

Practicum and teacher education: *Wrapped around your finger*<sup>1</sup>

Allan MacKinnon  
*Simon Fraser University*

In the popular song *Wrapped around your finger* by the eighties rock group *The Police*, Gordon Sumner (aka Sting) sings about the master and apprentice relationship. The lyrics of his song provide a heuristic for my commentary in this issue of *Studying Teacher Education*, which is devoted to researching the experience of practicum. I interpret this song with the practicum of teacher education in mind, as the song evokes particular insights about student teaching that encapsulate and provide an entry into the research featured in this special issue. Sting is cited as having characterized his composition as, “a spiteful song about turning the tables on someone who had been in charge ... vaguely alchemical and probably about a friend of mine, a professional psychic and my tutor in tarot, with bits of Doctor Faustus and ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’ thrown into the pot for good measure.”<sup>2</sup>

*Wrapped around your finger* provides a literary device to analyze general features of practicum as a site of learning, as well as subtleties inherent in relationships between teacher candidates and their mentor teachers. I see potential for the song to *speak back* to readers and authors of these articles, as it not only helps to frame their insights about practicum, it help us see the unique qualities of their research and practice as teacher educators. The papers emanate from a multi-year research project involving four Canadian universities that investigated the potential of transformative interventions by associate teachers and university supervisors during practicum.<sup>3</sup> Central to this research was the identification of participants’ assumptions and beliefs about their learning and their abilities to express that learning through more effective practices. The papers span the four teacher education programs involved in the study: a one-year program in British Columbia, a one-year program in Ontario, and two four-year programs in Québec—one English, one French.

I think of the song as a worthy example of self-study in its own right, wondering if the lyrics may have been partially inspired by Sumner’s own experience as a teacher candidate in practicum during an earlier time in his life when he attended Northern Counties College of Education (now Northumbria University). But I do not put words into Sting’s mouth. Instead I put his words into my mouth—the song helps me articulate what I know of practicum in gathering my thoughts and commentary about these articles.

One set of reasons for choosing this approach has to do with how these articles cut through linear models and superficial thinking about practicum as a site where things learned in the lecture hall can simply be *applied* to the practice of teaching. These researchers grapple with

---

<sup>1</sup> Sumner, G.M. (1983). *Wrapped around your finger* [Recorded by The Police]. On *Synchronicity* (album). London: A&M Records.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wrapped\\_Around\\_Your\\_Finger#cite\\_ref-songfacts\\_3-0](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wrapped_Around_Your_Finger#cite_ref-songfacts_3-0)

<sup>3</sup> This research project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

perennial issues associated with learning in a practice environment where teacher candidates can experience vulnerability and uncertainty, where they can be subject to an unequal distribution of power from many sides, and where they may feel caught between the schools that support their practicums and the universities where most of their courses and seminars are held. It is deceptively easy to parse these two apparent solitudes into the ‘theory of the universities’ and the ‘practice of the schools’ and we probably create or substantiate much more than the *impression* of these two solitudes unwittingly in our discourse and actions, leaving it to teacher candidates to construct their own bridges between the two as a matter of sheer survival. Here are five teacher educators who say, “No, this is not good enough.” And by virtue of the fact that they take on the task of creating something they believe is better, they also create an uphill climb for themselves in the academy, and to that end just like their teacher candidates they are left to construct their own bridges between the two apparent solitudes of research and practice, albeit now at a different and arguably more intensified level.

In setting the stage for *Wrapped around your finger*, we will need to imagine a place that is unfamiliar to teacher candidates and teacher educators alike. Practicum is like a shrine, a pagoda, or a dojo when we first enter. It’s beyond mysterious; it is luring and almost captivating. We do not know what to expect there, but it lures us deeper and deeper as though we were in a dream. The song begins with soft music playing in a minor key with Eastern tones and sustained echoing notes that only add to the contemplative, mystic atmosphere. The video for the song portrays Sting, dressed in a Gee, surrounded by dozens of candles marking out pathways that seem to lead nowhere. Here we are now, looking into the experience of practicum with a group of Canadian scholars who know the place well. They have been here for a good portion of their careers as teacher educators and researchers. There is substantial collective understanding and concern at their hand and together they have developed the capacity to *hear* the teacher candidate in a special way.

