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The Potential of Early Practice: A Case Study

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The Potential of Early Practice: A Case Study

Purpose

This case study examines how first-year education students in one foundations course view “peer teaching” as a tool to develop competency and skills. Results from their feedback will demonstrate the potential of *early practice* as one straightforward way to augment clinical experience. This will better help candidates¹ meet the updated InTASC standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013) and face new performance-based assessments like the edTPA (Teacher Performance Assessment) and the Danielson (2013) Framework for Teaching.

Framework

Over the past several years, there have been vigorous calls to place *practice* at the center of teacher preparation (e.g., American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2010; CCSSO Task Force on Educator Preparation, 2012; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010). Yet practice is still not the main focus in most traditional schools of education. During the first two to three years of their program, students mainly observe classrooms and teachers as part of their practicum training. Even during methodology courses students still observe more than they teach. Only during their last term or year do candidates immerse themselves in the craft. Education schools are still looking to optimize their curricula to meet the new performance-based standards and assessments.

One way to accelerate this process is to *incorporate more opportunities to practice teaching during the first year of training*, when students primarily take theory-based courses. Collectively, the impact of early practice would be significant. Candidates would have more time to develop and refine the essential skills, habits, and practices that affect the learning outcomes of their future students (American Federation of Teachers, 2012; Levine, 2006). Early practice would also expose candidates to the daily rigors and realities of the job they wouldn’t normally experience until student teaching. This paper aims to demonstrate the potential of early practice through the perspective of teaching candidates.

Method and Data

23 students in one education foundations class were required to “teach” a 30-minute presentation on a given topic to their peers. To do so, however, they first discussed the difference between a “content-focused” approach (one typically found in student presentations) and a “learner-centered” approach (one required for effective teaching); see Table 1 for examples and Appendix A for a lesson plan. Candidates also learned basic technical skills, such as how to engage learners and use slides effectively (see Appendix B). Their lessons had to incorporate at least one activity or task to engage the audience.

The instructor assessed candidates’ teaching performance by: 1) providing ongoing feedback during the lesson; and 2) evaluating their content knowledge and ability to engage the audience meaningfully. Peers also evaluated presenters through anonymous, written, open-ended surveys.

At the end of the semester, all 23 students were asked to write a 3-page, graded reflection of the peer teaching experience, based on the three questions below.

- Did this experience affect the way you think of teaching? If so, how?
- What specific skills did you gain (or feel you can improve upon)?
- Does this experience help you become an effective teacher? Explain.

Excerpts are presented and discussed below.ⁱⁱ

Results and Discussion

1. Did this experience affect the way you think of teaching? If so, how?

Students were no strangers to making class presentations, yet rarely did they think of them in terms of teaching:

When I thought about presentations before coming to this class, I thought [it was] just to deliver the message to audiences.

[This] experience taught me that just knowing is not enough to teach.

In most college classes, when you present a topic you just explain what [it] is. You don't really have to relate it to real life or give your audience a clear understanding of it.

By recognizing the importance of engagement, students began to see presentations (and teaching) differently:

In my previous presentations, I would not consider how to engage the audience; I would not ask questions; I would simply read from the slides or from index cards, and I would be the only person to speak for the whole fifteen minutes...I realized that [the] purpose of presentations [was] not just to deliver message but also to...engage [the] audience actively throughout the lesson. Engaging with an audience will allow [both sides to] comprehend the topic and...help...bring new conversation.

In [this course]...when we have to talk about a topic we don't present it we teach it. Our job is to make sure that when the class ends every student has a crystal clear understanding of the lesson, as if it was taught by our professor, not just a regular classmate.

The process of seeing presentations as a two-sided affair helped candidates adopt a "teaching" mentality—one oriented toward the learner. This suggests that early and explicit discussions on the "learner-centered" mindset are critical. It also appeared to help candidates focus their lesson:

[The "teaching approach" taught] me to be as specific as possible in every aspect of my lesson. The more simple...the easier it is for the student to understand...

