

EDUCATION WEEK

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Scholars Eye 'Signature' Method of Teacher Training

Experts say preparation programs should pursue a consistent pedagogy.

By Debra Viadero

Anyone who has ever seen movies like "The Paper Chase" and "Legally Blonde" can picture what goes on in a law school classroom. The routine, repeated in law schools throughout the country, calls for an instructor to stand at the center of a semicircle of desks and pepper individual students with questions based on assigned readings of legal cases or statutes.

FOCUS
on
Research

This familiar yet distinctive teaching style is what Lee S. Shulman, the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, calls a "signature pedagogy," a systematic, shared set of practices that distinguishes the preparation programs in a given profession. Over five years of study, Mr. Shulman and his colleagues at the Stanford University-based foundation have identified similar pedagogies to characterize training programs for doctors, members of the clergy, engineers, and possibly nurses.



Mills College education student Chris Scheer, left, discusses teaching with high school student Kayla Nine-Expinosa.
—Erin Lubin for Education Week

Try as they might, though, the researchers could find no such trademark practices for preparing teachers.

"Wherever you go in education, people want you to understand that what they are doing is totally different from what is done elsewhere," said Mr. Shulman, who is an education professor at Stanford.

That's a pity, he says, because the field could benefit from a little more uniformity and a little less individuality. At least a signature pedagogy might ensure that beginning teachers, no matter where they are prepared, have been exposed to some practices that experts agree are beneficial.

"Teaching teachers is just as complex pedagogically as teaching kids," Mr. Shulman said. "And we have to develop distinctive pedagogies in teacher education in the same way that we have to develop pedagogies for teaching reading, math, or piano playing."

Mr. Shulman and his colleagues began their examination of the professional training in 1999, two years after he took the helm of the Palo Alto, Calif.-based foundation. Like Abraham Flexner, the Carnegie scholar whose study of the medical profession at the turn of the 20th century transformed training in that field, Mr. Shulman wanted to bore into what it meant to learn to be a professional for a particular line of work. But he wanted to do it for a range of professions so that educators in each of those fields could learn from one another.

Independent Contractors

Early on, the Carnegie Foundation researchers looked at law, engineering, the clergy, medicine, teaching, and nursing. The foundation is due to publish the first of a series of books from those studies,

a report on the preparation of clergy members, next month. Volumes on law and engineering are due out next year.

The research teams, all of which included at least one expert from the field under study, visited dozens of schools, conducted surveys, and ran focus groups.

“As you went from a law school in California to a law school in Minnesota and another in New York City, they all looked alike in terms of how they taught and what they taught,” Mr. Shulman said. “The same was true of engineering.”

In medicine, the researchers identified the bedside rounds of medical students as one signature pedagogy. For clergy in Western religious traditions, it was the common study of the Bible.

Videotaped Lessons Bring Insights to Aspiring Educators

Once a year, Anna E. **Richert**, an education professor at Mills College in Oakland, Calif., invites students from a local public high school to watch videos with her teacher education students. Rather than music or movie clips, though, the tapes show high school teachers at work with their students.

“My students use them as a text around which they can have a conversation about teaching with high school students,” said Ms. **Richert**, who is piloting a project involving Web-based case studies of teaching for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, based at Stanford University.

The groups talk about the best educators they've had, among other issues. The gatherings, the latest of which took place late last month in Ms. **Richert**'s adolescent-development class, aim to give the college students insights into the minds of younger learners.

One clip showed a student explaining why he fails his classes.

“One of my [high school] students at first responded by saying she could relate to students like him because she knew a lot of people like that,” said

When Mr. Shulman failed to find trademark practices for the preparation of teachers, he dropped education from the mix. “It was as if every teacher education program was an independent contractor,” he said.

Mr. Shulman's ideas about signature pedagogy are bound to stir controversy in teacher education as happened when he proposed creating a national board to certify skilled teachers—an idea that has since spawned the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

“I think there needs to be a common understanding of what teachers need to learn and know, but I don't think we need cookie-cutter programs,” said Kenneth M. Zeichner, an associate dean of the school of education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “We really don't know exactly what goes on in existing teacher education programs on a large scale.”

Another expert, Stanford education professor David F. Labaree, suggests that teaching, with its relatively low status and salary potential, may not want to emulate the grueling preparation practices that mark some other fields.

“It may be that you can only have such signature pedagogies in occupations that are sufficiently dramatic and romantically appealing and prestigious so that people will go through the agonies of going on rounds and getting put on the spot at bedside,” he said.

Mr. Shulman argues that the teaching profession can share ideas and practices without imposing a lock-step curriculum. He even suggests a candidate for the field's signature pedagogy: videotaped case studies of good teachers in action.

Under the direction of senior scholar Ann Lieberman, the foundation is creating an archive of more than 25 such studies of teachers, some of them teaching the same material, but in different contexts.

Sarah Pooner, a graduate student who took part in the exercise.

The teenager gave Ms. Pooner advice on how to help such students: privately explain to them the choices they face, such as seeking tutoring or continuing to fail, and trust them to make the right decisions.

“This girl later confessed that she was actually talking about herself,” Ms. Pooner said, “and a teacher had done that for her.”

Ms. **Richert** also has her students explore the foundation’s online video archives to hear teachers talk about developing lesson plans, read and watch the lessons that result, and view the work produced by the students of those teachers.

“It all makes for a rich learning opportunity,” she said.

—**Debra Viadero**

Teacher education students can go to the archives, which are being collected on a Web site, to watch the work of teaching from start to finish, from hearing teachers discuss how they developed particular lesson plans, to watching those lessons being taught, to seeing the work students produced as a result.

Teacher-educators using the site report that their students are emulating the practices they’ve seen on videotape when they take over their own classrooms. Through the process, scholars at the foundation’s Center for the Study of Advanced Teaching and Learning are also gathering teacher-educators’ thoughts on key ideas to teach aspiring teachers before they begin their careers.

“I expect as we make these public, there’s going to be some core stuff we could fit into the notion of signature pedagogy,” said Ms. Lieberman, who directs the center. “We can’t rush to judgment yet.”

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

“**Review Panel Turns Up Little Evidence to Back Teacher Ed. Practices,**” June 22, 2005.

“**Teacher Education Homing In on Content,**” June 8, 2005.

“**Panel Urges New Testing for Teachers,**” May 25, 2005.

“**Education Schools Use Performance Standards to Improve Graduates,**” May 11, 2005.

“**Book Spells Out ‘Core Curriculum’ for Teacher Training,**” March 2, 2005.

“**Teacher Education Popular Topic For Panels, Commissions,**” April 28, 2004.

“**Congress Orders Thorough Study Of Teacher Education Programs,**” March 3, 2004.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **Teacher Quality**.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

The **Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching** provides more information on its **teacher education** initiatives.

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