Listen to the song, imagining that it is the teacher candidate speaking:

*You consider me the young apprentice  
Caught between the Scylla and Charibdes  
Hypnotized by you if I should linger  
Staring at the ring around your finger*

In this first verse we are introduced to the teacher candidate as a person who is well aware of being observed and of the associated perceptions that are forming among those who are watching. Practicum is a difficult and unfamiliar place where, metaphorically, the waters can be treacherous—where one might either crash into the rocks of the legendary *Scylla* on the one side in navigating between Sicily and the Italian mainland, or be pulled into a whirlpool of the *Charibdes* on the other side of the narrow passageway of the *Straight of Messina*. This topography is reminiscent of Schön’s (1983, 1987) metaphor of *the rocky high ground*, apt in representing the positivistic leanings of university-based research and the associated technical-rational approaches taken up in the schools of the professions, lying hidden in our assumptions and expectations about teacher education curriculum. Equally apt is Schön’s depiction of the

*swampy lowlands of practice* that defy the typical textbook representations of knowledge that teacher candidates often carry as novice practitioners and where there is no firm, or familiar footing. There are similarities here between the two sets of images, representing the ‘hazards’ of practicum. The ring around the finger is worn by the mentor teacher and might be seen to represent the goal in mind, which is often seen by teacher candidates especially during the initial weeks as a matter of *surviving* the practicum.

Practicum of teacher education can be uncertain and difficult and the risks are high—unlike what Schön (1983) described as the somewhat benign *virtual world* of the sketchpad used by master architect Quist with his apprentice Petra to explore ideas and test various hypothetical designs. The practicum in teacher education is a place where problematic and confusing situations are bound to challenge teacher candidates, even in successful situations. A partial reason for this is that the problems encountered in practice *don’t come as givens*, as Schön would say, and they may not easily fit into textbook categories; there is often a problem in *finding* the problem—it must be constructed out of the materials of the problematic situation. This is a different kind of skill and artistry being asked of teacher candidates, not at all like the familiar skills required for navigating and staying afloat of class schedules, course readings, seminar discussions, and exams on campus. And so teacher candidates need freedom with support, as we’ll see below. They need freedom to get to know their pupils in ways that are genuine, to try their hand at designing lessons that express their ideals at this time in their development. They need this alongside steady support from a seasoned practitioner to assist them by providing resources, suggestions for lessons, and frequent feedback based on observed lessons.

Developing the metaphor, here between the Scylla and Charibdes of practicum is where we find our authors of this special issue; they are here because they seek ways to bridge the practicum experience with the coursework of teacher education. They present research conducted at the intersection of practicum and the courses in their institution, which they have refined in ways intended to support learning from experience. There is a common thread and a variety to their approaches, in practice and research, which results in an impressive breadth and depth of pedagogical, curricular, and research strategies for supporting teacher candidates’ learning from experience.

I see this first theme about the epistemology of practice (Schön, 1983) in the article by David Dillon, *Straddling teacher candidates’ two worlds to link practice and theory: A self-study of successful and unsuccessful efforts*. David asks how teacher educators might best work with teacher candidates to complement and enhance their extended practical experience in schools and classrooms. He discusses an alternate course/pedagogy he developed at McGill University over the years during students’ extended practicum, guided in part by Korthagen’s (2001) *realistic teacher education*, to build from candidates’ teaching experience in a way that focuses on the questions, issues, and challenges they experience in practice. His pedagogy for these courses and seminars stems from an understanding of the central role of experience in schools and classrooms as *socio-constructivist* and *self-reflective*, as he helps teacher candidates to develop and articulate their own personal and practical wisdom. He discusses the complexity