...by choosing one particular section of the reading, I was able to go in depth and explain the different aspects that surround it rather than rushing through it.

I have done so many presentations for my other classes before but teaching is a whole different concept because the point of teaching is that my students understand the material and exchange their ideas with each other.

This experience taught me the importance of taking my time and teaching one topic very well than rushing through five topics.

2. What specific skills did you learn (or feel you can improve upon)?

Candidates appeared to learn as much from their peers' presentations as from their own, including subtle practices and habits. Three competencies in particular stood out: the use of questioning and discussion techniques; opening a lesson; and classroom management—all areas explicitly measured by assessments like Danielson's (2013) Framework for Teaching Evaluation instrument.

The use of questioning and discussion techniques: I learned that being the one who always speaks as the teacher isn't very fun. It is important to ask questions and give the students a chance to express themselves, that way they remain focused on what is being taught; and also depending on their responses, it gives me an idea on whether they are grasping the concept of what I'm teaching...

Another subtle concept that one of the presenters...used...was the rephrasing of a question...If you ask [children] a question and they...ponder too long on it, it does not necessarily mean that they do not know the answer. It could just...mean that they did not understand the question the way you phrased it. [One presenter] practiced this during her presentation...the second time she posed the question in a different way, she got more feedback.

Asking questions to the audience can be difficult because the answers are unexpected...The answers I received...were personal experiences that had very little to do with the subject. This was challenging to overcome...because I don't want the audience to think their answers are not important...I tried to overcome this problem by re-asking the original question, but instead a better approach would've been to ask a follow up question.

Opening a lesson: When [one of my classmates] first began her lesson, she asked the class [if] they thought that the child [shown] on the [slide] was "cute or pretty," and as the class agreed...she dove into how Coy (the pretty child on the screen) was transgendered and was in fact, physically, a boy. Both of these presentations taught me that explanations and tone of voice [are some] of the most effective ways to grab children's attention.

I had started off my presentation with a class [building exercise] I called “Just Like Me.” This aided in setting the amicable tone to the room, so everyone learns that in this room there are [many] others who they can connect with; thus, they feel more comfortable.

Classroom management: Following the group activity I wanted to get the student’s attention and that proved to be a daunting task...I felt uneasy when trying to gain all of their attention...I let out a couple muffled “excuse me’s” before [a classmate] caught my eye, telling me to clap to gain the attention of the class. I clapped a popular arrangement that was sure to get the student’s attention and IT WORKED. I was shocked that something so simple could not only grab the student’s attention but engage them to complete the clap arrangement along with me...At that moment I realized how very important classroom management is.

...as a teacher or presenter I think it's really important to work on time management. I feel that when I divided my groups up and set them to do group work I needed to be clearer with how much time each group would get and for me to keep better track of time. If I [were] more aware of the time, we would have more time to discuss everyone’s experiments and their results toward the end of class.

I thought that since we were college students we would have more manners than children but it turns out we have problem listening to directions too. Next time I present I have to be more firm and loud to make sure that when I need all eyes on me I’ll get that...When I put students in [groups] I counted on that everyone would be in class, and I would have two groups of two and the rest of three. It didn’t work out like that and everyone was confused. Next time I’ll know to take control and assign groups instead of letting them choose on their own.

3. Does this experience help you become an effective teacher? Explain.

Candidates appeared to feel the opportunity to practice teaching through student presentations addressed a real need—previewing what it is like to teach—early on in their training:

I felt that these teaching exercises were extremely helpful in giving us a taste of what it’s like to effectively teach each other about a topic you are presenting. I think that it was a good way to loosen up our nervousness because as teachers, this will become a way of life. It certainly helped me realize what things I need to work on as well as what I should continue to do.

We’re going to be teaching in a few years, so it’s important that we practice teaching now to become a better teacher. This is my first education class, so I

hope the rest of my classes make us practice teaching lesson so we become better at it. It was great to get my classmates feedback on my presentation because now I know what I need to work on the next time I have to teach a topic.

