The Expertise in Urban Teaching Project: Interview instruments, pilot study, and other materials

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Original Recruitment Letter and Interview Instrument

For the Expertise in Urban Teaching Project

Charles Vanover
Dear Chicago Teacher,
Thank you for agreeing to consider participating in the Knowledge of Practice. Your participation is, of course, completely voluntary and confidential.

The stories you provide in your interviews will help me understand the personal, practical knowledge teachers draw on to make the everyday decisions they use to serve their students. Teaching in the Chicago Public Schools is highly skilled work and the interviews are designed to compare the reflections and plans of beginning and experienced teachers. Attached to this letter are the following documents:

- the interview instrument that contains most of the questions we will ask during the four interviews that compromise data collection for the study,
- a copy of the informed consent form that we will ask you to complete before each interview,
- and a brief list of questions that will help me learn more about you and help me choose the final sample.

Please look them over, and if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call or write.

I am looking for teachers who are willing to be enthusiastic participants in the study. In order to allow you to make an informed decision to participate, I have written a detailed description of The Knowledge of Practice.

Sample
My goal is to recruit between 4 and 8 beginning and expert teachers for a total of between 8 and 16 Chicago Teachers. I define expert teachers as educators who have:

- National Board of Professional Teaching Standards Certification in the grade level they are teaching
- At least 7, and preferably 10 or more, years of teaching experience in the Chicago Public Schools or similar urban system.

I define beginning teachers as educators who have:

- No more than two years of teaching experience in any school system, anywhere.

If more teachers agree to be part of the study than I have the capacity to interview, contributors will be selected according to the following criteria:

- Teachers in high-poverty schools will have preference over teachers who serve less at risk-populations.
- Beginning teachers who work in the same schools and/or grade levels as expert teachers will have preference over beginners who do not work in those schools or classrooms.
- The sample will be as balanced as possible, thus I would like to interview equal numbers of white and minority teachers.
The teacher information sheet that is attached to this letter contains a list of questions that I will use to select the final group.

**Interview Style and Confidentiality**

My interviews have been designed to allow you to talk about your teaching in your own way and in your own voice. Instead of asking you a long list of questions about your teaching, you will be asked to answer a few general questions and then expand on your answers during the interviews. In order to help you to prepare for your interviews, you will be asked to complete a homework assignment before each interview session. In the first interview, for instance, you will be asked to write a brief story—not a literary masterpiece(!)—about how your teaching made a difference to a particular student or group of students during the 2003-2004 school year.

All interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to have an accurate record of what you say. As always, participation is completely voluntary. You will have the right to refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time.

In order to allow you to speak freely, I will take the following steps to assure your confidentiality. Your name, the name of your school, its location, and the names of your students as well as other people you mention in your interviews will never be made public. You, your school and the people you discuss will be assigned pseudonyms that will be entered directly into the transcripts of your interviews. These pseudonyms will be used in all oral and written discussions of the study and will always be used in any public discussion of the research project. You will receive a paper or electronic copy of each of your interviews for your records. The tapes from you session will be kept in a secure location for the duration of the study, and will not be played publicly.

**Content of interviews**

*The Knowledge of Practice* is a study of teachers’ working knowledge. The questions in my interviews are designed to surface the sense one’s teaching and the sense of one’s classroom that teachers draw on to make the everyday decisions that structure their work with children. The first two interviews will ask you to reflect on your teaching by telling stories about the 2003-2004 school year. The first interview will ask you to tell stories about how your teaching made a difference in your students’ lives. The second will focus on your language arts’ practice. You will be asked to prepare for your interviews by writing a brief story about a student or group of students that you were able to reach in the first interview, and to write a brief story about a language arts unit that you were proud in the second interview. The interview guides for these interviews and homework assignments are attached to this document.

