

Finding Opportunities Outside the Academy to Enhance Student Learning: A Paper on Practice *PRACTICE*

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Abstract

A recent trend in higher education is the concept of giving authentic experiences to students. A report in the *Washington Post* found that college graduates were greatly lacking necessary career readiness skills including decision-making, prioritization, time management, and problem solving (Selingo, 2015) needed for entry into the professional job market. Additional research noted students often have difficulty bridging theory to practice and transferring skills from one situation to another (Gordon, 2007). This paper highlights the work of one southwestern university Teacher Education program as they addressed such concerns. Program faculty looked for opportunities to utilize pedagogical expertise outside the academy walls as they guide preservice teacher educational skill development during the transition from collegiate classroom to their own K-12 classrooms. This resulted in faculty implementation of experiential learning activities within the standard teacher education curriculum. At this university, experiential learning activities have fallen into three primary focus areas: service learning, post-graduation continuing education, and opportunities for faculty research mentoring.

Keywords: experiential learning, theory to practice, problem solving

The literature targeting the need for university students to have “real world” work experiences is plentiful. A report by High Fliers Research in 2013 cited it was exceptionally important for college graduates to have additional experience outside the university classroom (Baker, 2013). Teaching at the collegiate level has often been done only in a lecture type format (Hanford, 2018), which is contrary to the way many people learn due to its passive nature. One of the most recent trends in higher education is the concept of facilitating authentic experiences for students. Collegiate students often may do well in a university setting but have trouble bridging theory to practice when asked to implement skills in the workplace. A 2015 report in the *Washington Post* found that college graduates were greatly lacking necessary skills for the workplace including decision-making, prioritization, time management, and problem solving (Selingo, 2015). Additionally, many college graduates were found to be missing the vital socio-emotional skills that are necessary for success in the workplace (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

This paper on practice highlights the work of a southern university's Teacher Education program in seeking methods to combat some of these concerns. Program faculty have looked for opportunities to utilize pedagogical expertise outside the academy walls as they guide preservice teacher development in 21st century pedagogy, career readiness, and socio-emotional skills during the transition from collegiate classroom to their own K-12 classrooms. In seeking these opportunist, the faculty implemented experiential learning activities within the standard teacher education curriculum.

The concept of experiential learning draws upon the work of John Dewey in the context of human development. Dewey (1987) noted that “Education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience” (p. 76). According to scholars, experiential learning has been

demonstrated to be effective in helping learners make authentic connections and improvement in the quality of their work after leaving the university program (Kolb et al., 2000). Experiential learning involves invested learning experiences on behalf of the student. In addition, an experiential focus has been shown to help students develop socio-emotional skills necessary for success in the workplace (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Necessary Skills for Teaching

Career Readiness Skills

When people think about the necessary skills for effective teaching, career readiness is not necessarily the first category that comes to mind. However, it is just as important for teachers to be prepared for their career as it is for any other profession if a “skills gap” is to be avoided. Often a mismatch occurs between skills novice teachers acquire during their training and those specifically required to be successful on the job (Meyer, 2014). Furthermore, Darling-Hammond (2010) found a direct relationship between teachers’ initial effectiveness and job retention to the quality of experiences in their teacher preparation programs. Most certainly, experiential learning opportunities that facilitate meaningful interactions with students in a teaching and learning process are necessary to ensure that teachers are ready for their future education careers.

Socio-Emotional Skills

The Florida Department of Education (2018) compiled a list of the most important skills and characteristics needed by students to be successful in the workforce once they leave the university. Some of these skills include skills that could be considered socio-emotional skills; however, many of them are personal qualities such as being dependable, responsible, polite, appropriately dressed, punctual, and having self-confidence. Additional skills deemed important include conflict resolution, common sense, and the ability to actively listen to others.

Understanding and being able to use socio-emotional skills are necessary for being a teacher in the 21st century classroom (Zakrzewski, 2013). Having these aspects not only helps facilitate quality teaching, but also allows teachers to pass these skills on to their students. There are five basic principles to not only understanding but also having and applying socio-emotional skills (Lifecho, 2012). These principles include:

- Empathy: the ability to understand and identify with others’ feelings
- Internal motivation: the personal desire to achieve a desired result
- Self-regulation: the ability to control ourselves physically and emotionally
- Relatability: to identify with others and have them be responsive to you
- Personal understanding: to have a personal understanding of our own emotions

By exhibiting these socio-emotional skills, teachers are able to find inventive ways to assist students in their own personal understandings. This assistance can impact multiple aspects of the classroom from instruction, assessment, and classroom management (Zakrzewski, 2013).