of integrating the coursework of teacher education programs with candidates' learning in practicum and their expectations for transmission teaching on the one hand, and the traditional structure and composition of the campus based components of teacher education programs that fall short of attending to students' learning in practicum, on the other. He proposes a pedagogy for courses and seminars that complements the central role of experience in school classrooms, one that best suits smaller cohorts with integrated teams of instructors and supervisors, cultivating a more holistic approach to knowing for teacher candidates. David refers to this as a practice-and-theory approach to teacher education. I identify with Dillon when I consider my own efforts to develop what I believe have been innovative programs that link formal aspects of teacher education with learning from experience in school settings (MacKinnon, 1996; MacKinnon, Clarke, & Erickson, 2013). As innovative as it is, this kind of work can easily remain invisible in the university setting. David's article, and the others too, help me to stand firmly and tall in my own commitments as a teacher educator—these researchers are kindred spirits. I lament the loss of the innovative program and thinking at McGill and applaud David and his efforts in generating it.

The passage between the Scylla and Charibdis is narrow and hazardous. There, in the passageway, is the hypnotizing image of the mentor teacher—all encompassing, all consuming. David Dillon's article also highlights how the influence of the mentor teacher can be overpowering, even overshadowing, in the mindset of teacher candidates.

*I have only come here seeking knowledge  
Things they would not teach me of in college  
I can see the destiny you sold  
Turning to a shining band of gold*

*I'll be wrapped around your finger*

In practicum, teacher candidates may hope to apply the things they have learned on campus and mentor teachers and university supervisors are usually seen as their coaches or guides. This kind of learning is different from the more distilled form of knowledge that can be conveyed in a lecture hall. It may not be apparent to teacher candidates at this time how the knowledge received from the university might relate to practice when they are trying to stay afloat. What they often reach out for is a kind of practical lifesaver (what can I do on Monday morning?) to help navigate these waters, and the mentor teacher is usually seen as the person who can most readily assist. The *destiny you sold* is how mentor teachers can model good teaching and describe what they advocate in a situated, embodied manner. The *shining band of gold* represents a time when teacher candidates can emulate their mentors' modeling, first through imitation and later with understanding that has been felt in their own practice. The ring around the finger (shining band of gold) has now grown to a symbol of common goals and shared ethical commitments, not unlike the ring worn by professional engineers. At this point in the practicum, the teacher candidate is totally dependent on the mentor teacher and the practical ideals this person represents.

As many readers will know, Tom Russell has held a longstanding interest in connecting learning in practicum to campus-based coursework of teacher education programs. He has taken great measures to do this work at Queen's University in Kingston where he has created courses, seminars and, like David Dillon, entire programs that coincide or interweave with practicum. Having extended and embellished his role as a practicum supervisor with extra meetings and seminars during practicum terms, Tom works with teacher candidates in helping them learn from their experiences in the practicum. Even in situations where his course coexists alongside the practicum, Tom will want to get to know the teacher candidates months before the course begins. He has a deep connection to learning from experience and this is expressed in his practice and research. In his present article, *Improving the quality of practicum learning: Self-study of a faculty member's role in practicum supervision*, Tom reports on his self-study during school visitations as a faculty supervisor during practicum. These visitations are generally quite extensive in that he usually watches an entire lesson during a school visitation (rather than a portion of a lesson), followed by a lengthy, supportive discussion designed to help the teacher candidate learn from the experience of teaching. Tom provides an account of one formal interaction when he broke this pattern and left the classroom in the middle of a class observation for a twenty-minute period to speak with the mentoring teacher—a move he later regretted when he realized how the resulting (perfunctory) feedback deflated the teacher candidate's confidence. The account powerfully reminds us all of the vulnerability teacher candidates experience during practicum and their need for the faculty supervisor to provide *fair and supportive, direct observational feedback*, which may in the end contravene the supervisor's attempts to cultivate teacher candidates' critical, self-monitoring habits of reflection during practicum. Tom concludes that, "the tension between the traditional epistemology of the university and the epistemology of learning from practicum experience seems to come to the forefront in every teacher education program and is a particularly significant issue for the faculty supervisor."

