

Roots of Teaching Expertise: A Comparison of Two Novice Music Teachers

This study is part of a longitudinal research project on the development of novice teachers, tracking the growth of some of our university string education majors in their first years of full-time teaching. Last year in a paper, I explored relationships between a song-teaching approach that I thought we taught in the junior-year methods course and the teaching practices of three first-year teachers.

Karen and Jennifer were both 23. Karen was a double bass major, teaching in 3 elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. Her district mentor was a math teacher. Her primary concerns in her first year seemed to be classroom management and staying organized. Jennifer was a violinist, teaching in 3 elementary schools, with a mentor who was an experienced string teacher. Her major concerns were her students' learning and her relationships with parents and students. Jing-Wei came into the program while working on a DMA in guitar, and also learned to play string bass at a competent level. He taught in the same district as Jennifer, also at 3 elementary schools and working with the same string teacher mentor. His primary concerns seemed to be with string pedagogy and managing paper work efficiently.

I found that their song-teaching practices as first year teachers took many ideas from the approach we had presented in their junior-year methods class. However, Karen and Jing-Wei seemed to view the song-teaching method as a selection of activities to use in their classrooms. In contrast, Jennifer used the song-teaching strategies as part of an entire approach to music literacy, which was what we had tried to communicate in the methods course. This difference showed in the effectiveness of their teaching. In these three cases, neither cooperating teachers' practices, district mentors' supervision, nor prior teaching experience completely accounted for the observed differences, while effort and readiness to learn appeared to contribute to their varied understandings of what I thought we taught. While Karen and Jing-Wei

appeared to be acceptably competent for what could be expected of first year teachers, Jennifer demonstrated a higher level of teaching expertise. As defined by Berliner (1995), her proficiency was already equivalent to that of a teacher with three to five years of experience.

I was curious about why Jennifer appeared to understand ideas we presented in the course at a conceptual level, while the other two seemed to be more focused on surface features of the activities themselves. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to try to identify differences in their work in the junior-year methods course and their String Project teaching experiences. I hoped that by revisiting data collected during their time at the university, I might gain some insight into some of the issues involved.

And my real question, which I am always fascinated by but which is very difficult to research, is why students appear to learn such different things from the same courses?

In this study, I focused on data I had collected for Karen and Jennifer beginning in their first year at the university. Jing-Wei came into the teacher education program through a different route, so I did not have completely comparable data for him, and did not include him in this study. I also selected them as a focus because they represented the higher and lower ends of performance in the course. Both Karen and Jennifer taught classes and private lessons in their sophomore year in our String Project, so I revisited my observation notes and videos from that year. In addition, while the previous paper focused on their applications of the song-teaching method from the junior-year methods course, I examined other written assignments and teaching videos that I collected, with their permission, from their work in that course.

One obvious difference was the amount of data I had for both: I had about a third more written work from Jennifer, probably because she was more conscientious about completing assignments on time and about keeping all her completed assignments. She also kept written

lesson plans and other records for all her String Project classes and lessons. Even though I provided financial incentive for keeping written plans, Karen seldom did. Karen's course assignments also contained many spelling errors for words like "rhythm" and "definitely," and her written essays tended to ramble, whereas Jennifer's writing was more focused, directly addressed the questions asked, and had better spelling and grammar.

Both teachers admitted to feeling a tension between needing to plan and being able to respond to students "in the moment." Both felt successful when they were able to deviate from their planned lesson to address issues that arose in a class or rehearsal.

• "I was able to stray from my lesson plan to address issues that arose."
(Jennifer)

"I think that the lesson plan itself was good, but I barely followed it. This is something I often do. If I feel that something else needs to be worked on I will work on that, and then move on. I think that this is acceptable as long as I do two things. I have already written and rehearsed what I want to do in the lesson and the major objectives/goals are still reached by the end of the class." (Karen)

While Karen *said* she recognized the benefit of planning ahead to make that type of teacher improvisation possible, I saw only limited evidence of detailed planning during her first year of teaching. She tended to plan to work on a specific section or a specific piece, but to have few specific assessable outcomes in mind. Rather, Karen often waited to hear what the students played, and then responded to that.

I found hints of these differences in their earlier work. Part of the challenge in analyzing this data set is that the differences are very subtle, and did not leap out at me at the time I graded the assignments. In retrospect, I can see sharp differences in the clarity and specific focus of their written objectives. These examples are representative.

