In the spirit of investigating the spaces of struggle that mark the heart of inquiry, we invite you to share your experiences with the enduring tensions of our practice. How have these tensions influenced your students, your classroom, and your development as a teacher? How have these issues resurfaced into new contexts and influenced your teaching? How does your classroom reveal that “the more things change, the more they stay the same”? And how can we continue to grow while honoring philosophies that have shaped our profession?

The language used to define the focus of this issue of *English Journal*, “investigating the spaces of struggle that mark the heart of inquiry” and sharing “enduring tensions of our practice,” may seem a relatively distanced, even sanitized description of what happens when thoughtful teachers consider the contradictions of our daily work. The contradictions become even sharper when the topic embraces not just classroom practice but also the preparation for that practice within university and college programs. Perhaps more than other comparable professions—medicine and law come to mind—the fit between theory and practice, that is, what the education profession espouses and what then is enacted in the classroom, is often widely uneven. Thus “enduring tensions” are central to education, and while our stories are markedly different, we, Lisa and Leila, agree that neither of us is able to fully embrace those tensions nor even completely reconcile them.

But we do have some ideas.

Both of us, Lisa and Leila, have paths into the classroom that are different and yet may illuminate some of the tensions and what we think are some of the approaches to solutions.

**Who We Are**

**Leila**

Coming out of five years teaching high school in two very different settings, my transition from being a classroom teacher to a doctoral student and working with prospective teachers was mostly a smooth one. Early on in my career, my commitment to the real world of first period was energizing and grounding—I loved the reality of the classroom and was comfortable integrating that with my nascent understanding of educational theory. Doctoral study allowed me to examine the choices I had made as an early career teacher and helped me understand their implications. I was able to write directly about what I felt was the fit, or lack of fit, between the real and the ideal, the research I was reading and what I had practiced in my own teaching for five years. It was a satisfying place to be.

This fit, for me, also meant that when I started my university career as an assistant professor, I felt more than somewhat prepared for what turned out to be four decades of work as a teacher educator.

**Lisa**

I was fortunate to go through an excellent English education program; what didn’t work out so well was my student teaching placement, a rural school with a 45-minute drive each way and a department that was not the friendliest. I quickly applied to graduate English literature programs, forgoing
a secondary teaching career. It would be six years later before I started teaching. Three years into full-time teaching, I realized there was still so much more to know—especially when it came to working with struggling readers. Thus, I returned to school, working on a doctorate in reading at night while teaching high school English during the day.

This set up a wonderful laboratory for me in that the theories and ideas I learned about and discussed at night could be put into practice—and researched—during the day. This shift in thinking led me to seek a position in teacher education upon graduation. However, after just over a decade in higher education, the high school classroom called to me. So, I returned to my roots and my hometown to be an English teacher.

The above trajectory and experiences create quite a bit of tension because, at times from 2013 to the present, it would be easier to be “Lisa the high school teacher” circa 1997 than “Dr. Lisa Scherff, the teacher who learned so much obtaining her PhD and working in higher education.” Why? Before my doctorate, there were no high-stakes tests. I didn’t know the politics of education. And, I was naive to the full effects of systems that disenfranchise students. In other words: I taught in a bubble that made my teaching life pretty easy. However, now I question—on a daily basis—things that I knew and espoused while a university teacher educator.

The Central Dilemma

Leila

As I continued to stay in higher education, some of the aspects of my role and its satisfactions began to fray. In particular, my work was the preparation of secondary English teachers, and in our university graduate program I discussed, demonstrated, and advocated student-centered classrooms with significant space for student talk, student ideas, and student success. I was careful to model this in my own teaching—we did together in our graduate classes what I advocated be done in a secondary classroom. My students were largely receptive, excited, positive, and we worked together to finish their master’s degrees, get a job, and negotiate the first years of teaching.