*Mephistopheles is not your name  
I know what you're up to just the same  
I will listen hard to your tuition  
You will see it come to its fruition*

*I'll be wrapped around your finger*

The teacher candidate understands that the mentor teacher and faculty supervisor will not bring harm, and anticipates his or her intentions, intuitively knowing what lessons are being designed. Trust is essential to the relationship in order for the teacher candidate to take more ownership and initiative in the practicum.

In *Learning to learn about the practicum: A self-study of learning to support student learning in the field*, Lynn Thomas focuses on teacher candidates' learning in practicum as a foundation for faculty and practicum supervisors, and her work in particular as Practicum Coordinator at Université de Sherbrooke, to proceed pedagogically in ways that complement practicum experiences. Lynn's self-study includes an examination of her own understanding of teaching

and learning and her development as a teacher and teacher educator. Thus, Lynn's own learning as a teacher educator and researcher can be seen to run parallel to her teacher education candidates' learning in practicum. In fact, this intriguing overlay of learning from experience can be found in all of the articles included in this special issue, where we can see a *hall of mirrors* (Schön, 1987) between the learning of the researchers as teacher educators and that of their teacher candidates' learning in practicum. I appreciate and admire Lynn for her commitments and the honest and open way she tells her research story. I believe teacher educators need to be open and sensitive to the practical demands of teacher candidates as they navigate the practicum. Lynn's article is exemplary and provides a model account of a teacher educator as learner. She uses this research to unpack her assumptions about what we usually think *ought* to occur in practicum, on the part of the teacher candidate, the mentor teacher, the faculty supervisor, the methods course, and so on, revealing a veil of deception and superficial understanding that she felt had limited her understanding and practice in the past. The social and collegial network of the research group provides a safe place for this kind of interrogation, and once again we can observe parallelisms between how the researchers pay attention to the *backtalk* (Schön, 1983) of their experience, establishing a foundation for their learning, and the nature and processes involved in teacher candidates' learning in practicum.

*Devil on the deep blue sea behind me  
Vanish in the air you'll never find me  
I will turn your face to alabaster  
Then you'll find your servant is your master*

*You'll be wrapped around my finger*

Now the 'tables have turned.' The teacher candidate is beyond the influence and power of the mentor teacher now; practicum is finished and the Scylla and Charibdes are a memory. There are aspects of teaching practice that will live on in the work of this young teacher that, wittingly or not and for better or worse, will be traceable to the mentor teacher in practicum. There are also elements of what was modeled in practicum that have been critiqued and consciously discarded. The teacher is more critical, more aware, more independent and autonomous, having had the time and opportunity to reflect upon and reframe practicum experiences.

Shawn Bullock draws from his experience teaching a science teaching methodology course at Simon Fraser University that is uniquely placed at a time of the program when some of his teacher education candidates have completed practicum, while others have yet to take their practicum. In either case, students are not enrolled in practicum during the semester of Shawn's course. The fact that some students have completed practicum while others have not affords a rich pedagogical opportunity in its own right, and the fact that Shawn's course occurs either just before, or just after practicum provides a research site that 'book-ends' those of the other members of the research group. In his article, *Understanding candidates' learning relationships with their cooperating teachers: A call to reframe my pedagogy*, Shawn offers a group of metaphors to characterize his insights and pedagogical approach. The first of these, *action-at-a-distance*, is a concept in physics used to explain phenomena such as charge by

induction, where one thing (a molecule) influences another without physical contact. Shawn borrows this concept to characterize the curricular relationship and positioning between his methods course and the teacher candidates' practicum, given the fact that they occur in different semesters and at a distance from the practicum site (i.e., on campus). Like David Dillon, Shawn has revealing evidence of the influence of teacher candidates' relationships with their mentor (cooperating) teachers in practicum. One of the action-at-a-distance effects Shawn speaks to is *freedom with foundation* (mentioned above) and another is identified as *power and performance*. These metaphors represent insights about the hopes the teaching candidates hold for their practicum. They are hopeful they will have the freedom to experiment in their practice, with the foundational support of frequent and regular direct observational feedback from their mentor teachers, delivered alongside suggestions for practical activities and resources that can be used in lessons. The action-at-a-distance of power and performance speaks to issues of trust and validation that are so aptly revealed in the last verse of Sting's lyrics.

