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Learning to Teach English in Urban Schools: The Role of Bipolar Disciplinary Aims

Lauren Gatti
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, lgatti2@unl.edu

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Abstract for DBER Group Discussion on 2013-09-12

Presenter, Department(s):
Lauren Gatti
Assistant Professor
Dept. of Teaching, Learning, & Teacher Education
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Title:
Learning to Teach English in Urban Schools: The Role of Bipolar Disciplinary Aims

Abstract:
In this talk, Dr. Lauren Gatti will share findings from a year-long, multi-case study exploring how novice teachers learn to teach English in urban schools. She will focus on the learning to teach process of one novice teacher, Margaret, who was placed in a Chicago middle school for her student teaching. Through this case, she will illustrate why and how disciplinary aims matter for those learning to teach English in classrooms that emphasize college readiness as the larger disciplinary goal and use scores on high-stakes testing (i.e. ACT or state testing) to measure "successful" learning in English. She argues that the "college readiness" aims embedded within Margaret's curricula in combination with her larger disciplinary aims—English to what end?—shaped the version of the discipline she was able to construct within her classroom where the intellectual work of English was largely framed as preparation for a State Achievement Test. While this talk will emphasize disciplinary construction in the field of English education, discussion will focus on why and how disciplinary aims in other fields (i.e., STEM) and to what effect.

The Power of Disciplinary Aims in Learning to Teach English

Lauren Gatti, Ph. D.
Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

Examining our own disciplinary ideas

- Take five minutes to write down the following things:
  - Ranked from most important/compelling to least important/compelling, what are the larger aims, the "*to what end*" for teaching your discipline?
  - Write each aim on a sticky note and place a number in the upper right hand corner to denote rank. Be prepared to defend your rankings.
  - Share your aims with somebody around you. They need not be in your same discipline.
  - When you are finished, come to the board and place the sticky notes on the board IN ORDER (most to least compelling) under the correct heading for your discipline.

The Role of Disciplinary Aims in Learning to Teach

- Overview of larger study
- The reality of fragmented and irrelevant English curricula in urban schools
- Curriculum vs. Discipline
- The role of resources in learning to teach English
- *Disciplinary* resources: English to what end?
- Margaret: Case Study

English, Disciplined

- Year-long multi-case study
- How are novice teachers enrolled in two different teacher preparation pathways– a university-based teacher education programs and an urban teacher residency– learning to teach English?
- Urban: highly bureaucratic, under-resourced, overcrowded, high teacher turnover, and disproportionate numbers minority and low income students.
- Novice teachers: N=9
- Methods instructors, university deans, university supervisors, and mentor coaches: N=17
- Interviews (59); Observations (20)

