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Improving the Preparation of Pre-service Teachers in Real-World Environments

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In 2004, I applied for a Teacher Quality Enhancement Partnership Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which was granted to our program at Governors State University, an upper-division university in Chicago, Illinois. Governors State University subsequently formed a partnership with three high school districts surrounding our campus, Bloom, Rich, and Crete-Monroe, to address this very need. Through our partnership, we are attempting to make a difference in young people's lives and the communities in which they live. We believe in the power of education to change the way things are now and to create a better future for the generations to come.

Focus on Micro-teaching

Micro-teaching can be defined as mini teaching experiences that pre-service teachers engage in prior to their student teaching semester. Before we implemented Micro-teaching, our teacher candidates, whom we call *interns*, were spending their state-mandated 100 hours of field experiences mostly in passive observation of secondary classrooms. Occasionally they did some after-school tutoring, but this was often non-productive because the low-performing students they were hoping to tutor frequently did not show up. With Micro-teaching, however, our interns design lessons and teach them to real high school students. Research shows that pre-service teachers learn best through collaboration, observation, and reflection (Darling-Hammond), and Micro-teaching experiences provide interns with authentic classroom experiences, promote role assumption, and link lesson planning and reflection (Subramaniam).

Our interns Micro-teach during their two methods courses, which amounts to at least 65 hours in English or 60 hours in biology, chemistry, or math, depending on what subject they are preparing to teach at the high school level. The desirable model is to stay with the mentor teacher for a full school day and to return for successive days to see how learning takes place over time. They gain a better understanding of how high school students think and behave and the important relationship of school and community. Without a doubt, the existence of Micro-teaching has revolutionized our entire program in secondary education.

How it Works

During each methods trimester, interns are assigned specific mentor teachers corresponding to the emphasis of the course they are taking. For example, interns who are taking *Reading Theory and Practice in Secondary Schools* are paired with Reading teachers in one of our six partner high schools. The intern/mentor dyad works closely together. At first, interns observe the mentors teach a lesson; then the interns teach that same lesson in a "shadowing" model. A day or so later, the interns work with the mentors to develop a lesson, using some of the strategies that the interns are learning in their Methods classes, and then they teach the lesson to the mentors' students. The mentors coach the interns, giving suggestions and feedback. A university supervisor also observes the interns teach, giving feedback as well. When the interns return to their Methods classes, they report back how things went, ask questions, gain support and further ideas, which they then can incorporate into new lessons they create and subsequently teach.

The beauty of Micro-teaching is that as interns are learning fundamentals of lesson design, they get to put this learning into practice right away. For example, they learn theory and then have actual practice implementing their understanding or how scaffolding works, why higher order thinking skills are important, and how to diversify the presentation of information so all students

in conjunction with learning theory, which improves their preparation by contextualizing it in a real-world environment. Additionally, Darling-Hammond argues that teachers who train in programs with real-world connections are more likely to remain in teaching careers.

Another advantage of Micro-teaching is that interns gain experience in classroom management prior to student teaching. Unfortunately, they sometimes observe what not to do; but when they return to their Methods classes, they bring up the problem situations that they observed, and together the class brainstorms some solution strategies. Actual experience is even better than watching the best of the “teacher prep videos.” As in the lesson-designing phase, the interns can try out these classroom management strategies; often, they return with triumphant stories of how student behaviors improved as a result. With Micro-teaching, the interns have the benefit of learning what no textbook can teach them. Best of all, they have confidence when they begin their student teaching practicum, knowing that they have real classroom experience and a handful of strategies that actually work in managing a classroom of diverse learners. They have practice grading students’ papers; they have experienced the rewards from giving students feedback and hope from encouraging students to work to their best. Micro-teaching demystifies the high school experience and takes the fear out of the first days of school. This alone—is priceless.

The next sections offer other key features of the partnership and Micro-teaching, including a case study and analysis of each.

Focus on Active Learning

A major feature of our project in “Improving the Preparation of Pre-service Teachers in Real-World Environments” is extensive course re-design. The “ivory tower” approach to education is not a commonality today; however, even if teachers experience that approach, it will not help struggling students. Teachers have to show not just tell, and programs like this one are providing teacher candidates with opportunities to show as well as tell. Every lesson plan objective must answer the question: “What’s

the Big Idea?”

Every lesson plan that our interns design must focus on a central concept that is relevant to their students’ lives; students must see the connection between what they are learning and

their own personal experiences, and they must see the value that this learning has for their future lives.