Jennifer tended to have learning objectives focused on specific concrete, assessable skills, both for her students and for herself.

Karen's objectives tended to be general or global, and were often not

directly tied to specific skills or spots in the music.

I think that differences in Karen's and Jennifer's ability to articulate learning objectives for a particular lesson plan also was reflected in their teacher talk while teaching. In the methods class, we emphasized the use of complete teaching cycles, what Price calls "sequential patterns of instruction."

This approach outlines patterns of teacher talk where the teacher ideally (a) gives a specific direction, with information about what to do physically to achieve that goal, then (b) has students do what is asked for, and finally, (c) gives students specific feedback about their performance related to the stated objective.

A few times a year, to focus on efficient teacher talk, we required the preservice teachers to write a verbatim transcript of a lesson, with written corrections and clarifications. These examples are typical. This teaching cycle demonstrates Karen's tendency to give unfocused directions. In her analysis, she crossed out apologetic statements, a focus of hers at the time. She also noted that she did not give specific feedback, e.g., "Good bowing," or other comment related to the students' progress towards her learning objective. It is evident that she did not have a clear idea of what she wanted to hear from the score, despite two previous peer-teaching lessons on this piece with feedback from her peers and me about how to streamline her lesson. In contrast, Jennifer's transcripts consistently reveal learning objectives focused on specific skills, information about what to do physically to improve those skills, and feedback that provided information about how close the students came to performing at the expected level.

While Karen commented occasionally in her first year that she knew she should be thinking about using the teaching cycle, Jennifer quickly generalized in-class assignments to all her teaching.

It is not clear to me whether her ability to predict student errors and sequence instruction effectively was intuitive or learned, although they quite likely were related.

A confounding factor is the fact that now I can see that Jennifer made both major and minor revisions to her plans in each subsequent teaching opportunity, while Karen's written plans for different versions of the same lesson were often exactly the same. Karen seemed to make small changes in her in-class teaching, so I didn't check at the time to see whether she was actually revising the lesson plan itself. I just assumed that, for whatever reason, she was making less consistent progress than others in the class.

Of course, we try to help preservice teachers learn to focus beyond their lesson plans and respond to what the students in front of them actually do through real-time assessment while they are teaching. There were also differences here.

For example, both teachers claimed to notice that their students did not produce the dynamic variations they sought, but Karen seldom worked on that skill in context, although she did mention it occasionally to the students.

Jennifer was far more likely to use several strategies to work on the problem spots with her classes.

However, it was tricky to use observations as evidence of what these teachers were thinking, because what I saw didn't always line up with what Karen and Jennifer said they experienced in their classrooms.

Sometimes Karen told me she had noticed things that I thought she missed because I didn't see her do anything about them. Although these differences are now obvious to me, I still don't have much insight into why Karen doesn't respond, if she hears errors that needed correcting. I am conducting a study with Karen this year to investigate my suspicion that she lacks strategies to address the problem.

And I was surprised to realize that this pattern is not only evident in their preservice assignments and videos, but also in their first year teaching videos. It is now clear to me that Jennifer saw herself as responsible for student learning.

She understood that it really depended on her whether each child actually learned what she hoped. Her self-assessments frequently

included comments about how what she did in the lesson affected the students' or her peers' performance.

Karen's comments more often focused just on her actions or intentions as a teacher, without reference to the students' responses.

I had hoped to find clear-cut evidence of early differences between these two teachers. I did find that from my data analysis. However, reasons for those differences remain elusive. I suspect that the differences are influenced by a number of factors, many of which are well-documented in other research.

Both teachers used practices that they had preferred as students, or emphasized things they wished their teachers had taught them. For example, from Karen's first String Project teaching through her first year in the classroom, she tried to teach her students about key signatures. Although we never specifically discussed this in methods courses, I think she felt it had made a difference for her as a student, and she was committed to sharing that skill with her students. Her strategies for teaching key signatures gradually became more effective and age-appropriate, but she never deviated from that goal.