But in the majority of cases, as I delved deeper into students’ subsequent careers, whatever we had so happily agreed upon on campus unraveled in their schools. I saw my students teach in successive years and met them at local, state, and national conferences. While there were stellar exceptions, many of my graduates complained vociferously about their own students and their school climate. More troubling, many had given up professional reading and practice, and they were largely disconnected from whatever we had once agreed was the definition of good teaching and good learning.

Who was at fault for this? My text, which we used in the course, the book I had written based on my own high school teaching and which I continued to revise in successive editions? The materials from NCTE and other excellent sources (such as Heinemann and Stenhouse, to name two) that were unhelpful or unconvincing? The courses themselves and their connection to the schools? My own example as a teacher educator? Regardless, the transition from progressive-minded graduate student to exemplar, student-centered classroom teacher was not occurring with most of my graduates. This lack of fit was concerning.

My work in teacher preparation was not effective as it translated into the schools. For Lisa, it was a different experience.

Lisa

Like Leila, when I was in higher education I often used my own classroom teaching materials and ideas with teacher candidates. And my former students—many still teaching today—noted that they found these materials and ideas useful in their classrooms. So, when I came back to the classroom in 2013, I had all sorts of units, lessons, and activities in mind and could not wait to get started. However, as much as I thought I knew about teaching high school English, I was constrained by a number of issues, not the least of which was a narrow pacing guide that did not consider the different skills, interests, and experiences students bring to school and what I as a professional brought to the table. This sort of curricular mandate leads many teachers to forget what it is to be an English teacher or to make them “teach” in hiding, sneaking around to include a novel or film.
Embracing Enduring Tensions in English Education

In addition, I am now expected to put my students on computer-based modules each week to provide literacy instruction based on their scores on a computer-based multiple-choice reading test that we must administer three to four times per year. The reading test and the computer-based instruction are supposed to help ensure higher scores on the mandated graduation exam. I am also encouraged (i.e., expected) to include computer-based literacy skills practice from a new program that our district bought to monitor and track data on student learning; however, it should not be assigned as a practice session for the graduation exam, nor should a certain day of the week be dedicated to preparing for the test. It should be incorporated into the curriculum. My question is, with which curriculum? The mandatory pacing guide or the differentiated computer-based instruction?

Curricular mandates like the ones above stand in stark contrast to what I focused on during my time as a teacher educator and cause tension between who I want to be as a teacher and who I am sometimes forced to be. This is a reality and tension that our English education students face when entering many classrooms, and some are pressured—or even forced—to make periodic adjustments that are not consistent with their preparation. Like many teachers, I have had to select the literacy practices I think are important for students to be successful throughout the reading and writing they complete across the content areas. I also try to find ways to make the curriculum interesting, relevant, and connected to the world outside of school at a time when there are more external constraints than ever before.

What We See in the Classroom

Leila

Some 15 years ago, the then—Washington Post education reporter wrote a series of articles about the disconnect between schools of education and what happens in real classrooms. He was scathing and precise; nothing he was finding in the schools in nearby Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia led him to believe that any kind of outside preparation was effective. I called him and we talked; I mentioned how in my situation our professors were in the schools every week and were connected to the reality of the classroom. He challenged me individually, and, in reply to his question, I accurately responded that I had been in a middle school within days of our discussion. He sighed—my comments did not fit his model—but he maintained that, regardless of what I had told him, his overall contention was accurate. I stoutly maintained it was not, but hanging up the phone I knew, fairly surely, that while there were exceptions, the Washington Post essentially had a point: in most teacher preparation programs there is a strong disconnect between theory and practice, preparation and reality, and once students have finished their degrees and certification, they turn to other sources of validation for their teaching. They also, as Lisa so clearly describes, face pressures on a day-to-day basis that someone at the university can do little to address. Accordingly, what early career teachers and even student interns do on their own in class often looks very different than what we advocate in their teacher preparation. And, in addition, few of us in universities routinely provide the kind of support in their first few years our newest teachers need—and deserve.