Case Study. An example of how the “Big Idea” works can be seen in a lesson that an intern in my “Reading Theory and Practice” course designed for a 10th grade reading class that she was going to Micro-teach at Rich Central high school. The “Big Idea,” or objective of her lesson, was that “students will understand that material things should not define who they are as people.” This overarching concept fits into state standard 2.B.4c: “Discuss and evaluate motive, resulting behavior and consequences demonstrated in literature.” Her focusing activity, or *hook*, as we call it, is to have the students list five characteristics that define them as a person. Then she plays the song that she had found online, “Air Force Ones” by Nelly, in which a currently popular rap group sings for ten minutes that the most important thing to them is their *shoes*. Our intern asks, “How many of you picked shoes as your defining characteristic?” She expects students will answer “None.” As a segue, she has the students get with a partner and, using the *mind streaming* strategy, name every brand name they can for the period of one minute.

Next, using the *fishbowl* strategy, she asks the students to discuss the following, 1) What is the importance of personal appearance; and 2) What makes

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a name brand (like Nike, Fubu, Coach) better than an off-brand of the same item? Then, having frontloaded students' prior knowledge and grounded the lesson in their own experiences, she has students get with a partner and read, using the "Think-Pair-Share" strategy, the article, "Nike: Just Don't Do It," from *Global Exchange*, June 1997, an Internet article, which presents information about Nike's billion-dollar advertising campaigns and use of third-world countries for cheap labor. She asks students to consider the motive for extensive advertising campaigns and the effectiveness upon the consumer, as well as the human cost, of these products as they read the article.

After the pairs finish their reading and "report out" to the class, she has the pairs join into groups of four and create an *advertising campaign flyer*, complete with slogan and symbol, and design a *t-shirt or boxer shorts* that promote a better definition of self than a materialistic campaign. She models a t-shirt that she has created with a sun-type object in the center and the slogan "The Power Is in You." Then she passes out paper, cut into shapes of t-shirts or boxer shorts, markers, and colored pencils. When the students finish, they explain their advertising campaign flyer and t-shirt or shorts; and she pins them up around the room on clothesline. As an *exit ticket*, she ask the students to revisit the list of five characteristics from the beginning of the class, pick one, and explain why it makes a more important statement about who you are than a status symbol (like Nike shoes) does. She passes out a paper shoe shape for them to write on. This is the closure to her lesson. She is asking them: So what? What does what we have just talked about mean to you? How is it relevant to your life? She collects the "shoes" as the students walk out the door.

Analysis. This is a tenth grade Reading class; students are reading at the third to fifth grade levels. From "Big Idea" to "So what" she has challenged them to think about their lives, their values, and how they spend their money. She has asked them to read deeply and thoughtfully a form of writing they might be expected to encounter throughout their adult lives—an online news article. She has given them the opportunity to engage in thoughtful and meaningful conversation with their peers, both

speaking and listening on a subject that has both relevance and merit. She has used innovative teaching strategies in which the students were the center, not the teacher. She has asked them to put their own thoughts into writing. She will be able to assess the effectiveness of her lesson by what they have written. Her students are engaged in their learning because it is relevant to their lives. Their skills in reading and writing, thinking and communicating are improving—while they were having fun. This is a high-quality lesson, and this intern is on her way to becoming a highly qualified teacher.

Focus on Technology

Twenty-first century students are stimulated by digital technology in many ways, so future teachers must be prepared to reach them using a plethora of technologically advanced methods. One way to help struggling readers make connections with texts is by activating existing schema by frontloading key ideas using technology.

Case Study. I illustrated this process to my Reading Methods class with the short story "The Shawl" by Cynthia Ozick. Without pictures of the Holocaust that I obtained from the Internet, many of the story's images were too obscure for students to grasp, and therefore the story appeared "too difficult" for them. With the aid of powerful pictures, accompanied by some music that I also downloaded from iTunes, a lasting moment was created to set the scene for an engaged response and important conversation about the story.

The educational process did not stop there, however. By the time those same students reached their second semester methods class, they had far surpassed the simple PowerPoint slides that I had taught them to create. Now they were grabbing streaming videos, MP3s, movie clips, and all kinds of other relevant technological materials into the lesson plans they were creating. Added to the fact that they were in their second cycle of Micro-teaching experiences, they were using clips from "Saturday Night Live," "Snoop Dogg," and many more that they had to explain to *me*. They "got" the idea and saw that it had worked with actual high school students.

