

Lifelong Learners

By Jennifer Worham

The expectations are clear. According to the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession, teachers have a professional responsibility to “act as role models who demonstrate lifelong learning.” For today’s educators, going to school—beyond the workday—is part of the job.

“Teachers need to be students. It keeps them connected, empathetic. It keeps them aware,” says Garth Chalmers, a high school geography teacher in Toronto who recently finished a master’s degree while working full-time. For him, the experience of going back to school was important both personally and professionally.

Chalmers is not alone. According to a recent survey of readers of Professionally Speaking magazine, a publication by teachers for teachers, “Ontario’s educators continue to put a high premium on professional development...On average, teachers say they completed extra reading in their subject or specialty areas during 29 full or partial days during the [2004] school year.”

For teachers, professional development and learning go hand-in-hand, and the opportunities for both abound. From additional qualification courses in English to seminars on bullying and workshops in literacy, teachers have a choice about what form their learning will take. And like Chalmers, when given the choice, many teachers are choosing to pursue post-graduate degrees.

Motivations for going back to school

It seems logical that teachers would love being in school—why else would they choose to work in them, day in and day out? But being in school as a teacher and being there as a student are two entirely different experiences. Why someone would choose to make the transition from one role to the other depends on such factors as time, age, previous learning experiences, professional aspirations, interests, and money. In other words, teachers’ motivations for going back to school are as varied as the learners themselves.

Craig Cooper, a teacher at Sir John A. McDonald, approached his studies pragmatically. For him, doing a post-graduate degree was a means to a specific end. "My master's was done with the idea of getting into administration. I felt that in the future a master's—although more work than two specialists' certifications—would prove to be beneficial in the future."

He was right. Cooper's decision to go back to school helped him earn an acting vice-principal position in his school, and an opportunity to explore this career option. His master's, while still a work in progress, is in curriculum studies in education. It has provided him with plenty of chances to reflect on his teaching.

"I often spent my time in class thinking about how what I was learning would impact the students," says the grade eight teacher. Cooper found himself wondering, "How could I best bring these ideas and theories to life?" With this in mind, he started to plan classes with a greater awareness of the research that supported his pedagogy.

Chalmers' decision to go back to school came from a desire to pursue other options. After four years of teaching, he began to question whether it was what he really wanted to be doing. "I wasn't unhappy teaching. I was just thinking there might be something else out there for me."

The program he chose was a master's in spatial analysis, related to his field but not specific to education. It was a "professional degree," a program for working people. "I have always loved geography, and this program combined geography and technology. It seemed perfect for me." If there was another field he wanted to be in, this would be it.

From the other side

It would seem that going from teacher to student would present some obvious challenges, not the least of which would involve the shift in roles. What teacher wouldn't go into a classroom, sit down, and think critically about herself as a professional in comparison to the person at the front of the room? She couldn't help but ask herself, "Would I provide instructions like this? Am I prompt in starting my lessons? Do I overuse the word 'OK'?"

Cooper liked letting someone else take over. "I often sat there and thought about the prep (or lack there of) that was put into the class or seminar I was in. It was almost relaxing knowing that I could pretty much sit and absorb for three hours rather than always having to be 'on'."

For Chalmers, becoming a student was not relaxing. "The real challenge I faced was time. My program was new. There were still bugs to be worked out. The major one was how much time students were expected to commit to school while still working full-time. They demanded too much of us, and I felt like I was in over my head."

Chalmers discovered that a program does not need to be education-specific in order to be professionally valuable to a teacher, and that any chance to change roles and become a student can lead to reflection. And he found himself identifying with his professors. "It's hard not to think of things from the teacher's perspective."

Impact of school experience on practice

Teachers are required to engage in ongoing professional learning in order to improve their practice in the classroom. Yet does so much time dedicated to something as demanding as post-graduate work really make a positive difference?

According to Craig Cooper, the answer is yes. His practice has improved and so has his relationship with his students. In fact, the kids love the idea that he is a student again. "When I talk about or tell stories about being a student, it is an excellent way for the kids to relate to me on a familiar level, as a student." His experiences have provided him with another opportunity to open up a dialogue with his "fellow" learners.

"I show them that I am a lifelong learner. I like the kids to see that you can never stop learning. This is the one thing I want the kids to take away from my class. If they do, I feel that I have succeeded."

When Chalmers returned to UTS, he landed a department head position. His priorities in this new role were to avoid making the same kinds of mistakes he had seen his own teachers make. "The frustration

I experienced as a student helped me get involved. I had the opportunity to see things from a different perspective. And along the way, I realized that teaching was the career for me."

This realization was perhaps the most important of all for the young geography teacher. "It got me excited about teaching again. At one time, I had my doubts about it. I think most professionals do sometimes. His experience as a student had a dramatic impact on his professional practice. "I realized that in teaching, I get to influence people. Everyday I empower kids. I discovered I wanted to keep doing that."

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