In the final two interviews you will be asked to plan for the upcoming school year. In order to prepare for that interview, you will be given a disposable camera and will be asked to create a classroom travelogue by taking pictures of your classroom. These pictures will become part of the documentation for the study, but will not be shown publicly. They are prompts to help you tell your stories. In the last interview, you will be asked to plan for the upcoming school year. Because that interview will be held close to the beginning of school, there is no homework assignment, instead I’ll ask you to bring in your lesson plan book and/or calendar.

**Scheduling**

I would like to schedule 4 interviews with you during the summer of 2004. The pilot interviews for the study lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, and I would like you to schedule 90
minutes of time so you do not feel rushed. These interviews will be held at the Chicago Teachers’ Union Quest Center’s offices at the Merchandise Mart—or a place of your own choosing—and you will be reimbursed for parking or public transportation costs. These interviews will be held at your convenience at anytime during the day or evening, whenever you have time to speak. Talking about your teaching is hard work, and so I would like to do each interview on a different day. Here is the preliminary schedule:

- **Interview One**: preferably the first week or two after classes end in June. However, because of vacations and conferences, I would be happy to meet you any time from the last two weeks before the end of classes until the middle of July.

- **Interview Two**: preferably about a week or two after your first interview, but it can be held as long as a month after that session—ie before the end of July.

- **Interview Three**: preferably after you begin planning for your upcoming classes in July or August.

- **Interview Four**: this interview must completed before the first official day of school—ie before students walk in for their first day of class. I would like to hold this session as close to that point in time as possible, without risking the possibility that you will not be able to participate in the interview because of a scheduling conflict.

**Interpretation, Analysis and Publication**

The stories and information you share in your interviews and homework assignments will be used as materials for my dissertation and in publications that attempt to understand and describe the nature of teachers’ work. Your stories will be used to create a portrait of your teaching practice similar to the oral history portraits found in Studs Terkel’s work with, of course, names and identifying details changed to protect confidentiality. If you wish, you will receive a paper or electronic copy of the portrait I create from our interview sessions. The interviews will also be analyzed to describe differences in the working knowledge of expert and beginning teachers, as well as to understand the nature and development of teachers’ working knowledge.

Because *The Knowledge of Practice* is the beginning of what is hoped to be a long term research project into teachers’ work, your interviews may be analyzed in future studies of teaching and teachers’ practice. You will have the right to limit the time that your interviews are available for subsequent analysis. Your confidentiality will always be maintained, with one exception. If you wish, your tapes will be deposited at public archive to be used by historical researchers 50 years after the first portion of The Knowledge of Practice is completed in 2055.

**Honoraria**

Participating in this study is a lot work! I hope that you will be motivated to participate primarily by the opportunity it provides to engage in extended reflection on your teaching and to share with others knowledge you have gained through teaching in the Chicago Public Schools. Because you will receive copies of all of your interview transcripts, you will have the opportunity to learn more about your practice than I do, and you are free to use your transcripts in any way that you choose. I am will pay all teachers an honoraria of $25 per interview plus $5 for parking or public transportation.
Thanks
Thanks for looking this over. If you are interested in participating please contact me by:

- Sending an email to cvanover@umich.edu
- Sending a letter to:
  - Charles Vanover
    3112 School of Education
    610 E University
    Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259

- Or calling me at 734-XXX-XXXX. I will have a cell phone number this summer when I stay in Chicago that I give you as time for study approaches.

If you wish, you can include the information I ask on the Teacher Questionnaire, but I would be happy to get this information over the phone.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Charlie Vanover
Ph.D. Candidate, Educational Administration and Social Policy;
University of Michigan
610 E University; School of Education
48109-1259
cvanover@umich.edu

To learn more about the informed consent and your rights as a research subject go to http://www.irb.research.umich.edu/IRB_Health/consent.html Questions may be directed to the Behavioral Sciences office which is located at 1040 Fleming Administration Building, 503 Thompson Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1340. Phone: (734) 936-0933. Fax: (734) 647-9084. Email: irbhsbs@umich.edu
Homework assignment before Interview 1.