Researchers have documented how preservice teachers develop images of themselves acting in classrooms, many of which are vaguely defined, as in Jennifer's desire to be a "fun" teacher or Karen's aim to be "open" to the orchestra. These internalized role models became reflected in their struggles to act in ways they felt reflected that "fun" or "openness," yet still be demanding and maintain classroom discipline. This concern also appeared in both women's frequent references to a desire to feel "confident." This also was difficult for me to assess simply by observing – there wasn't a good match between when they said they felt unsure and whether to me they looked confident.

One example of research about preservice teachers' stages of development is Fuller and Bown's study, suggesting that teachers progress through three stages of concerns. Neither of these women appeared to be in survival mode during their first year of teaching, but throughout the six years of the study, Karen seemed more concerned with the tasks of teaching, while Jennifer early on developed concerns

with how her choice of teaching tasks affected student learning. As part of this concern with the tasks of teaching, both women not surprisingly continued to articulate a need to develop specific instructional skills, beginning in their String Project teaching and continuing throughout their first year of teaching.

Other possible influences on beginning teachers' development include ideas presented in methods courses and practices learned from field experiences, including student teaching. Other mentors and peers, such as those who work as rehearsal technicians in a marching band or sectional coaches, may also be a source ideas.

Individual processing of feedback and individual meaning-making from experience have been shown to shape what preservice teachers learn from their experiences, but we have a lot to learn about how all these different influences work together to influence any given teacher's beliefs and practices.

In the cases of these two teachers, my previous studied identified two factors that may have come into play. First, Jennifer was naturally a more logical-sequential thinker, which fit better with the type of lesson planning and teaching we asked for in the methods course. Karen's more random-abstract approach may have conflicted with her ability or willingness to accept and learn what we expected.

Second, Jennifer likely applied more effort to making changes. The following quote from her end-of-the-first semester final self-assessment gives a good indication of her approach.

It seems that Jennifer has continued this step-by-step approach to her own growth in teaching skills into her first years of teaching, and it was evident from my first contact with her.

Data from this study leave me with more questions than answers. I can group my questions into three categories.

First, although my data support the findings of much other research, I don't feel that I have been able to learn much about how all these factors interact to affect Karen's and Jennifer's growth. For example, both

women often said they didn't feel confident, but it seemed they could only gain confidence by experiencing themselves as successful teachers. The question of which comes first, in this case, the skill development and experience that lead to feelings of competence or the change of attitude that leads to more successful experience, seems to be a chicken and egg question for many aspects of teacher development.

A related question involves which factors in that constellation of possible influences are the most important to direct our attention to as researchers and as teacher educators? Are there research approaches that might allow us to identify a productive end of the string from which to start untangling the large balled-up knot?

A second group of questions involves effective approaches to studying these questions. A single study can reveal interesting pieces of the puzzle, but still leaves "blank spots" and "blind spots" in what can be learned. Even with all the data I have collected over six years, I am missing key pieces of information. Jennifer and Karen's written work gave me interesting insights into what they were thinking, but what they wrote did not always match what I observed. Using as an example the concern they both frequently expressed about believing they lacked "confidence," they often looked to me more confident than they evidently felt. And I found it difficult to discern their real motivations for certain things. Even though I think I maintain a good relationship with them, I expect that they probably still limit what they tell me because I was their instructor. This leaves me with a really difficult-to-address research question: What *aren't* they telling us in their reflections and other work?

A question that is even more perplexing to me has come out of this set of case studies. I have worked with these young women over six years, and analysis of data for this study has confirmed what I intuitively knew from the beginning: Compared to Karen, Jennifer has demonstrated both greater interest and greater skills in teaching from the beginning. I have always believed that anyone with the desire can learn to teach, if the component skills are presented to them in a way that connects for them.

Although both women made great strides in the university program in improving their confidence and teaching skills, similar patterns of differences remained through their first year of teaching. This leaves me pondering the question of whether some elements of being an effective teacher really can't be learned.

Is there some truth in the saying that "good teachers are born, not made"? Berliner's research on teaching expertise suggests that this may indeed be the case. He identifies five stages in the development of teaching expertise, and suggests that only a small percentage of teachers advance beyond the third level of competence. Maybe there is some wisdom in what Jennifer wrote that she learned from her first early field experience working with an elementary string teacher.

If that is the case, it seems even more imperative to me that we find ways to research which of the many factors that have been shown to be important in developing teaching skill are the ones we should focus on in our teacher preparation courses. Where do we begin untangling these knotty questions?