

March 2017

## At Issue: A Tale of Three Teachers

Marcella G. Prater  
*Valdosta State University*

Charles Backes  
*Valdosta State University*

Randy McElvey  
*Valdosta State University*

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### Recommended Citation

Prater, Marcella G.; Backes, Charles; and McElvey, Randy (2017) "At Issue: A Tale of Three Teachers," *Journal of STEM Teacher Education*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.  
Available at: <http://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/jste/vol42/iss2/6>

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**A Tale of Three Teachers**

Marcella G. Prater  
Charles Backes  
Randy McElvey  
Valdosta State University

Raise your hand if you remember a great test you once took. How about a terrific worksheet? In an article in the *New York Times*, Anemona Hartocollis writes, “No one remembers a great school system or a great chancellor, a great textbook, or a great curriculum” (Hartocollis, 2004, p. 4A16). In the end, what sticks in memory, Hartocollis reminds us, is a great teacher. What people recall “is the teacher who made them understand algebra for the first time, or love literature, or feel as if they would grow up to be somebody worthwhile” (p. 4A16). Or perhaps it was the teacher who taught a life-long skill—a skill that provided a steady job, a favorite hobby, or an income source when other jobs vanished.

For some high school students it is indeed the teachers of practical skills who prove most memorable. For despite the push from some parents and politicians for all high school graduates to enroll in four-year colleges, many high school students will not do so. Some students prefer careers that do not require a four-year college degree—careers such as auto mechanics, cosmetology, or drafting. Others, once they have completed high school, simply do not wish to devote another four years to study. Even among those high-school graduates who do enroll in colleges and universities, many fail to complete a four-year program. The American College Testing Program, an organization that provides assessment, research, information, and program management services in the broad areas of education and workforce development, estimates that one in three students fail or drop out of college after one year

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Prater is Assistant Professor, Backes is Professor, and McElvey is Professor in the Department of Adult and Career Education at Valdosta State University, Valdosta, Georgia. Prater can be reached at [mgrprater@valdosta.edu](mailto:mgrprater@valdosta.edu).

(American College Testing Program, 2004). Four years of post-secondary education, it seems, is not for all.

### **A Craftsman's Life**

Walter was one such student. Walter was a craftsman. He grew up in New Orleans as the son of a marble and granite cutter. His playground was a shop full of tools. As a child, his bare feet were constantly coated with a mixture of dirt and marble dust from running in and out of the shop, which made up the first floor of his family's home. In 1935, young Walter took his first shop class in the fifth grade at P.A. Capdau Grammar School. His shop teacher's name is long forgotten, but his influence on Walter remained with him forever. The shop Walter shared with his classmates wasn't a laboratory, with the computer simulators and heavily guarded, scaled down drills and prefabricated kits found in schools of the future. No, this shop had a lumber rack filled with all kinds of woods. There were saws, lots of them, along with chisels, hand planes, and even a wood lathe. Walter learned to use them all, and he was good at using them. The cypress shoe shine bench that he made in that fifth-grade class proudly sits in his youngest son's office today, as a testament to Walter's early skills.

Walter went on to spend three more years in shop classes, and he even spent a summer in a pre-vocational class at Edward Hines School. But Walter never finished high school; times were different. At seventeen, Walter gave up his academic pursuits to work for the railroad. It wasn't long before he enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served his country on a mail carrier in the Pacific during World War II. When it was all over, he returned home to Louisiana and back to his job with the railroad. Although he spent the next forty years riding the rails, woodcraft never left him. It was too deeply entrenched. When work slowed on the railroad, he relied on his craft. He made ends meet for his young family by building cypress furniture, oak cabinets, and, now and then, water skis to make extra money for paying bills. He even had a business card that proudly proclaimed, "Builder of Joe Wright's Cocktail Bar."

Walter also crafted a family. Walter and his wife, Helen, masterfully chiseled and sculpted a fifty-seven year marriage. His

youngest son grew up to become a teacher. But not just any teacher—a shop teacher—working in a wood shop with a lumber rack filled with all kinds of woods. And there were saws, lots of them, along with chisels, hand planes, and even a wood lathe. And there were students just like Walter! Walter was always proud of that. Although Walter had trouble understanding his son's career move from high-school wood shop to a position in higher education, he understood the value of his calling.

### **A Need for Trade and Industrial Teachers**

My, how things were different then! Today, our shops are learning laboratories. The tools have changed to computers and modules. Some people say that the kids have changed. But there are still a lot of “Walters” in classrooms everywhere. They need teachers who care about them and who want them to have a better life. They need teachers who recognize the value of all students, whether they are rich or poor, academically gifted or learning challenged—teachers who are willing to teach the craft that will stay with their students for generations.

Although times have changed, there is still plenty of room for teachers who teach the types of skills that benefited Walter. Today many high schools are offering career and technical courses (sometimes still referred to as vocational courses) as a way to prepare high school students for entry into trade and industry. About 75 percent of all comprehensive high schools offer specialized courses in career technical programs. According to Alan Penn, principal of West Shore Vocational Education District in Ohio, “Vocational students are studying technology, engineering, construction trades, medical occupations, fashion design, graphic design and computers . . .” (Adams, 2000, p. 21). Susan Adams states, “The level of skill, the potential earnings and the image of vocational education are rising rapidly, a trend many area small businesses are following in hiring students with vocational training” (p. 21).

