

Expansive learning within a teachers' community of ongoing learners

Good teachers are the critical element in improving education for children everywhere but especially for children in high poverty schools. However, urban schools serving children of poverty rarely attract and retain well-prepared teachers and they seldom provide their teachers with the kinds of support that would improve teaching and learning in their classrooms. To address this need, Professor Frances O'Connell Rust recommends a radical shift in teacher education that creates a seamless path for professional learning that can occur through partnerships between schools and universities. Her work on the TCOOL (Teachers Community of Ongoing Learners) project suggests the possibilities inherent in such a design experiment.

A good teacher is more important for students than smaller class sizes, new facilities, or laptops. However, urban schools serving children of poverty rarely attract and retain well-prepared teachers and seldom provide their teachers with the kinds of support that would improve teaching and learning in their classrooms. Drawing on the theory of *expansive learning*,

The TCOOL (Teachers Community of Ongoing Learners) design experiment has teacher education sitting at the nexus of theory and practice. The goal is to create a seamless path for professional learning among teachers. Instead of the school just providing field experience for beginning teachers, community and college/university-based assets are drawn into the school, transforming the school into a centre that provides continuous learning for its students and professional growth for its teachers throughout their professional lives. Professor Rust describes the TCOOL Project as embodying "a new vision for the professional education of teachers to engage schools and universities in

deep partnership aimed at supporting the preparation and on-going learning of teachers".

TWO SIGNIFICANT SHIFTS REQUIRED

To achieve this vision, Prof Rust explains that two significant shifts are required to prepare and support teachers to optimise the learning and achievement of children of poverty. Firstly, teacher education should be extended beyond pre-service preparation to include programmes that take place *throughout* a teacher's professional life. This would mean involving schools in the preparation of new teachers and universities in the professional life of teachers in schools. Secondly, the current model of low expectations for both children and teachers in high-poverty urban schools should shift towards a model where both students and teachers become partners in knowledge building. To realise this transformation, long-lasting, committed, dynamic collaborations between local schools, communities, and colleges/universities are required to redefine teacher education, encouraging professional learning through high levels of practice in schools.

TEACHER EDUCATION AS EXPANSIVE LEARNING – A DESIGN EXPERIMENT

This process could be considered a design experiment where the familiar

practices of teacher education are deployed in novel ways to develop an innovative approach to teacher preparation for urban schools. Prof Rust comments that the outcome of this type of design experiment in education could be viewed as an example of expansive learning, wherein, according to Engestrom and Sannino (2010), "the learners construct a new object and concept for their collective activity and implement this new object and concept in practice". Typically, the process involves questioning, analysis, modelling the new solution, examining and testing the new model, implementing the new model, reflecting on the process, consolidating and generalising the new practice.

THE TCOOL PROJECT

The TCOOL project provides an example of a design experiment in teacher education. It is aimed at addressing the problem of redefining and reshaping teacher education to explore the question: *What would it take to bring the university and schools together as partners in the pre- and in-service education of teachers for high-poverty urban schools?* These are schools where the percentage of students living below the national poverty line far exceeds the city wide average. As a partnership between higher education and public schools, TCOOL is intended to begin within a single school and expand over a ten-year period to include a network of schools (elementary, middle, and secondary) in the same geographic area that will function as research-informed communities of practice. Within each school, the same collaborative elements will be in place: Each begins with a strong principal and teachers in a high poverty school choosing to collaborate with university-based pre-service teacher educators to make the school the educational analogue of a teaching hospital. That is, each school will operate simultaneously as a site for coursework and fieldwork for student teachers, and professional learning for experienced teachers. This process of moving each school to becoming an inquiry-orientated site in which school and university collaborate in support of powerful professional learning is the prime intervention that is TCOOL.



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WHAT SETS TCOOL APART?

TCOOL provides in-situ learning where teacher education happens inside the classroom and school over an extended period of one or two years. Student teachers are provided with real-time continual feedback throughout their immersion in the school. By design, new teachers' experience of learning to teach resides in the school as a laboratory for learning and it is hoped that, like new doctors, they will move into their first years of teaching knowing

to both classroom teachers and the research and policy community, and may result in the retention of high-quality teachers, particularly in high poverty urban schools.

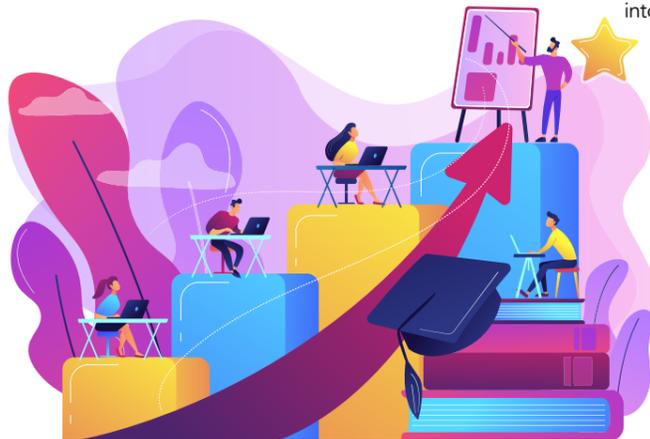
PILOTING THE TCOOL DESIGN EXPERIMENT

Early in 2016, Rust developed a partnership with the School of Education of Brooklyn College and a local public early childhood and elementary school. Teacher education programmes of

