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The Angle of Repose, or Don't Try to Change the World During your Placement

Ken Badley

Most teachers enter the profession for noble reasons. We may word it in various ways but our answers to the "Why teach?" question usually run along the lines of "making the world a better place," "helping children," or "wanting to see my students' eyes shine." Those of us who worked on this book share these reasons for entering the profession. We expect that one or more of the three phrases above may resonate with you. In short, most teachers ultimately teach for humanistic reasons; we want to do some good. However, once in their school placements, many pre-service teachers get distracted and end up giving their energy to changing the classroom ethos or the school culture, both of which have likely already been long established and are quite resistant to change.

In your teacher education program, you probably have learned many progressive learning-teaching strategies (I use that word in an undifferentiated sense, not in a strict Dewey-ian sense). Equipped with this kind of teacher education, you might find it a bit shocking to arrive at a school or classroom that values some combination of direct instruction, worksheets, and complete silence. Type "movie teachers ditto's class" into YouTube for a funny, if macabre, illustration of what I am talking about here. Our natural inclination in such circumstances (and this is my own as well), is immediately to want to change the culture of that school or classroom. Pre-service teachers are assigned internships and placements in schools and classrooms because experiential learning has been long-recognized as essential for teacher education. That's a given. But because of this model, many pre-service teachers end up placements where they must adapt or conform to an environment and an philosophy of education which they find foreign or even regressive.

In this chapter, I will argue that you should spend your time in your placement classroom wisely and with somewhat scaled-back goals. By this I mean simply that you not set out to change the world—or even your school or classroom—in the few weeks that you will be in your placement. I will make that suggestion for two reasons. First, the school and classroom environment in your placement have already been operating and facilitating learning in certain ways for some time and are not likely going to adjust to your educational vision or approach in a few weeks. Second, if you pay attention—even in what you might consider to be difficult or regressive pedagogical circumstances—your time in your placement classroom can become a time of intense learning. My straightforward aims in recommending this double course of action is this:

I want you to become the competent, emerging professional educator school districts expect you to be upon graduation from your education program. And I don't want you to go crazy during your placement because those supervising your placement don't recognize the superiority of your pedagogical approach.

The angle of repose:
Schools and classrooms are what they are

In his novel, *Angle of Repose*, Wallace Stegner explores the long marriage of his protagonists, concluding that every married couple reach a kind of agreement or system of being together. They come to terms with each other. Indeed, one could argue that every person achieves a way of being or finding purpose in this world in one form or another. Stegner borrowed the concept of the *angle of repose* from geology. The idea is simple: over time, any pile of sand, gravel, or soil will respond to gravity, weather, shape, and surface friction by finding its angle of repose; the angle at which it will no longer drop further toward flatness. Large landscape boulders will barely move at all and a pile of sugar will spread across a flat kitchen counter very quickly. When we hear of tragedies involving excavation sites caving in and trapping city workers, or of a sandy cliff giving way and smothering children at a beach, we likely do not consider the geological concept of the angle of repose. Yet, those tragedies happen because this principle is always at work, proving the popular truth that gravity sucks. As I noted, weather, friction, and the shape of the material also influence the angle. You have likely already guessed the metaphorical conclusion I am moving toward here: classrooms and schools in which you carry out your practice-teaching have already found their angle of repose long before your arrival.

Married couples and mounds of material are not alone in finding their angle of repose. Government and university departments, schools, working groups, companies, classes, and teams achieve an angle of repose as well. Sociologists remind us that social groups must establish traditions for the simple reason that few of us could cope with the alternative: *anomie* (literally a situation without rules, "no law"). Out of psychological need, we establish formal and informal rules, and we accept that certain things always happen in certain ways. Back to my analogy, schools—headed by the principal—have traditions, practices, and ideals in place. As teachers, students, and administrative staff inhabit their schools, they conform to these traditions and practices. For decades, sociologists have studied conformity and deviance, noting how institutions socialize their members (and anthropologists study the same processes in whole cultures). Of course, not everyone in an institution or culture accepts the prescribed socialization. Both sociologists and anthropologists also study how groups attempt to bring back into line those members who deviate from the group norms (the original meaning of *deviant*).

Let me illustrate group norms from a school I worked in. In this school, the same teacher always moved adjournment of our monthly staff meeting. When I posed the question to my mentor teacher as to why this continuously happened, he quoted Tevé from *Fiddler on the Roof*—it was the tradition. Before I came as a professor to Mount Royal University, where all the authors of this

book met, I taught at a college that prided itself in its ability to operate by consensus. Yet ironically, one faculty member usually spoke when (he thought) we had achieved consensus in faculty meetings. When I asked how one person could so consistently possess such insight and not be seen simply as someone manipulating the group process, one colleague answered that the professor in question actually knew when the meeting had achieved consensus. Another told me that my discussion-ending colleague was simply passive-aggressive. Take your pick. The first reply I got is less like Tevé's in *Fiddler*, but I think it concealed the same idea; the second reply was closer to the truth. These meeting-ending and discussion-ending practices illustrate how groups of people achieve and accept an angle of repose.