This [teaching lesson] approach enables future educators to practice and become acquainted with different techniques that may enhance their ability to speak in public, engage the audience and present information clearly and concisely.

Significance and Conclusion

This case study sought to demonstrate the potential of peer teaching through the eyes of first-year education students. Their positive feedback suggests that it is a constructive way to develop competency and skills, and that candidates would benefit from more consistent opportunities. Early practice also aligns with the current shift toward a clinical model of teacher training.

More significant, this case study highlights the critical role of instructors who teach first year courses. Helping students discover the differences between a “content-focused” and a “learner-centered” approach, for instance, likely influenced the quality of their lessons and their positive feedback. Without such explicit discussions, candidates would continue to treat their lessons as presentation assignments, which would negate the point of early practice.

Moving forward, education schools will need to confront two fundamental questions: 1) Do all instructors, particularly those who teach theory, *want* to refocus their work on the world of practice? 2) If so, do all instructors have the capacity? With proper support and training, instructors can significantly build their students’ teaching capacity by the end of Year 1.

Table 1. A content-focused approach vs. a learner-centered approach to presenting

Examples of Topics	Content-Focused Approach	Learner-Centered Approach
John Dewey	Highlight the major milestones of Dewey, including his pragmatist and progressive education philosophy exemplified in his work, <i>Experience and Education</i> . Examine how his philosophy influenced American education.	Challenge students to recall a lesson they were taught in secondary school or in other lecture courses, and how they can modify it with a Deweyian hands-on, experience-based approach. Tie into Dewey’s progressive philosophy of education.
The Theory of Multiple Intelligences	Review the life of MI theorist Howard Gardner, and describe each of his nine multiple intelligences. Give examples of each intelligence.	1) Invite students to think of individuals who personify each of the nine intelligences; 2) have them take a personal inventory of their perceived strengths; 3) take an MI survey; and 4) have them discuss the implications of their results on how they plan to teach.
Common Core State Standards	Explore the emergence and evolution of the Common Core and analyze its benefits and challenges for U.S. public schools.	Discuss the benefits and challenges of Common Core using videos and open-ended questions and have students debate its merits.

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Appendix A

Lesson Plan: Helping Candidates Understand the Psychology of Teaching

Learning Objective

Teaching candidates will understand the difference between a “content-focused” and a “learner-centered” approach by examining their prior experiences with oral presentations and lectures.

Grade Level: First year education students (i.e., teaching candidates)

Length: 45 minutes

Materials: None needed

InTASC Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013)

Standard 1: Learner Development. The teacher understands how learners grow and develop, recognizing that patterns of learning and development vary individually within and across the cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical areas, and designs and implements developmentally appropriate and challenging learning experiences.

Standard 5: Application of Content. The teacher understands how to connect concepts and use differing perspectives to engage learners in critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative problem solving relating to authentic local and global issues.

Pre-Activity (15-20 minutes)

Start by asking candidates about their prior experiences with class presentations or lectures, such as: “What makes presentations bad?” or “Why are some lectures boring?”

Solicit answers. If needed, have students turn and talk to each other first to draw out participation. Answers will likely touch on some of following reasons:

- 1) Presentation/lecture is too long
- 2) Information presented is too dense
- 3) Presenters/lecturers read directly from slides or notes
- 4) Presenters/lecturers do not connect with or involve audience

Use these reasons to establish the primary role of teachers, which is *to help students learn through meaningful experiences*. It is not to deliver content or convey knowledge per se, as many may believe. For instance, you might say, “Based on your reasons, it seems that many lectures and presentations are bad because they convey information that doesn’t relate to the class. So, what might good teachers do instead?”

The purpose is to help candidates understand that teaching focuses on *the needs of the learner* (what’s known as the “student-centered” or “learner-centered” approach), which entails concrete experiences. Ask candidates what kinds of activities or tasks they might use

to engage students. Write down their responses on the board. They may include: discussions, surveys, debates, group activities, quizzes, and games.