Pedagogical Content Knowledge and Skills

In the past, having the content knowledge of the subject that they were teaching is all that was expected of teachers. Shulman (1987) focused on the importance of the content knowledge possessed by teachers. Pedagogical content knowledge is “the manner in which teachers relate

their subject matter knowledge (what they know about what they teach) to their pedagogical knowledge (what they know about teaching) and how subject matter knowledge is part of the process of pedagogical reasoning” (Cochran, DeRuiter, & King, 1993, p. 263). This belief was wholly different from previous research in education where the foci were mostly on the external factors of teaching such as classroom planning, grading, and time usage. Ball, Thames, and Phelps (2008) expanded this theory of content knowledge to the idea of pedagogical content skills. Teachers need to not only personally master and understand the content, teachers must have the pedagogical knowledge to know also how to teach and reach students. This knowledge includes all aspects within the art of teaching such as instructional design for all learners, diversity of assessment and instructional practices, classroom management that enhances the learning environment, and meeting the needs of all learners. Hence, this marriage of content intelligence and enactment of pedagogy then transforms into the philosophy of pedagogical content knowledge.

In order to provide these necessary skills, the university has implemented experiential learning activities both inside and outside the classroom. This implementation was done to assist preservice teachers in being prepared to enter their own classrooms. Experiential learning activities have fallen into three primary focus areas: service learning, post-graduation continuing education, and opportunities for faculty research mentoring.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning, or learning that happens in a hands-on manner, outside the traditional confines of the classroom, is becoming more common as universities try to find ways to assist students in gaining valuable information through a meaningful, authentic environment. Although experiential learning has been shown to provide necessary skills for students, it is difficult to change the paradigm of the university classroom and culture. Especially in the K-12 to K-16 pipeline, the disconnect between K-12 and higher education has resulted in many high school graduates not being prepared for academic success in college (Perna & Armijos, 2014). The lack of cohesiveness between K-12 and higher education has caused many university degree programs to restructure and revise pedagogical coursework to embed learning activities that promote academic growth and academic maturity. To accomplish this task, a systemic approach that allows for failure, facilitates change in structure, pedagogy, and assessment, and provides for resource allocation is required (Meyer, 2014). The faculty implemented three experiential learning activities for students to supplement the already robust teacher preparation curriculum at the university. These opportunities include service learning, continued education after graduation, and faculty mentoring in student research. Below is a discussion and example of how teacher candidates implemented and used all of these activities.

Service Learning Opportunity: Barnes and Noble Reading Program

Activity

In 2010, the teacher education program implemented a service learning opportunity within the surrounding community. They worked with a community partner, a local bookstore, to establish a community reading program. The program involved the university’s preservice teachers (university students in the Teacher Education program) planning thematic reading units and creating corresponding activities or projects to support the readings. This program was presented at the local bookstore on a weekly basis through the summer months and was free of charge to children who participated.

Participating preservice teachers then had the opportunity to serve in multiple roles: as an instructional planner, an instructional leader, an instructional presenter (reader or activity leader), or as an instructional helper. This structure was developed as a way for preservice teachers to not only work with community children, but also for them to learn from one another in a developed lab environment.

These roles were clearly defined and developed to assist in creating a simulated classroom environment where children and preservice teachers learn together. The instructional planner worked each week with faculty and the manager of the bookstore to develop a thematic plan and find literature to support the theme. There were usually two to three books read each week, depending upon the length of the books. Sometimes the themes were requested by the bookstore but most often, it was left up to the instructional planner to make this determination. The instructional leader for the week worked with faculty to assign roles to each of the members present. That person could assist the instructional planner in finding literature that correlated with the selected weekly theme. The leader also introduced the group and readers each week while providing transitions between books. This later evolved into teaching participating children transitional songs or movement activities in between each reading. The instructional presenter read the chosen books to children. The instructional presenter, or activity leader, worked with the planner to create an activity or project that the children would complete. This experience could take on multiple forms such as having a parade around the bookstore or facilitating an art project that the children would each create. Finally, all remaining preservice teachers acted as instructional helpers. These preservice teachers sat with children, helped them engage and focus in the activities, and assisted with the projects.

The Necessary Skills for Teaching

By participating in this experiential learning activity, preservice teachers gained several necessary career readiness skills for teaching including socio-emotional skills and pedagogical content knowledge skills. They had the opportunity to practice their instructional skills in an unstructured environment. They also worked with parents in the community and engaged with children as the “teacher.” Preservice teachers learned how to plan thematic instruction with appropriate transition activities and apply these in a real world setting. Finally, preservice teachers experimented with classroom management strategies in a somewhat representative setting to that of an authentic classroom. These opportunities gave preservice teachers practice at implementing these skills for teaching in an authentic environment where they could bridge theory to practice.

Continued Education after Graduation: New Teacher Academy

Activity

Research over the last 30 years suggests that teacher attrition continues to be a problem for school districts (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Specifically, mentoring and induction programs have been created to provide professional development and support for new teachers (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). A wealth of research has been conducted to suggest that mentoring and induction programs for new teachers are imperative for the professional growth and sustainability of the beginning teacher (Smith, 2011). These initiatives usually fall to the responsibility of the school district and campus. In an attempt to facilitate successful preservice teacher entry into the first few years of teaching, our Teacher Education program developed a New Teacher Academy (NTA).

