request help, they will be developing skills and dispositions that are critical in the ongoing improvement of teaching. (Feiman-Nemser 2001, 1030)

However, I humbly acknowledge the realistic constraints of classroom teaching today. Within our own program, many preservice teachers and their supervisors report turf wars with cooperating teachers reluctant to give



up teaching time for the novice to “practice.” Burdened with multiple compliance documentation tasks and ongoing assessment and evaluation mechanisms, cooperating teachers struggle with their own heavy load of curricular expectations and professional responsibilities (Sadler 2006; Zeichner 2010). Most are passionate about sharing craft knowledge (Barth 2006; Greene 1984), but they simply don’t have the time to dedicate exclusively to candidate mentorship amid their primary professional obligations. Thus I am recommending teacher candidates bravely initiate and manage these important conversations to develop their sense of professional agency rather than wait for traditional formal feedback sessions.

“The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning” (Dewey [1938] 1997, 48). There is a big push in education today to bring high-leverage practices up to scale (Schneider 2014). I think teaching like a human provides balance to this charge by addressing the individual and his or her learning needs at a particular moment in time. The message of striving for life and learning, shared by Kalanithi (2016, 149), who found courage in Samuel Beckett’s ([1958] 1997, 476) turn of phrase, “I can’t go on. I’ll go on,” can embolden our resolve as we press forward together to reframe educator preparation in this challenging and uncertain climate. In this way, educator preparation can be both for today and tomorrow, no matter which way the policy winds blow.

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