What is unique about Shawn's research is that he revisits his own personal journal kept during teacher education and examines his documented experience as a teacher candidate in practicum. He does this in a way that further explores the metaphors he offers to characterize some of the underlying dynamics of practicum that rise to the surface for teacher candidates. This results in a rare reflexivity between the researcher's own experience and the object of his inquiry that generates insights, in this case not only about supporting teacher candidates as they prepare for, move through, or later unpack their learning in practicum, but also about how we construct ourselves over time and particularly how memories of earlier life can (and often do) lean one way or another. This aspect of Shawn's article is like a double hall-of-mirrors, especially since the teacher education program Shawn took at Queen's University was one of the alternative programs Tom Russell and his colleagues created to address the very issues we find in this volume.

Now the song is over, and we have a sense of teacher candidates' learning in practicum that leads to improvement of practice over time. The *turn of the tables* that occurs in the last verse of the song shows us how practicum also involves a critique of current practice and an eventual (lifelong) transcendence to something better.

I've drawn from the song in a way that highlights insights and qualities of the research emanating from the collaboration of these authors and their individual efforts to create more effective teacher education programs by focusing on integrating learning from experience in practicum. There are a number of things that remain to be said and there is a need to *step back* in order to see the holistic qualities and significance of these ideas and research insights. Andrea Martin's article, *In search of ways to improve practicum learning: Self-study of the teacher educator/research as responsive listener*, provides a rich justification for this whole approach to an ethic in teacher education that addresses the integration of learning in practicum, and the associated research of these practices through self-study. This justification includes grounding the work in an ethic of care, an understanding of the *relational essence* of teaching and learning at all levels, and an appeal to teacher educators to listen carefully to

teacher candidates, to be open to hearing their voices in new and liberating ways (for the sake of both teacher candidates and teacher educator/researchers), and for us all to be true to ourselves so that we can see our own learning in similar and reciprocal ways to our teacher candidates. Andrea provides a rich and comprehensive review of teacher education research over recent decades. One of the highlights of her article is her acknowledgement of the *mystery of reframing*, as discussed by Munby (1989) when many of us were immersed in interpreting Schön's idea of reflection-in-action. This reminded me of the innovative thinking and development that came out of Queen's University *back in the day* when Schön was first presenting his ideas about reflective practice. Andrea's article is true to this heritage as she elucidates the insights emanating from her self-study; it provides a comprehensive justification and philosophical foundation for *why* all of this attention to the practicum matters.

### Wrapping up

This collection of articles offers generative insights about ways of understanding and supporting teacher candidates in practicum. The combined voices and collective wisdom and ethics of the authors make a bold and courageous contribution to teacher education research. Their learning through self-study mirrors the learning they are researching in practicum, and the resulting reciprocity and respect they have for teacher candidates is illuminated. I thank them all for the opportunity to engage in their work; it has been a privilege and an honor to offer this commentary.

*Wrapped around your finger* is a song that is telling of the experience of practicum. I have used the lyrics metaphorically to comment about the relationship between teacher candidates and their mentor teachers, the epistemological terrain and the risks associated with the practicum as a site of learning, and the foundation and direction provided by practicum for future practice.

### References

Korthagen, F. (2001). *Linking practice and theory: The pedagogy of realistic teacher education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

MacKinnon, A. (1996). Learning to teach at the elbows: The Tao of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 12 (6), 653–664.

MacKinnon, A., Clarke, A., & Erickson, G. (2013). What we owe to Donald Schön: Three educators in conversation. *Phronesis*, 2 (1), 89–99. <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015642ar>

Munby, H. (1989). Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. *Current Issues in Education*, 9, 31-42.

Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think-in-action*. New York: Basic Books.

Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design in the schools of the professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sumner, G. (1983). Wrapped around your finger (Recorded by The Police). On *Synchronicity* (album). London: A&M Records.