Please read the question sheet for Interview 1 and prepare for the interview by reflecting about what happened in your classroom from Fall 03 to Spring 04. A few days before the interview, I’d like you to write a short story, not more than 2 or 3 pages, about a student for whom your teaching made a difference this year. You don’t have to write a literary masterpiece; just try to think about a student you helped and then write down what happened. If you can, try to look over the story and the interview guide the night before the interview, so that your answers will be fresh in your mind the next day.
Interview 1: The story of your teaching

To be conducted in June or early July.

Please come to the interview ready to tell the story of your teaching this past school year, from September 03 until June 04. I am interested in learning how the year began, how it ended, and the important incidents that happened in between. I would like to know about the successes that made you proud and the mistakes you learned from. I hope you will share some of the joy of life in the classroom while not forgetting the hard work and difficult moments that are also part of life in school. You are welcome to bring notes, samples of student work and other materials that might help you narrate. As you tell your stories, I would like you to focus on the following questions:

• Please tell a story about a student, or a group of students, for whom your teaching made a difference during the 03-04 school year.

• Describe a unit or a group of lessons where you made a difference in your students’ lives.

• Describe moments during the year when you felt you had learned something new about your teaching or your students.

• For experienced teachers:
  o Tell a story about a particular moment when something you learned from the your efforts to become accredited by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards helped you become a better teacher, or instances when this knowledge made it more difficult for you to serve your students.

• For beginning teachers:
  o Tell a story about a particular moment when something you learned from your student teaching or teacher education classes helped you become a better teacher, or instances when this knowledge made it more difficult for you to serve your students.

• Tell a story about any obstacles that got in the way of your teaching.

• Tell a story about a particular event that illustrates what you believe teaching is all about.

My goal as interviewer is to ask you to describe specific events and incidents. Throughout the session, I will ask you to expand on your stories by asking you to “Tell me more about that.” or to “Walk me through what happened at that moment.” or to “Describe a specific incident that illustrates that idea.” In order to focus the time we have on your teaching I may also ask you questions such as “Could you tell me specifically how that event or person affected your teaching?” All of these questions are designed to help you tell your story in your own way, and in your own words.

Please don’t worry about telling your stories in the specific order that they happened. My goal is for you to feel relaxed enough to speak naturally about the work you’ve done. Feel free to move forward and backwards in time and to come back to incidents that you’ve brought up before. I hope you will feel comfortable enough to tell your story to me in the same way you would tell it to teacher you trust.
The pilot interviews for this project ran from between an hour and an hour and a half. I would like you to have 90 minutes free so that you can speak freely without feeling rushed.
**Homework Assignment for Interview 2:**

We are going to focus this interview on your Language Arts teaching. Please bring to the interview a story about a reading or writing unit or series of lessons that you are very proud. Again, I’m not looking for a literary masterpiece, just something that will prompt your stories. If you have time, please look over that story and the interview guide the night before the interview.
Interview 2: Language Arts.
To be conducted in late June or July

I would like you to reflect on your teaching by telling stories about specific language arts units or series of lessons you taught during the past 2003-2004 school year. I hope that you will be willing to share how your efforts to teach writing and reading made a difference in your students’ lives. You are welcome to bring notes, samples of student work and other materials that might help you narrate. Stories that you might want to share include:

- A unit or lesson you are very proud.
- A unit or lesson that was extremely exciting.
- A unit or lesson that did not go well, but that you learned from.
- A unit or lesson where you had to improvise.
- A unit or lesson where you used student test reports or other types of assessment data.
- A unit or lesson that you think describes what teaching is all about.

My goal as interviewer is to ask you to describe specific events and incidents. Throughout the session, I will ask you to expand on your stories by asking you to “Tell me more about that.” or to “Walk me through what happened when you taught that lesson.” or to “Describe a specific incident that illustrates that idea.” In order to focus the time we have on your teaching I may also ask you questions such as “Could you tell me specifically how that event or person affected your teaching.” As always my goal is to help you tell your story in your own way, and in your own words.

