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academic discipline. Their work in the discipline is as rigorous as every other major in that field. They learn the same analytic and other research skills. Our teaching graduates, in other words, will have expertise in their fields.

In addition, our graduates will also have intensified study of the teaching and learning processes. The new research on how people acquire knowledge will be at the center of their program.

Two exciting conclusions from the research on learning in the last century are becoming the basis for understanding the learning process. The first derives from studies on human thinking. Psychologists and philosophers have come together around the idea that knowledge is actively created in the mind of the thinker. There is no simple fact that can be automatically memorized; rather, every bit of information is transformed by the thinker in the very act of perceiving, memorizing, and recalling it. Teachers versed in these processes will better understand what a student needs to succeed in a complex world. Equally important, they can better diagnose which aspects of the process are not working for children who are not learning appropriately.

It is precisely this deeper understanding of human cognition that has been revolutionizing teaching methods. A simple presentation of information is unlikely to engage students. Instead of resorting to grades as a class ranking tool, today’s teachers use it to diagnose student development and adjust instruction appropriately.

The second breakthrough educational idea from the last century is that people construct knowledge very differently at various stages in life. A first-grader is not an immature, incompetent fifth-grader but rather someone who constructs the world in a totally different way. The same information presented to both students will lead to vastly different understandings because each child’s mindset is so differenty organized. In psychology, this is called developmental theory.

New teachers are learning to create developmentally appropriate lessons that help students construct more complex knowledge at the stage they understand. As important, they are learning to use assessment techniques to identify where along the path of developmental progress each student is and learning. Our new programs have been designed to develop graduates who apply this research base to analyze problems in their teaching practice. Accordingly, their culminating experience involves a classroom action research project. Such scholars can devise teaching solutions that allow many more students to succeed than was possible under the old approaches.

Systems Thinking
A second revolution shaping the education world is one that has been influencing thinking in many other sectors of society. Whether in business or science or sports or government, problems are increasingly conceptualized and addressed as systems. It is rarely enough to consider a problem in isolation; rather, it is typically seen as a piece in a system of interdependent factors. Low-quality water is the result of an ecosystem. Business products are developed in a system of finance and marketing as well as production. Likewise, teachers at all levels are beginning to understand that learning activities are developed within a system of teaching initiatives, often described as a learning community.

In addition to teaching about learning communities, we have revised our programs so they apply systems thinking. This is most obvious in our approach to linking courses together. In several of our programs, for instance, students will take course work in mathematics and science content at the same time as they receive lessons in mathematics and science teaching methods. Additionally, they will have field experiences where they observe and assist mathematics and science teachers. This coordinated cluster of instruction encourages students to see the connections between subject matter content, pedagogical theory, and field applications.

We have also revised the student teaching experience so that it, too, provides an integrated cluster of experiences. In seminars during their practice teaching semester, students reflect on the pragmatic dilemmas of their initial experiences. We also challenge them to examine the deeper philosophical choices behind their classroom decisions. Their action research project studies the impact their personal choices have on the lives of the children. In short, by approaching this semester as a system of related learning activities, students will be guided in the powerful work of bringing their beliefs and actions together using the habits of a scholarly mind.

The rich organization of semesters is, in turn, framed by an overall curriculum designed around the New Jersey Professional Teaching Standards. This set of 10 standards articulates over a hundred skills, dispositions, and knowledge requirements for effective teaching. While teacher certification once depended on successful completion of an approved course sequence, today it is determined by how well teacher candidates meet these standards. An effective teacher preparation program must develop students who will do so.

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The School of Education’s Professional Development Schools Network (PSDN) has become one of our most successful initiatives. Our PSDN office coordinates common professional development activities for 18 nearby school districts, bringing in speakers, conducting faculty workshops, and sponsoring a summer academy that attracts over 200 teachers. Together, we work on projects and grants. The network creates a rich exchange of ideas between public schools and connects our programs to partners across the region. This working collaboration provides frequent opportunities for our faculty and students to explore the union of theory and practice.

Another example of the potential of collaboration is emerging from our unique, five-year Deaf and Hard of Hearing program. Recently we became the home for the NJ Deaf Blind project. We also established a partnership with a private clinic, Speech and Hearing Associates, and plan to conduct child study teams for children diagnosed with hearing disabilities. An exciting round of discussions with the state’s Marie Katzenbach School for the Deaf has identified a variety of common projects for our teachers and students. Additionally, the program has established close ties with the cochlear implant team at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

These affiliations, combined with TCNJ’s Center for Assistive Technology and Inclusive Education Studies (see page 4), connect our faculty and students with leading practitioners. The challenges of educating children with hearing loss will not remain a textbook exercise at TCNJ. It will come to life because of these cutting-edge collaborations.

Community

The worth of an education is measured in the value it brings to the community. The real value of the School of Education’s learning community will be judged by how well we prepare this new generation of teachers and how much they enhance the schools and the neighborhoods they serve.

Of course, we are proud of TCNJ’s reputation for creating a welcoming intellectual community for our students. Inviting students into the community of learners in our profession is a vital step to encouraging them to join us in bringing scholarly vision to the schools. Our collaborations are able to draw them even more closely into the community of scholars in the world of practice.

Our programs also offer plenty of opportunities for our students to explore a school’s culture. Where previously students visited schools to focus on teaching methods, they are now expected to ask questions about the culture of that school and the teachers’ role in it. Field experiences aim to locate school practice within an understanding of the way the local learning communities have been constructed.

TCNJ students also are being asked to go beyond the school to the surrounding communities in the school neighborhood. We challenge them to study the interaction between lessons and the lives of the children. This study is not simply one of identifying interesting ethnic traits. It seeks a deeper understanding of how multiple culture groups struggle to define the public space of society. Our programs are especially committed to recognizing the nature of injustice that historically has been woven into the status quo and defining the role educators can play in promoting social justice. Such themes are not left to lofty lectures. Each of the field experiences offers students assignments that probe the social connections between teachers and those who are taught.

In the end, this more demanding role of being a member of a community is precisely where John Dewey located education in a democratic society over 100 years ago.

Conclusion

The critiques and challenges facing today’s educators are as demanding as at any point in American educational history. The weakness of the critics’ arguments, however, is their assumption that nothing will ever change. Here at TCNJ, we are convinced that significant revisions in our own learning communities can help meet these concerns. We cannot predict that our research-based, system thinking grounded in collaborative, learning communities will resolve all these issues. However, we do believe they offer the sort of educational leadership the state has come to expect of TCNJ. In the spirit of some of those first students, we have “confident hope” that, as we prepare to celebrate our sesquicentennial, we are ready to meet the demands of our generation just as our forebears met theirs.

Terence O’Connor was named dean of the School of Education in 2002, after 16 years as a professor and administrator at Indiana State University.