Analysis. Technology is an authentic and potent tool to reach and teach today's students—and it is a *must* for today's teacher-candidates and institutions that prepare them. NCTE/NCATE Program Standards for teacher preparation in English Language Arts include demonstrations of knowledge and integration of technology in lessons. Additionally, many states, such as Illinois and Michigan, require high school graduates to take courses that integrate technology and learning. Our partnership has, with the aid of some small grants, purchased a SMART Board to use with lectures and a video camera to assist with our observations of student teachers. I learned how to create a wiki at the Conference on English Education Leadership and Policy Summit this summer, and I plan to create and use one with my methods classes this fall. Technology is exciting and fun because it keeps education fresh, always new. Online learning environments and blended classrooms are here to stay, and it behooves all of us to try, as best we can, to take advantage of the many opportunities that are offered to us to learn and use new technologies. Often when it comes to technology, our students will turn out to be our best teachers.

Focus on Assessment

Now more than ever, education is accountability driven. Regrettably, however, over the years I have noticed that very few student teachers or interns fully understood or utilized the assessment feature of lesson plans. Indeed, tucked away at the bottom of the page, the “Assessment” was often written as a wishy-washy afterthought that was of little value or use to the teacher in actually assessing whether students had achieved the stated objectives for that day's lesson. Hence, there was a need for a paradigm shift and re-design of the template. I turned the lesson plan from portrait to landscape; changed it from an outline to a table; and pulled the assessment piece from the bottom of the page to the right side column. Now, every activity that is listed on the left is matched with an assessment next to it on the right.

Case Study. Using the above lesson plan: the *hook* asks the students to list five characteristics that define you as a person. The assessment reads: “Students will list words like: reliable, happy, exciting.” In the *fishbowl* activity,

the assessment reads: “Students will say things 1) like to show self respect, to be clean and 2) advertising, status symbols, quality.” When they read the *article* and discuss it in pairs, she will circulate around the room, looking for the following signifiers of their reading comprehension: “Students will notice the difference in price they pay for an item compared to what it costs to make and understand that they are paying a massively inflated price simply for a status symbol. Students will also note the unfair labor practices.” In the advertising campaign activity, the assessment reads: “Students will create a *Flyer* and a *T-shirt* with a theme along the lines of some characteristic that is found within themselves, such as ‘Happiness is inside you’ and ‘Hope lives in us.’” The assessment for the *exit ticket* shoe reads, “Students will pick a characteristic and write two or three sentences about why it is more important than materialism.” The intern's self-assessment of her lesson plan: she will know whether her students accomplished her objective: “Students will understand the cost, both human and dollars, of name brand symbols and realize that material items should define them.”

Analysis. This intern has thought deeply about each activity she is asking her students to do. She knows why she wants them to do the activity, and she knows specific behaviors to look for that will signify when and if her students have met the objective for that activity. She has established a *specific purpose* for each activity and a *specific measure* of student outcomes for that activity. She has set objectives that are realistic, measurable, and achievable.

Her students will know, and she will know, that they, together, have created something good – something worthwhile, something of value to each of them during this class period. They will each know, and she will know, that they created knowledge together this day; that they collectively are more now than they were when the class began; that learning took place; that creativity and productivity are self-replicating. Even though this is a classroom of “under-achieving” students in a high-needs school, and even though this intern describes herself as extremely shy, all of them will be eager to come to class tomorrow because classes like this are full of life, possibilities, and hope for the future.

Conclusion

Micro-teaching allows pre-service teachers to get a sneak peek at the high school experience before student teaching and eliminates much of the fear of those first days of teaching in the real world. Micro-teaching works because teacher interns create and implement lessons and engage in feedback and reflection as a part of a real-world experience. When techniques such as Micro-teaching are combined with effective collaborative programs like the partnership between Governors State University and its three adjacent high school districts, we get a glimpse into the successful integration of real-world experience and teacher preparation, of technology and learning, and of academic service learning and reflection.

Our partnership is making significant strides in improving the quality of teacher education through the thoughtful cooperation of the university and the local schools. Each member of the team--the university professors, the micro-teaching supervisors, the interns, the mentors, the high school curriculum coordinators, and the high school students— plays a dynamic roll in shaping the future of education because we believe that education holds the hope for a better future for us all.

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About the Author

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