CHAPTER 6

CREATING A CLEAR SIGNAL AGAINST A NOISY BACKGROUND

[Physics is] that class where you know you’re not going to have to show up and do something trivial ... it’s been sort of that place of refuge where we know we can go.... and focus on what I feel is important and of value. (David3, 7–9)

In addition to the regular schedule of coursework, a 8-month teacher education program needs to deal with the challenge of finding the appropriate time to include the extra requirements of a professional certification program. In the Ontario context, these extra requirements include finding time for presentations by the teachers’ unions and for the Ontario College of Teachers. In both cases, candidates are required to complete an application form to ensure they become certified Ontario teachers and are paid at the appropriate rate once they complete their degree. At Queen’s, there are also many opportunities for candidates to engage in various workshops related to finding a job, including a popular recruiting fair for candidates interested in teaching overseas. Teacher candidates’ thoughts naturally begin to drift to the job search and the possibility of teaching in their own classroom.

Unfortunately, the practical stress of finding a job can often coincide with the mid-point of a 8-month teacher education program. Teacher educators, particularly those who feel it is their responsibility to give candidates as many resources as possible in the name of preparation for the first year, might feel a new push to cover as much content as possible. There might be an increased pressure to complete assignments, particularly if candidates are about to embark on their final extended practicum. The previous chapter revealed that some participants felt that the November on-campus portion of the program did not do enough to help them resolve the existential tensions they arose during their first month of practicum. Candidates who participated in this research experienced themselves as “living contradictions” (Whitehead, 1993, p. 70) as a result of their practicum experiences. If these tensions were exacerbated during their second practicum, in December, then it is possible that candidates returned to the on-campus weeks in January feeling more unsettled than they did in November.

In short, there are a considerable number of distractions in a 8-month teacher education program, particularly at the mid-point when candidates are compelled to consider applying for jobs, possibly while coming to terms with increased requirements from course work and feelings of insecurity about their practicum experiences. These distractions may well add up to a considerable amount of noise in a program that might make it difficult to focus on the broader challenges of learning to teach. It becomes a major challenge, then, for teacher educators to send a clear signal against the noisy background of a busy teacher education program.
The first section of this chapter describes the major events that occurred during the physics course in this block of classes. The data obtained from the focus group and individual interviews are then analyzed to provide insight into how teacher candidates constructed professional knowledge from learning experiences in the physics course. Selected narratives of the candidates’ practicum experiences are then presented in order to reveal many of the tensions associated with constructing professional knowledge during the practicum. The next section provides the perspective and voice of the teacher educator as I analyze the discussions Tom and I engaged in during January classes. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the professional knowledge constructed and co-constructed by the teacher candidates and the teacher educators.

**CONTEXTUAL FEATURES OF THE PHYSICS METHODS COURSE**

Tom began this block of classes by engaging candidates in group work designed to help them set goals for their learning in January. At the end of the first class, he formalized the self-directed learning (SDL) assignment that would become the focus of the term. Candidates were asked to come to the second class prepared to form groups around common interests. These SDL groups would each be responsible for producing an “exemplary teaching resource” (Journal, January 7) to share with peers in the final class. The rest of the January classes alternated between two patterns. On Mondays, a guest speaker presented to teacher candidates for approximately half the class, and Tom used the other half of the class to both debrief the presentation and to guide candidates in processing the effects the program was having on their learning. Thursdays were designated as self-directed learning classes, where candidates were free to work on the projects on which their groups had decided. To emphasize the point, Tom stated that candidates need not attend class on Thursdays if their group’s time could be spent more productively elsewhere. The physics courses concluded on Thursday at the end of January with 13 presentations of exemplary teaching resources from both groups and people who had chosen to work individually.

**LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN THE PHYSICS CLASS: TEACHER CANDIDATES**

The data provided by the participants during the focus group interview and the individual follow-up interviews were analyzed with a view toward understanding how the teacher candidates were constructing knowledge from learning experiences during their physics methods course. Four themes are explored in this section: Learning from the Program, Learning from Tensions, Learning from Tom, and Theorizing Teaching and Learning. The first theme focuses on how teacher candidates learned from the structure of the program, with particular emphasis on the transitions between the end of the extended fall practicum, the winter holiday break, and the return to Queen’s in January. Unlike the previous two chapters, in which candidates spoke at length about how they learned from peers in both the physics classroom and the program, this set of data contributing to this chapter gave little mention of the effect that other teacher candidates had on participants’ learning. Instead, the idea...