Activity (15 minutes)

In groups, candidates will apply the “content-focused” approach and the “learner-centered” approach to a specific topic, such as the American Civil War, Albert Einstein, How to write an essay, or any general topic (avoid education-specific topics, as most may not have taken education courses). Prompt them with the following questions: “How might you have presented this topic *before*, if you were focused on content only? How would you present this topic *now* as a ‘teacher’?” The point is to help candidates crystallize the difference between the two approaches. Each group should select a representative to share their ideas with the class.

Post-Activity (10 minutes)

Have each group share their ideas with the class. Reinforce the importance of a learner-centered approach through open-ended questions and discussions (e.g., “Why might this idea help students learn more?”).

Appendix B

Lesson Plan: How to Present with Slides

Background

Should candidates decide to use PowerPoint (or other presentation applications like Prezi), they need to understand how to use it. Slides primarily support instruction, not the other way around, as many might believe. As such, using them effectively requires careful planning. This lesson examines three fundamental elements of good slide presentations: Focus, simplicity, and engagement.

Learning Objective

Through class discussions, teaching candidates will understand the importance of focus, simplicity, and engagement when presenting or teaching with slides.

Grade Level: First year education students (i.e., teaching candidates)

Length: 45 minutes

Materials: None needed

InTASC Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013)

Standard 5: Application of Content. The teacher understands how to connect concepts and use differing perspectives to engage learners in critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative problem solving relating to authentic local and global issues.

Standard 8: Instructional Strategies. The teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage learners to develop deep understanding of content areas and their connections, and to build skills to apply knowledge in meaningful ways.

Lesson/Discussion

Remind candidates the importance of focusing on the learner when teaching, which they learned previously. In this lesson, candidates will explore the three fundamental elements of effective slide presentations: Focus, simplicity, and engagement.

Focus (15 min). Start by giving students a broad topic, such as Abraham Lincoln. Ask them if this is a tenable topic to present: “Do you think that you can effectively present about Abraham Lincoln in 30 minutes?” Lead students to understand that the amount of information required to cover a broad topic would overwhelm an audience. However, a more focused lesson, such as one on Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, would be easier to learn. It is the presenter’s job, therefore, to find the most salient aspect of a topic to teach. As an exercise, have the class discuss how to narrow a broad range of topics, like fractions, the Bill of Rights, and racism.

Engagement (15 min). Once presenters establish a focus, they can design an appropriate experience for the audience. Have candidates brainstorm ways to engage students. Their responses may include storytelling, class discussions, or other hands-on tasks such as group

work, surveys, and debates. Candidates should incorporate at least one of these ideas into their slides.

Simplicity (10 min). Audiences absorb presentations and lessons more readily when slides are simple. Presenters should therefore convey no more than one idea (and three bullet points) per slide. Bullet points should be kept brief. Visuals, such as pictures, videos, or illustrations, can often convey a message more effectively. Introduce the “10-20-30” rule as a guide (no more than 10 slides, no more than 20 minutes, and no smaller than 30 point type size). Discuss how these tips can enhance instruction and learning.

Wrap-Up (5 min.)

Reinforce the idea of focus, engagement, and simplicity as cornerstones of presentations and lessons. As an extension of this lesson, have candidates read and view “The Best of TED 2014: Lessons for Your Next Presentation” (<http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/233045>). Ask them: How can these tips help the audience learn more effectively?

ⁱ Unless specified, the terms “candidate” and “student” refer to those enrolled in teacher preparation programs to become teachers and are used interchangeably throughout this article.

ⁱⁱ Students’ written feedback is used verbatim, although spelling and/or grammatical errors were cleaned up. Occasionally, words were substituted in brackets to facilitate flow or redacted for editorial purposes. Either way, the author has attempted to preserve the students’ original meaning and intent. Even though students’ names and references were anonymized, the author also obtained written permission from those whose perspectives were used for this article.