The NTA was developed to provide a summer bridge between graduation and the first year of teaching. NTA's purpose is to facilitate the transition from preservice to inservice teacher. Moreover, NTA allows university faculty to provide continued support to beginning teachers beyond the walls of academia and acts as supportive mechanism in the holistic induction process. NTA further supports the pipeline for teacher growth and development by providing tailored professional learning opportunities that strengthen pedagogical content knowledge beyond the university coursework.

The NTA was developed in 2014 to provide a one day (6 hour) targeted professional learning development on topics first year teachers struggle with the most (i.e., classroom management, technology integration that enhances learning, navigating the political infrastructure of the campus, working with English Language Learners (ELLs) and other special populations). NTA has grown significantly in size since its beginning, but also in quality of sessions. The sessions are facilitated with university partners (school practitioners and leaders) and they conclude with an overarching session at the end that allows participants to ask questions to a panel of practitioners. Furthermore, the last session also encourages participants to consider furthering their education by pursuing graduate education. Survey data is collected following the event to gauge overall session effectiveness and perceptions of participants learning experiences.

Necessary Skills for Teaching

Data collected from several years of NTA suggest that the hands-on, interactive sessions assisted new teachers in continuing to develop their knowledge of effective pedagogical practices as well as strengthen content knowledge. The breakout sessions provide additional learning opportunities and resources to assist beginning teachers in the transition to their first year of teaching.

The NTA not only provides opportunities to strengthen knowledge, it also provides opportunities for faculty members to serve as mentors outside the traditional confines of the academic classroom in a non-supervisory role. Klein et al. (2015) suggested that faculty members' responsibilities post-graduation are to continue supporting and mentoring beginning teachers. This coaching approach allows for beginning teachers to enter the classroom, more confident in their ability to teach and in their ability to engage students in authentic learning experiences that strengthen students' depth of knowledge. Andrews, Gilbert, and Martin (2006) and Smith (2011) further suggested that new teachers want supportive feedback especially from those in non-supervisory roles. NTA allows just for that - opportunities for continued support, feedback, and enhance learning without the performance evaluations or grades attached to it. These additional opportunities after graduation allow for beginning teachers to strengthen their overall knowledge of teaching and learning.

Faculty Mentoring in Research: Opportunities for Leadership

Activity

Smith (2011) noted that only a few studies have looked into the role university faculty play in beginning teacher mentoring. By engaging in collaborative research endeavors, faculty can help students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels develop writing, public speaking, and presentation skills they will need later in their career (Palmer, 2017). An additional benefit of being mentored by faculty on research projects is the understanding students gain about the value of research and its place in the improvement of professional practice. In many cases, after working

with faculty mentors, students actively transform their perception of academia, and as a result, seek postgraduate degrees (Kehler, Verwoord, & Smith, 2017).

Student Creative Arts and Research Symposium

At this university, graduate and undergraduate students are given opportunities to work with faculty on research, scholarly activities, and creative art projects. The Creative Arts and Research Symposium gives students and their faculty sponsors a forum for showcasing their collaborative work in platform, poster, or virtual formats. Faculty, staff, and students from all campus disciplines gather to view, question, and dialogue in a professional setting. In addition, the university's Chancellor highlights work completed by Student Research Scholars. The symposium permits student scholars to build leadership and other professional skills as they celebrate the student-mentor achievement.

Quality Enhancement Plan. Part of the university's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), is the Experiential Student Scholars Program, which permits graduate and undergraduate students to partner with a faculty mentor in an experiential project or creative arts endeavor. Selection to this group of scholar/mentors is a competitive application process. Once student/faculty dyads complete their projects, QEP supports the teams as they present research data at local, state, regional, national, or international conferences related to their discipline.

Conference presentations. Students at the university also have opportunities to present at conferences in their own right as researchers. Classroom projects that help close the gap between theory and practice are often transformed into poster presentations or joint faculty advisor/student information sessions.

The Necessary Skills for Teaching

By engaging with faculty in collaborative research projects, students develop skills that will enhance their professional careers. Speaking to an audience in presentations, learning to clearly articulate an idea and document the rationale leading up to it, engaging in critical thinking process with a mentor, are only a few of the positive impacts and insights garnered through participation in a faculty mentor relationship.

Concluding Thoughts

Experiential learning activities that occur outside the walls of the academy contribute to additional student understanding of concepts through lived experiences in authentic ways. The learning that occurs outside the classroom allows students to reflect upon new knowledge and apply this understanding to transform their own teaching. Smith (2011) suggested that "extending the role of teacher education beyond graduation can help ease the transition between preservice and inservice education and help new teachers enact practices learned during their teaching preparation program" (p. 316). Moreover, these authentic experiences that happen outside the walls of the academic classroom are correlated with students' positive experiences in preparation programs and their likelihood to remain in the teaching profession after the first few years (DeAngelis, Wall, & Che, 2013).

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