But the lack of fit can occur even sooner than after a year or so of teaching. One incident was sharp enough to make me truly consider stepping out of teacher preparation and ceding it to other colleagues. To give a bit of background: In our graduate program, we have a typical sequence of courses and two extensive field placements during coursework. Fall is the methods course where we consider all aspects of school and English language arts teaching, accompanied by a field placement; in spring there is a seminar to which students come one night a week while they are doing their internship in the schools. The sequence allows the instructor to follow students for an entire year and, in essence, to guide students from the theory (methods class and field placement in fall) to practice (seminar and internship in spring). Certainly there are many glitches and bumps, most of which are to be expected and, in many cases, incorporated into the seminar. Central questions I ask include: What theory did you read that now seems unlikely to implement? What practice are you doing that you questioned so seriously in fall? What are you seeing of your own reactions to students and school regulations? To the workload?

The fact that there is never a one-to-one correspondence between what we read and discussed in class at the university and what students, now...
absorbed in the lore and culture of their new school system, are now practicing is not impossible. Although there have been times when students who have declared they have lost all their optimism (and they have been in their internship less than a month) need some adjustment, the shift from graduate student to student intern is, with support and guidance, achievable.

But.

As part of the spring internship seminar students video themselves teaching and present excerpts to their fellow students. They write a paper, quite open-ended, about what they are seeing in the video, contrasting it to their plan, their goals, and their ideals. I stress repeatedly that this is not a greatest hits performance, that reflective teaching is often all we can ask for, and that the video is a snapshot of one hour or so in their classroom. The point is the reflection and assessment, an integral part of successful teaching.

One recent spring, however, a student intern of mine presented a lesson segment on poetry. The lesson was to present a poem, discuss it, and then do some activities to further understanding. So far, so good. But the student intern introduction to the poem took almost three minutes, and the subsequent so-called discussion was his asking a single question and then, with no wait time at all, answering it himself. Again. And again. He was animated, voluble, excited, and no student in his class could get a word in edgewise. When one student did answer, he cut the student off, repeated the answer, and then charged on.

It was, in essence, everything that this group had been told not to do and that their text (which I wrote) reinforced and illustrated as reductive, teacher-centered, and disrespectful of student intelligence. Yet this student was confident enough—blind enough?—to present this video as an exemplary lesson on poetry. That would have been bad enough, but the reaction of his classmates was doubly discouraging: even within the polite confines of positive reinforcement that we had all established as a classroom norm, most of this student’s peers lauded his energy, animation, and grasp of the material. The role of the students, the wait time, the lack of discussion, the mangling of student answers, the display of teacher control and teacher ego were all ignored.

I was speechless. My ability to guide this discussion to probe other avenues of inquiry absolutely broke down. I think I made one or two comments, and then on we moved to the next video presentation: to critique this student as thoroughly as I believed he deserved would have been somewhat of a public humiliation, even cruel and, at this point in the semester, mostly self-defeating. I confined my critical comments to his paper, but a teachable moment for the whole class was lost.

So what is the tension here? The tension is that confronts a real classroom of young people, this student reverted ever so surely to the lecture and performance mode. Worse, his peers recognized this old structure and rewarded him for it. All the reading, discussion, and activities as part of this graduate program were, essentially, left behind and deemed, at least in that teaching moment, useless.

Lisa

What happened in Leila’s classroom is similar to what I imagine most of us as teacher educators have faced at one time or another—that lack of what we believe to be obvious transfer of pedagogy/ theory. I used to get it, but now—four weeks into my fifth year as an English teacher—I really get it. And, it is this fact that would make me an even better teacher educator if I was back at the university. Among other approaches, I recommend a powerful tool for teacher educators to interrogate and reflect on their own classrooms and practices: self-study.

