

## Maximizing a Student Teacher's Learning

In this helpful *Kappan* article, Douglas Larkin (Montclair State University, NJ) has these suggestions for mentoring student teachers, based on seven years of working with high-school science teachers:

- *Don't just leave them alone.* “During my research,” says Larkin, “I was surprised by how many cooperating teachers simply disappeared, thinking that they were doing their student teachers a favor.” Big mistake. Student teachers often enter the classroom with inchoate ideas about how to teach based on their own experience as K-12 and university students. Student teaching is the ideal time for them to get detailed feedback and suggestions from their mentor teachers – one or two pointers each lesson. For most student teachers, support is much more important than autonomy.

- *Give real-time insights on your own teaching.* Larkin likens this to the director's commentary track on a movie DVD, providing a window into the mentor teacher's decision-making process as he or she teaches.

- *Work with your student teacher to find creative outlets.* Many novice teachers want to try innovative, creative lessons and run into the brick wall of the district's required curriculum. Mentor teachers should allow their student teachers some flexibility while helping them to understand that a curriculum does not teach itself.

- *Model how to teach in a constructivist manner.* “Student teachers need to grasp that student ideas are the raw material of our work as teachers,” says Larkin. Informal classroom assessments and real-world connections are the best way to surface those ideas (and misconceptions) and build student understanding from the ground up – rather than by having students copy notes off the board.

- *Share topic-specific teaching knowledge.* For example, the mentor teacher may know twelve ways to teach the concept of density, while a student teacher knows one or two. Mentors should expand novices' knowledge base as well as their skill using lab equipment.

- *Model how to learn new content.* Student teachers need help building the depth and flexibility of their subject-area knowledge. “Be up front with them about your own learning,” says Larkin, “and help them connect what they already know to the big ideas of their discipline.”  
from this and how will you know that they know it?”

- *Plan together.* Beginning science teachers were usually high-achievers themselves and often forget what it's like not to know something simple – for example, Newton's laws, the periodic table, or basic cell structure. They also tend to plan activities rather than experiences that will build deeper understanding. It's therefore essential for mentor teachers to plan curriculum units and lessons with their student teachers, always asking, "What do you want students to learn from this and how will you know that they know it?"

- *Make time to talk.* In addition to a daily check-in, student teachers need longer talks that address the big picture, get beyond the immediate challenges of classroom management, and get into issues that may arise around professionalism and demeanor.

- *Connect student teachers to the larger political world of the school.* This might include attending a school board meeting, talking to the union representative, understanding the teacher-evaluation system, attending a child study meeting, learning legal requirements, looking at test data, and seeing teaching in the larger ecology of education and society.

- *Treat student teaching as a learning opportunity, not a performance.* "There is nothing more natural than saying, 'That lesson went well,' to a student teacher after a lesson," says Larkin, "but such language can be counterproductive in the longer-term goals of improving practice and student learning because it feeds the impression that each lesson is to be judged. Begin instead with the assumption that in each lesson there will be parts that are good and other parts that can be improved."

"10 Things to Know About Mentoring Student Teachers" by Douglas Larkin in *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2013 (Vol. 94, #7, p. 38-43), [www.kappanmagazine.com](http://www.kappanmagazine.com); Larkin can be reached at [larkind@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:larkind@mail.montclair.edu).