You could analyze a school or classroom on dozens of dimensions and consistently discover the angle of repose, the way that a school, teacher, or classroom has, in effect, come to function. Consider these examples:

enquiry-based learning … teacher-centred instruction
varied learning strategies … same strategies every day
orderly classroom … chaotic classroom
noisier … quieter
hierarchical authority … shared authority
joy in learning … learning is a drag.

Among teachers themselves, you can see a similar range of postures:

volunteerism … I do nothing I'm not paid to do
vocational vitality … vocational resignation and cynicism
warm and relational … colder and remote
ongoing professional growth … professional stagnation.

These two sets of examples, one of classroom environments and one of teachers' postures toward their vocations, both illustrate the concept of the angle of repose. They illustrate that an angle of repose can represent excellence or mediocrity and engagement or disengagement. They illustrate that teachers have teaching philosophies and teaching styles and that they shape their classrooms accordingly. The examples I gave before I presented those brief lists both illustrate an angle of repose—a social norm—that, at least in my view, did not serve the best interests of the organizations in question. If school staff meetings or university faculty meetings ought to be venues for professional educators to discuss important ideas, then granting a cynical, late-career teacher the power to end discussion month by month whenever he wishes is the equivalent of voting, month by month, for institutional mediocrity. However, the sociologists remind us that such traditions continue for the most insane and sometimes the most human of reasons. In these two cases, the traditions represent a permitted misuse of power, a kind of politics of mediocrity.

Alternatively, the angle of repose can represent excellence. I know of a school principal who, at afternoon dismissal, stands in the main school hallway and greets 463 elementary

students—by name—as they leave her building. On a school visit, I witnessed this happy, afternoon parade. This principal frequently asked one of her students to greet an older sibling who used to attend that school, to enjoy the evening, or to remember to get their homework done that night. Furthermore, this same principal visited each classroom in that school every instructional day of the entire school year. Do I need to repeat that? … every classroom on every instructional day. This is but one illustration of how both warmth and high professionalism can saturate the routines and practices of a school, provided that the principal uses the authority of her office to establish those norms. Because of this leader and the environment she created, children wanted to be at their school. Teachers from the entire school district applied to work at this school. A school does not achieve that kind of excellence by accident. Excellence requires politics—the use of authority—in the same way that mediocrity requires it. In this case, it is a politics, not of mediocrity, but of excellence. The angle of repose in this building represented excellence. Landscape boulders, sugar, schools … they all have norms.

Schools like the one I just described are hard to come by. Even if you know of one and ask your program's placement coordinator to place you there, chances are you will not be placed there because placements are not entirely in his or her hands. Unfortunately, this is the reality of being a pre-service teacher. As several have mentioned in their chapters, you could be placed in a school where your teacher identity will be challenged and your views may not align with those of your mentor teacher. Finding yourself in that circumstance, you may find yourself wanting to change that school's culture, its angle of repose.

But changing a school culture requires years of experience and time. Even those you think might be best positioned to change it—principals—often complain that they couldn't budge certain obstacles. Let's grant that those principals know the history and politics of the buildings they lead and the systems they serve. Let's grant that they know the individual teaching philosophies of their entire staff. Let's even grant that they know the priorities of those who send children and young people to their schools every day. Armed with that kind of information, how could they not implement the necessary strategies to bring about cultural change? I will leave the answer to that question to the authors of your introductory anthropology or sociology textbooks, but I do invite you to start typing this string into a search bar: "culture eats …" That's as far as you will get before your helpful browser fills in the search with "…strategy for breakfast" or "…strategy for lunch." While you're online, why not go to an online bookseller and type in "changing school cultures." You will find dozens of titles for sale. My point is, you will waste your time if you try to change the culture of your placement school in the few weeks you have available there; culture is simply too powerful.

So, what about something on a more modest scale? What about your co-operating teacher's philosophy and practices? That's a slightly different matter, but I suggest you take the same approach to that possibility. Make it your goal to learn as much about teaching as you can and to do the best job you can do with the students in front of you, even within the restraints (real or imagined) placed on you by your mentor teacher. If your mentor teacher happens to see an

approach you take or a strategy you use and implements it later, excellent. You may never find out if they copied and implemented what they observed in your practice. That won't matter … because your goal during your placement is not to change your mentor teacher's practice or to rejuvenate his or her sense of the teaching vocation. That is simply not your job.