A new vision for the professional education of teachers that engages schools and universities in deep partnership.

the breadth and depth of life in schools and classrooms and understanding and relying on research-informed practice. TCOOL positions both pre-service and experienced teachers' engagement in research as a core professional value. As well, it supports teacher educators' study of and refinement of their practice. TCOOL offers sustained collaboration between urban schools and their university/college partners, encouraging professional learning that is enriching

Brooklyn College prepare teachers for work in public and private schools in Brooklyn and across New York City. The public school that opted to work with Prof Rust can be described as a high-poverty urban school: 93% of the 357 students are eligible for free lunch; 28% have been identified as having learning distinctions; 8% are English Language Learners; and an alarming 27% are homeless or living in temporary housing. The teachers were potentially



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Professor Rust recommends a radical shift in teacher education that creates a seamless path for professional learning that can occur through partnerships between schools and universities.

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strong participants in developing a professional learning community, most have master's degrees and 5-30 years of teaching experience.

To enable the school faculty to work collaboratively with student teachers, Rust sought the development among those teachers of a professional conversation that was focused on teaching and learning. In keeping with research on professional learning, these conversations were embedded in the school day. With the principal and the

observe in their classrooms and, by the end of the first year, all the participating teachers had sought her out.

Although practice in the school changed dramatically through the seemingly simple intervention of weekly structured conversations over lunch, the effort to work with the teacher education programme at the college was fraught from the beginning. Without funding for student teachers (who themselves often experience serious financial difficulties so take as long as seven years to complete

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project mentor/manager (PM/M) (hired specifically to facilitate the TCOOL project), a schedule was developed, enabling the 12–15 participating teachers to engage in teams of 3–5 teachers (and student teachers in the Spring semester) in weekly lunch conversations with the project mentor. These conversations focused on teacher action research which Prof Rust and PM/M had introduced during a 3-day summer institute and continued to support with regular monthly meetings involving all participating teachers, the principal, and college-based mentors/supervisors. Within two months of initiation of weekly meetings, several participating teachers asked the PM/M to

their degrees), student teachers were reluctant to commit to more than the required hours of field experience that accompany their methods courses. Although the project was able to fund a college-based mentor to visit weekly with them at the school, there was no incentive to alter any parts of the teacher education programme so as to encourage shifts in programme requirements: there was no move to set days for student teachers' attendance at the school, hence no possibility that the mentor could see all of them in her weekly visit; there was no way to bring the student teachers' methods courses into the school which would have enabled a cohesive interaction between

college and school around instruction and professional learning. Essentially, without funding, there was no possibility of the sort of forward planning that could have supported a design experiment in the teacher education programme.

KEEPING TRACK

Focused on determining what worked well for the school and the college in the TCOOL pilot, Prof Rust employed a process of data review that enabled her, the PM/M, the principal, and the dean to collaborate regularly at dedicated times to review data and make modifications as necessary. For the school, they drew on weekly logs of lunchtime conversations kept by the PM/M and shared online with the teachers, principal, and project director; e-mail notes between the PM/M and project director; agendas and notes from monthly meetings run by the project director and project mentor with the teachers as well as from the two summer institutes; notes and videos from the teachers' presentations of their research in December and June each year; the teachers' research presentations; interviews conducted by the mentor; and feedback surveys given at the end of each semester. For the college, data were drawn from notes of meetings between the project director and the dean, department chairs, and college faculty and mentors; email with college mentors; notes from the PM/M's meetings with student teachers, classroom teachers, and the college mentor.

LEARNING ABOUT CHANGE

This overview of the TCOOL pilot has helped to clarify what it takes to get a school and a university to work together. Though, as the two years of the project show, a lot can happen when relational trust is established that permits boundary crossing among such complex organisations as a school and a college of education, realising the fullness of the design experiment cannot happen without adequate sustained funding. Resources that enable and allow participants to experience new ways of working within and across their separate organisations are essential to their adapting and making those new ways essential activities of viable partnership that persists after initial funding has ceased.



Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

Professor Frances O'Connell Rust's research is focused on teachers' professional learning and on teacher-driven action research and school improvement.

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Bio

Frances O'Connell Rust is Professor Emerita at New York University and Scholar in Residence at NYU Metro Center and currently serves as adjunct Professor at University of Pennsylvania – GSE. She directed teacher education programmes at Teachers College–Columbia, Manhattanville, Hofstra, NYU, and UPenn and has published on the design and implementation of teacher education programmes.

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Personal Response

What inspired you to use expansive learning to explore opportunities for learning about teaching?

“ I needed to find ways of thinking about the problems facing urban schools and universities including teacher preparation and professional learning, high teacher turnover, and poor school-community relations. These problems were too complex for simple solutions. Expansive learning theory has helped me to interpret the change process: The end state, the outcomes of real-life experiments like TCOOL must be understood as flexible and fluid since they can only be envisioned in terms of the general equilibrium desired. How one gets from here to there, while planned for in general terms, must be open to revision, redirection, and surprise. Otherwise, we end up at the place where we began. ”