Students, whether or not they plan to continue their education after high-school graduation, recognize the value of these courses. Approximately 97 percent of high school students enroll in at least one career/technical course. According to Susan Reese “high school career and technical education enrollments

declined through the 1980s and early 1990s, but that trend appears to have begun reversing in recent years” (2001, p. 34). Other evidence indicates that “from 1982 to 1994, the percentage of high school graduates completing both a vocational concentration and a college preparatory curriculum increased 7.5 times. During the same period, those with a vocational concentration who also completed a college prep curriculum grew nine fold—with the heaviest concentrations in the career and technical fields of health care, business, technology and communications” (Reese, 2001, p. 34).

This increase in enrollment has led to an increased need for trade and industrial teachers. In 2001, Missouri’s Community College Week reported that “with nearly 300,000 Missouri students turning to vocational-technology training each year, educators in the industry say they are scrambling to keep up with the increasing demand” (p. 11).

Where will these trade and industrial teachers come from, and what type of training is available to prepare them for teaching in a typical classroom setting? What motivates a professional to move from a technical, skilled occupation into education? What will keep such a teacher in the teaching profession? How will new trade and industrial teachers obtain renewable teacher certification? In order to meet the rise in demand for trade and industrial teachers, these are questions that educators in general and trade and industrial educators in particular, must ask and must answer.

### **Two Case Studies**

With the aim of shedding some light on the answers to a few of these questions, this article concludes with case studies of two trade and industrial educators who completed the New Teacher Institute at Valdosta State University. The New Teacher Institute (NTI) is a training program for new trade and industrial high school teachers. NTI begins with a six-hour semester course covering basic pedagogical topics that include teaching methods, managing the classroom, lesson planning, communicating with parents and administrators, coping with stress, serving special populations, evaluating students, and working with business and industry. Teachers enrolled in NTI follow this initial training

with an internship and mentoring program, along with other required coursework. The case studies attempt to ascertain the reasons these professionals left successful careers to become teachers as well as determine the effectiveness of the training they received in the New Teacher Institute. For the sake of privacy, their names have been changed.

*Ann*

Ann is a Healthcare Science Technology Education (HSTE) instructor. Before her career change, she worked for many years as a visiting home nurse. Due to a desire to be closer to her family during daytime hours, Ann left her position as a visiting home nurse to take a position as a nurse for a local school system. As a school nurse, Ann's responsibilities covered several schools and her duties required her to travel from school to school. When a teaching position in HSTE arose in the school system, Ann applied.

Ann herself had been a student in the same program in which she now teaches, so she recognized the value of the program and knew first-hand its benefits. When asked why she took the teaching position, Ann replied, "To be in one place rather than traveling from place to place." She also valued the fact that teaching allowed her to use her nursing knowledge and skills and to work with children, but also allowed her time to focus on her own children and family.

Ann gave high marks to the training offered through the New Teacher Institute. She felt she benefited most from the lessons on classroom management and lesson planning, but she added that all areas were beneficial. She emphasized the benefit of having face-to-face instruction and felt she learned as much by observing the instructor in charge of the program as by completing the lessons. Ann had taught for one semester before enrolling in the New Teacher Institute. She felt her first semester of teaching, before the training she received at NTI, was difficult and stated she saw a big difference her second semester in the effectiveness of her teaching. Ann came into NTI with a bachelor's degree and is now working towards her master's. Ann strongly recommends this type of teacher training program for others planning to enter the field of teaching.

*Jim*

Jim is a drafting instructor in a local school system. In the past, Jim worked in industry as a draftsman, at times for other companies and at times for himself. The thought of teaching had never entered Jim's mind. It was an acquaintance of his who first made the suggestion. When the position of drafting instructor opened at a local school, Jim's friend, a teacher at the school, contacted Jim to see if he might be interested. Jim's first reaction was "me? – teach?" However, Jim was enticed by the promise of regular income, good benefits, and steady hours. He decided to give teaching a try.

Jim also found what he learned at the New Teacher Institute worthwhile. Like Ann, he felt he benefited most from the lessons on classroom management and lesson planning. In his classroom, Jim's students work on many different projects and at many different levels of expertise during each class period. Keeping all these balls in the air makes classroom management and lesson planning critical. Jim found his classes ran much more smoothly when he applied the techniques he had learned in NTL.

The stories of these two educators revealed many similarities. Neither Ann nor Jim had planned to become teachers, nor did they go looking for teaching positions. Rather, the positions opened, and Ann and Jim found themselves in the "right place at the right time." As teachers, Ann and Jim feel better able to meet the needs of their families with the regular hours, steady pay, and the promise of job security. Both Ann and Jim believe teaching was the appropriate career choice for them, and they both express their convictions that the training they received played an important part in honing their skills as teachers.

**Conclusion**

The need for qualified instructors in the area of trade and industrial education is on the rise. These examples suggest some of the benefits and the personal fulfillment that the teaching profession offers individuals who leave other professional careers to become teachers. Although only three examples are presented here, they open a discussion of what brings these individuals to the teaching field and the type of training that can assist them in

their new career choice. In order to attract the trade and industrial teachers needed and to help them perform successfully in the classroom, states across the nation must make teaching an attractive choice for skilled professionals and offer them adequate and accessible training in order to smooth the transition from industry to education.

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