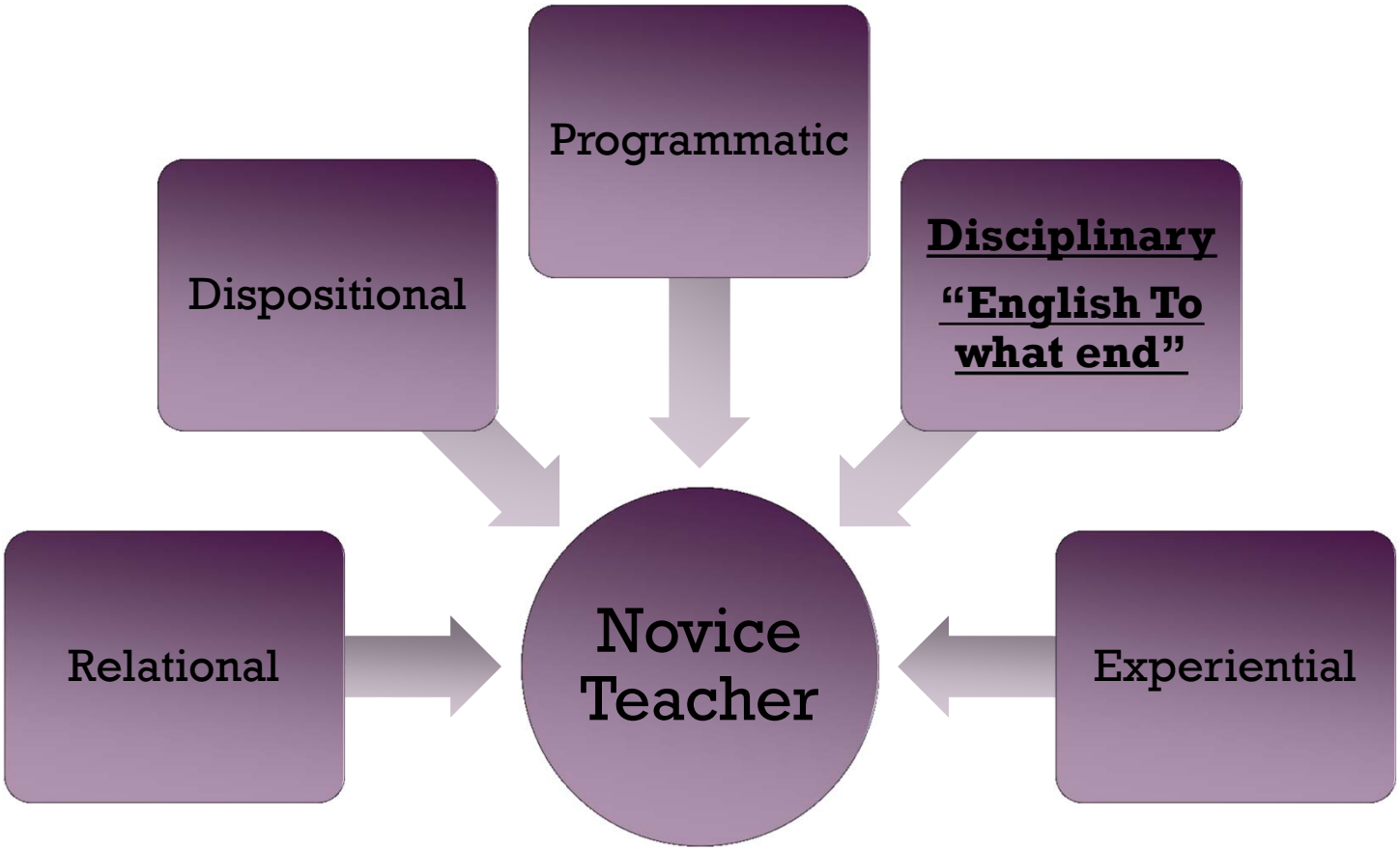
English Curriculum in Urban Schools

- "Test-based": This curriculum was a collection of standards taken from the ACT. All texts that were chosen were approached as vehicles through which to teach the skills that would be on the test.
- "Traditional": This curriculum included canonical texts that were primarily taught in summarized or excerpted form. "College readiness" was the primary rhetoric here.
- "Dueling": This curriculum was a split between test-based and traditional: Half the teacher's time was spent teaching canonical texts and the other half was preparing students for the state exam.

Disciplinary Construction

- How is it that two people learning to teach in the same classroom, using the same curriculum can have radically different learning to teach experiences?
- How is it that the intellectual work– the disciplinary experience--can be so different?
- Curriculum is the material site through which teachers *construct* the discipline.
- That disciplinary construction happens as teachers access particular resources.

The Role of Resources in Disciplinary Construction



Disciplinary Aims

- Robust Aims
  - Sam: Meaning-making
  - Genesis: Each One, Teach One
  - Sarah: Citizenship; Advocating for ones self in the world
  - Judith: Speak back to texts; get texts talking to each other
- Weak Aims
  - Jackie: Achieve on the standardized test so they can go to college
  - Linda: Appreciate Shakespeare and do well on their ACT

Margaret:

A Case Study in Disciplinary Aims

Teaching context: Beethoven Elementary

- Beethoven is a small, public school of 300 students,
- 96% of whom are classified as low income.
- The largest demographic in the school is Hispanic, making up 87.3% of the student population, followed by black (7.7%) and white (3.7%).
- In Margaret's 6th-grade class, 53% of students met standards and 38% exceeded them on the State Standard Achievement Test (SSAT).
- Beethoven Elementary is the highest performing, nonselective elementary school (serving 95% or higher low-income students) in the large district, with 94.1% of students meeting or exceeding state standards on the reading exam.

Identifying Bipolar Disciplinary Aims

- Take a few minutes to read through the data excerpts you have in front of you. With a partner, identify the different aims that Margaret has.
- Which of these aims/goals for teaching English seems most foregrounded? Which are backgrounded?
- What can you surmise about the kind of work her students engaged in intellectually in her classroom?

Discussion:

- Consider the aims you identified as most and least compelling. Consider Margaret's aims.
- Why do disciplinary aims matter for our teaching and for our students?

Dueling Curriculum, Dueling Aims

- "I think we realized we did a lot of switching to test prep. So I did do a lot of just that lesson only not connected to the next lesson, test prep lessons. Which I didn't like because . . . I'd rather focus on something and see where it goes, [but I couldn't really do this] because of the fact that 'No, we have to cover this skill. I know I brought an interesting piece but no we don't have time to cover this aspect of it. I'm excited that you want to know [about this topic], but no. We're not focusing on critical thinking with this.' So that was kind of difficult." (Interview, June 10, 2011).

Thank You!

- Lauren Gatti
  - lgatti2@unl.edu