What to do instead

What do I recommend instead? Let me begin my answer to that question by noting just a few of the things you will need to know when you begin teaching in your own classroom (I hope you get that classroom the first school year after your finish your teaching degree). You will need to know how to manage these aspects of the school day and the school year:

- the arrival routine (coats, lunches, packs, boots/shoes)
- the recess and lunch routines
- the dismissal routine
- taking attendance
- phone calls with parents
- tracking anecdotal remarks on student progress so you don't have to stay up till 3:00 a.m. when report cards are due
- tracking formal grades on student work
- tracking school materials on loan to students (such as textbooks)
- classroom first-aid kit … is it sufficient, accessible?
- tracking which of your students have Epipens? Where are they?
- email addresses so your work email goes one place and your personal email goes another place
- your Facebook/ Instagram account … did you create an account with a creative name for yourself that your students cannot guess?
- long-range course design and instructional planning
- day-to-day instructional planning
- standing substitute teacher plans
- "Plan B" instructional plans for when things don't go to plan and you and your students need to use time effectively
- storage of Individual Education Plans.

Insert about a dozen etceteras after that list. What I have catalogued here is but a slice of what you need to know and need to have in place to run a classroom. But there's more. Notice two major components missing from my list. First, you need to hone your pedagogical skills; that is the central purpose of your placement. These are the weeks to expand your knowledge of learning-teaching strategies into a genuine repertoire, to find out what works and to fine-tune those strategies of your own that you've already found to be effective. Second, this is the best time to clarify your own

sense of calling to teach. In her chapter, Lexi speaks about clarifying your vocation of teaching and finding your identity in the mix of this profession. As you reflect on the surprises, joys and sorrows of these weeks, you can clarify your sense of vocation. Is this where I belong? Do I fit? These tasks are more important than changing school culture.

Here's my point about what to focus on in a school placement. Whether you're there for a half day a week or for a whole semester, you have an opportunity to watch and learn from teachers who have already figured out classroom management and who have mastered the routines and systems needed to manage classroom materials and records. Maybe your co-operating teacher hasn't mastered all those parts; you can learn from negative examples too. If you notice that primary students, for example, don't seem to know what to do with their jackets upon arrival, make a note to yourself … what routine do you think would work there. You have to be the one who determines the wisdom of suggesting to your mentor teacher that this or that approach might be worth trying. That is your call, but make the note to yourself for your own future practice whether or not you have an opportunity to try a different approach in your placement classroom. When you get your own classroom, you can implement the arrival routine you think will work best. Although I guarantee you will have to tinker, note where this started; you observed a great system or process—or a flawed system or process—in your co-operating teacher's repertoire and you acted on it, a delayed action for sure, but you took it.

On the other hand, you may be placed in a classroom where what Csikszentmihalyi calls *flow* happens, even in the mundane housekeeping routines. The routine of third graders learning to hang up their coats is an ordinary venue to think about flow in a classroom. To expediate this function, your mentor teacher introduced a routine early in the school year. Like most routines, the ritual of hanging up the coats requires periodic reinforcement. For the sake of argument, let's put you in this room months into the school year; the children seem to go through this daily step effortlessly. A smooth-running routine like this is an opportunity to ask your co-operating teacher about the steps involved in building such a routine. Ask questions such as, "How did the first days of coat-wearing weather go?" "What instructions did you give?" "Where the instructions oral or written?" "What were some of the bumps?" Again, take notes during such discussions; your teaching day is coming. In your education program, you have worked on assessment, differentiation, the inclusive classroom, the big idea in lesson planning, and so on. Obviously, you need to know these fundamentals. Yet, the arrival routines, knowing the Epipen locations, tracking anecdotal comments so report-card writing becomes a celebration of progress instead of a late-night work of fiction; these things you must learn and build during your placements. As Jenna makes clear in her chapter (ch. 2), these routines are no small deal.

You already know how this chapter is going to end. The school you work in this semester already has found its angle of repose. Unless it opened as a new school the day before you arrived, its culture is already thoroughly in place. Its culture will not only eat strategy for lunch, it will eat you too if you aren't careful. So, don't be naïve and don't go there planning to change anything except maybe your students' reading levels, their understanding of mathematics, their ability to be

transported into the secondary worlds created by fiction authors, their skill at crafting inquiry questions that will lead to deep learning, their ability to reflect and to predict, their skill in using KWL sheets effectively, their meta-cognitive skills, and their ability to wonder at all the amazing things in the world they live in. Focus on those things instead of school or classroom culture and you will be a happier and more fulfilled student teacher. Furthermore, your students will be more exceptional people the day they leave you than they were the day they arrived. And that would be a good thing.