During the second half of the interview, I will ask you specific questions about how you manage your classroom and teach your students. These questions might include how you teach reading comprehension and writing if these subjects haven’t come up before in our interviews.
Homework Assignment for Week 3.

At the beginning of May, I will send you a disposable camera. Before school lets out, I would like you to create a photo-tour of your classroom when no students are present. I’d like you to take between 20 and 24 pictures that help describe “how your classroom works.” I’m interested in seeing pictures of materials and resources such as text-books, computers, learning centers, classroom libraries, plants, and pets. (For more details, please look at the questions for Interview 3.)

Please return the disposable camera to me at the start of Interview 1. I’d like some lead-time in case a camera gets lost or the flash doesn’t work or the pictures don’t come out right in order to make sure that everything is ready for Interview 3.

In order to help you prepare for interview 3, I’ll send you copies of these pictures. Please go over these pictures and try to prepare a travelogue of your classroom. I’d like you to explain in depth how you use these materials and plan to set up you room. Again, my goal is to learn “how your room works.”
Interview 3: Picture Your Room

To be conducted in July or August.

This interview will focus on how you plan to use the materials and resources in your classroom to teach next year’s students. I am interested in learning how you plan to use objects like textbooks, teacher’s guides, and calculators as well as how you plan to use resources such as learning centers, computers, and pet rabbits.

During the first portion of the interview, I will ask you to give me a tour of your classroom. This tour will be based on the pictures you took before the first interview. You can arrange them in any order you wish. Please go over each picture one-by-one and describe how you have used these materials in the past and, most importantly, how you plan to use them next year. If you are planning to add new learning centers or rearrange your classroom, please feel free to discuss those plans.

Here are some possible points-of-interest to help you plan your tour:

- Your desk.
- Any important academic records, important forms, or reports about your students or your school.
- Board of Education curriculum materials.
- Materials that help you teach reading or writing
- Any special learning centers or academic areas.
- Any computers, classroom libraries, or special furniture.
- Your seating plan.
- Your students’ desks, their homework folders, any prepared assignments as well as any games, puzzles or classroom management materials.
- Bulletin boards, posters, pictures, paintings and awards that are meaningful to you.
- Any pets or plants.

You may also include pictures of parts of your room that make it difficult for you to teach. These may include:

- A thermostat that doesn’t work.
- A leak and the bucket it drips into.
- Paperwork that takes time away from serving your students.

Please do not take any pictures of your students, or anyone who works in your school. The focus of the interview is on materials and tools, not people.

After we finish touring your room, I may ask you some specific questions about some of your materials.
Handout for Interview 3

I’d like you to stop for a moment, take a breath, and then describe for me in as much detail as possible how all these different elements would come together create your classroom. I’d like you to describe a day during October or November when the kids know what to do and everything moves along as planned. I’m interested in learning “how your room works” and would like you to describe how you and your students use the materials you described in the earlier part of the interview. Instead of talking about the different elements separately, I hope you might put them together and describe an “ordinary day-in-the-life.”
Homework Assignment for Interview 4

During the last interview, I will ask you to plan for the coming school year. Instead of writing a story, I’d like to bring whatever planning materials—such as a calendar or lesson plan book—you use to prepare for your next class. You may also bring any newsletters or other materials that you send to your students before the year begins.

Interview 4: The future
To be conducted in late August.

During this interview, I would like you to describe your plans for the upcoming school year. I would like to hear your ideas about what you and your class might do during the first day and the first week of school, as well as your ideas for the months afterwards. You are free to bring in any notes, calendars, planners, or other materials you use that might help you discuss your plans. As always, I will ask you to be specific as possible and to “Tell me more about that.” when you tell a small portion of a story and “Walk me through how you plan to do that.” to help you describe your ideas clearly.

I have a specific planning task that I would like you to complete at the beginning of the interview. It will take about 30 to 40 minutes.

During the last part of the interview I will give you a calendar for the upcoming year. I will ask you to describe what you and your students might do during the school year—from September until June.