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Cover Page Footnote
Nancy Nager is on the graduate faculty in Teacher Education at Bank Street College. In addition to teaching and advisement she is currently working on research concerning the epistemological development in teachers and the nature of career change for students moving into teaching from other occupations.
BECOMING A TEACHER: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THINKING ABOUT KNOWLEDGE, LEARNING AND THE SELF

Nancy Nager

To ask whether teaching must get in the way of education is to suggest that the customary relationship between teaching and education is one of interference in which teachers block rather than facilitate the growth of knowledge. This dismal view of teaching and teachers reflects some basic beliefs about knowledge, teaching, and learning. In this paper I will explore the epistemological assumptions that underlie different models of teaching and will discuss the ways in which the advisement process at Bank Street College aspires to prepare teachers to facilitate rather than get in the way of education.

There is an interesting parallel to explore between epistemological development and traditional and nontraditional teaching. The capacity for reflective thought is an epistemological orientation which reflects a set of beliefs about the kind of thinking and knowing that is necessary to good teaching. There are important differences in belief systems between traditional and nontraditional teachers (see, for example, Ayers, 1986). In the traditional notion of the teacher as the authority, the teacher is regarded as one who controls. It is a top-down model in which the teacher is regarded as having the knowledge to solve others' problems. Learning becomes a passive process, described quite vividly by Paolo Freire's (1971) metaphor of a "banking model" in which the teacher makes deposits of information and the student must simply "store the deposits." In a nontraditional model of teaching and teachers, the teacher is one who empowers. Knowledge becomes understood as actively constructed by the knower and learning becomes a process of discovery and invention. In this model, teaching is an active process of engagement between the knower and the objects or events to be known. The teacher becomes what Donald Schon (1983) calls a reflective practitioner.

The Graduate School curriculum at Bank Street is carefully designed to help students become competent in curricular content,
teaching skills, and understanding of children. We assume that becoming a competent teacher is tied not only to information but to the way in which the teacher experiences and internalizes information. Active participation in real problems is the kind of experience that we recognize as the basis of learning for both child and adult development. For graduate students at Bank Street, this means that supervised field work is at the heart of their learning.

Central to the graduate student's education at Bank Street is a year of field-based preparation known as advisement. The student has at least two placements in which she comes to assume increasing teaching responsibility. The number of placements, age group of the children with whom she works, and type of school varies according to each student's previous experience and learning needs. In each placement she works closely with a cooperating teacher who guides her work. The student also works closely with her Graduate School advisor throughout the year. She meets bi-weekly with her advisor for an individual conference. One of these meetings includes the advisor's observation of the student's classroom. In addition to the bi-weekly individual conferences, the student joins five other students for a weekly conference group. With the advisor, the students use the conference group to discuss their personal and professional development.

The content of group discussion is determined by the students. Issues that often arise in the group include the student's relationship to the cooperating teacher, her feelings of autonomy, competence or incompetence, and how she is integrating what she is learning in her graduate coursework with what she is doing in the field. Students also use the group to discuss individual children and how best to work with them. Perhaps the most basic and underlying issue that is addressed through all of these topics is the student's developing skills and developing sense of professional identity.

Groups usually become strong and the students become important to each other. What evolves through the weekly discussions is a learning community in which peers share ideas and offer support. The advisor provides a model for this kind of learning. By her comments, questions, and suggestions, she works to facilitate discovery, insight, and individual integration of the graduate educational experience. Implicit in this model is the understanding that discovery, insight, and individual integration are based on experience and that this kind of learning is Bank Street's educational goal for adults and for children. In this way it is not solely the growth of
knowledge that we desire, we also seek the growth of an orientation to knowledge. This is a process of epistemological growth in the student's view of herself and her way of thinking about knowledge, learning, and teaching.

In turning to studies of epistemological development, William Perry's influential *Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* stands out as a classic text. In a longitudinal study, Perry listened to undergraduate men making sense of their experiences at Harvard. From those interviews, he traced a series of regular changes in the way students conceptualized knowledge and education, values, and themselves. Central to this development is the movement from being a holder of meaning to being a maker of meaning. In other words, students first view knowledge passively as something to be acquired. With epistemological development, students come to view knowledge actively. They come to understand that they construct knowledge through their interactions with people and objects of thought in their worlds (Perry, 1970, 1981).

Because the majority of teachers are women, studies of women's ways of thinking about thinking and about themselves as knowers by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) are of special interest to teacher educators. They have shown the development of mind to be mutually involved with the capacity for dialogue. Women used the metaphor of a "voice" to describe the way they came to value themselves and their ideas. Most often this development was fostered by a mentor or counselor who valued them and enabled them to value themselves. Women's sense of themselves and of knowledge is constructed through a sense of connectedness to others. Women in their study spoke of "connecting" with ideas rather than "mastering" them. Epistemological development entailed a process of coming to value one's own voice, self, and mind. Students at different epistemological positions in the Belenky et al. and Perry studies had different concepts of what makes someone a good teacher. It seems likely, then, that the epistemological positions of students who are becoming teachers would inform different kinds of teaching practice. Knowledge of epistemological development then gives us a way to think about the kinds of educational experiences that we provide for adults. It teaches us that people need opportunities for self expression. They need to feel that they are part of a community which values them and their ideas. At Bank Street, advisement is designed to provide this kind of educational experience.
What is explicitly valued in advisement is the student as actively constructing meaning; peer interaction as a source of learning and support; and the importance of reflection on one's own practice. These values are represented in the centrality of the advisement experience. Advisement therefore represents an ideological commitment and value system. Learning to be a teacher becomes a process of self realization. Just as we teach our teachers to educate the whole child, we educate teachers to be whole persons. This is our epistemological orientation, the way we look at knowledge and the knower.

One student in my advisement group last year stands out for me as a good example of this kind of growth. Susan frequently felt torn between her new and shaky belief in learning by doing and her history of having been taught in a traditional, learn by sitting and taking in from the teacher model. She was a true "received knower," to borrow the Belenky group's eloquent term. This was further enforced by her parallel belief in the teacher as authority and her consequent need to impart information to the children. "But how will I know they're really learning unless I'm up there teaching?" she would cry. She repeatedly brought this question to the conference group, with her characteristic self depreciating humor but with a real need to know and understand. The group responded with care. Her questioning forced individuals who were thinking of knowledge as an active construction to articulate their understanding of knowledge and learning. Many examples were brought up of experiences with children in which it became clear that children were learning through the opportunities the teacher was providing. Susan understood but it was still "out there" for her. As she continued to work with children, to try out different approaches, to observe other teachers, and to reflect on her experiences, she began to speak differently about children, teaching, and herself. She began to talk about the kind of curriculum she wanted to build, what kinds of experiences she wanted children to have, and how she was feeling good about her role in helping children learn.

I don't mean to suggest a total transformation for Susan. Her development as a teacher continues to evolve as she continues to integrate her teaching and learning experiences. Susan called me at the beginning of this school year, her first as a head teacher. Excited about her work and her learning, she was also nervous, "I need a pep talk," she began. "I know they're really learning when they're running around doing things but remind me how."
I chose this example to illustrate how becoming a teacher and epistemological development should be an intertwined, mutually facilitative process in which the teacher grows in her understanding of the construction of knowledge and herself as an active maker of meaning. This growth in orientation to knowledge should correspond to an evolving commitment to an educational philosophy in which teaching and education serve as the same goal: facilitating the growth of knowledge, learning, and the self.

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References


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