Related to action research, where “the primary purpose is to modify or transform their practice” (Feldman et al. 953), self-study researchers recognize that “to change our teaching requires us to change who we are . . . [and] to improve our teaching education practices, we need to change our ways of being teacher educators . . . self-study is a form of inquiry in which we inquire into our self as a teacher educator to improve our way of being a teacher educator” (973). In short, self-study is about analyzing the self as a primary focus. The why for self-study emerges from questions about ourselves as teacher educators.

How do we do this? We collect data from our course(s), which can range from copies of assignments, syllabi, student work, field notes, student
feedback, reflective journals, etc. In earlier work (Scherff and Kaplan 156; Scherff et al. 44), I analyzed reflective journals, email communications with teacher candidates, interviews, and field notes to share how my classroom teaching experiences while I was a teacher educator affected and improved my pedagogy as a teacher educator. Richard H. Milner conducted self-study research to examine his “curricular decisions in teaching race in a course with mostly White teacher-education students” (181). Self-study can help address these teaching issues and can help early career teachers as well as veterans more sharply see their own practice.

What We Recommend

Beyond the other aspects discussed here, for both of us, the cure to this malaise is a single and heartfelt prescription: go back into the classroom. It makes sense and is, ultimately, only fair. Classroom teachers come to a college campus for courses and workshops and to professional and academic conferences for sessions; they buy books and complete school district professional development. There is, if you consider it, nothing comparable for university people who are situated firmly in their own settings. What do university people do? How is their connection to the “other side” renewed?

Setting up systems for university teachers to return to the classroom for a significant period of time is one clear and important approach to parity and understanding.

Lisa

As a former teacher educator who has been a full-time English teacher (again) for four years, I would like to see my former colleagues return to the classroom for at least one semester and teach. And by teach, I mean do not go in to collect data for an article or book. Do it to teach students and experience what your teacher candidates will face. It is very easy to tell classroom teachers to opt out or ignore mandates from the security of a position in higher education (I was there), but when many public school systems have gotten rid of tenure, that means every year teachers can be let go for just about any reason. I, for one, need a paycheck. That means I sometimes have to do things I don’t want to, or I have to find creative ways to teach as authentically as I can. This is a balancing act, but it is not impossible, and we need to experience it and then discuss it.

Leila

I did return to the classroom for a semester and found it both exhilarating and highly puzzling. While it was not in the initial plan, I also did end up writing a book on the experience. The semester itself, however, was daunting, and it took almost five years for me to unpack what had gone right and what had gone awry in my planning, teaching, and student contact. What did not go awry, however, was a renewed appreciation for students, their vigor and fascination, as well as an understanding of plans that are ostensibly creative and inventive but to which students, for various reasons, are indifferent or resistant. And I have carried those lessons forward with me in my own teacher preparation work. The poet T. S. Eliot has it right: “Humility is endless.”

Conclusion

Milner argues that “teacher educators need to engage in more self-study and follow their students (preservice and inservice teachers) into the classroom to capture their curricula and pedagogical decisions with students . . . and document the effectiveness of our [teacher educators’] teaching in the teacher-education classroom” (199). We could not agree more, and when we as teacher educators commit to the classroom, the benefits are multiple and long lasting. The enduring tensions in English education will doubtless remain—both of us are realistic about that fact. However, with more intentional connections to the classroom and more explicit modeling of how teacher preparation and teacher reality can intersect, we are closer to addressing—if not resolving—those spaces of struggle that mark the heart of inquiry.

Note

Many thanks to Alan Brown for reviewing this manuscript and offering helpful reactions and comments.
Leila Christenbury and Lisa Scherff

Works Cited


Leila Christenbury, NCTE member since 1975, is Commonwealth Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University and a former editor of *English Journal*; she can be reached at lchriste@vcu.edu. Lisa Scherff has been an NCTE member since the late 1990s and is a former coeditor of *English Education*; she can be reached at eas0228@gmail.com.