


1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Snyder, David W., "Reflections of pre-Service teachers on their own teaching practices" (2010). *Faculty Publications - College of Education*. Paper 7.
<http://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fped/7>

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Reflections of Pre-service Teachers on Their Own Teaching Practices

DAVID SNYDER

Most university programs ask their pre-service music educators to do some form of small- or large-group instruction as part of their program before the student teaching semester(s). These experiences can vary widely from in-class microteaching in small groups to like-instrument sectionals at a local school to full-fledged ensemble instruction at a professional development site. Undergraduate students and music teacher educators alike find these experiences to be invaluable in preparation for teaching in the schools (Downey, 2008). One of the tools used to deepen these pre-service teaching experiences and consequently the pedagogical knowledge of these teachers is to have them reflect on their teaching episodes. This can be done in several different ways including reflection with peers or a cooperating teacher or self-reflection using video (Wu & Kao, 2008).

The ability of our pre-service teachers to reflect on their craft cannot be overstated. Research findings indicate the emergence of new understandings and conceptions regarding planning and organization, pedagogical strategies, delivery, content knowledge, and classroom management when teachers reflect (Downey, 2008; Yung, et. al., 2007). Reflection that involves other pre-service teaching colleagues is an important developmental tool as well in learning how to teach. Conkling (2007), in her article on situated learning, writes, "... it seems that collaborative reflection, whether face-to-face or mediated by technology, is one of the keys to learning to teach because it allows pre-service teachers to learn from each other."

The focus of this paper is self-reflection on teaching using video. The excerpts

that are used in this paper are taken from the emails of pre-service music teachers at Illinois State University completing their required clinical hours with instrumental students at both the middle school and high school level. Though these teaching episodes were eventually evaluated by the instructor in the areas of teacher presence, classroom management, lesson planning, teaching method, pacing, error detection, pedagogy and assessment, the pre-service teachers received no specific guidelines on how to focus their first reflective comments. The intent was to get a glimpse into the developing teacher psyche and see what teachers-in-training actually *do* notice about their own teaching.

The students involved in this study taught in pairs and fell equally into one of two groups. For one group, these were their first teaching experiences with actual school children and their first time to be videotaped. The other group had worked with school children either the previous semester or during their instrumental methods classes. Most of the students in the second group had also been videotaped teaching before, but were not asked to reflect on their video clips. It was hoped that there would be a difference in the level and content of the comments given by the more experienced group even though they had not received specific guidelines on how the comments should be focused.

The specific questions to be answered in this study were: What do pre-service teachers notice about their own teaching after watching their video clips? Does the focus of comments made by pre-service teachers change with more experience watching video clips and how does this impact their teaching?

ANALYSIS OF REFLECTIVE COMMENTS

The reflections of more than 70 music education students from six different semesters were analyzed for common themes. Each music education student was asked to watch a 10-minute videotaped segment of their own teaching at the beginning of the semester and another 10-minute segment at the end of the semester. These video segments were filmed by the researcher with the camera focused on the teacher. Video clips were then loaded onto a class website for easy access. After viewing the clip, students were asked to write a critique of their own teaching. No other instructions were given than this. The goal was to document what these pre-service teachers noticed about their own teaching with the hope that it would give insight to what is important for them. These comments were submitted to the researcher (who was also these students' university supervisor) to read. The comments were coded by this researcher and subjected to a content analysis, which is a descriptive research technique for the study of verbal, symbolic or communicative data (Casey, 1992). This involved a detailed review of the comments sent over email in order to search for statements that contained similar information. These similar statements were identified and given code labels.

Initial observations made from studying these reflections included three findings: a noted "lack of enthusiasm" from the student musicians being taught; high incidences of self-criticism, and very few comments concerning the student musicians' playing. A lack of enthusiasm from the classroom students was also noted by Fallin and Royce (2000) in their case studies of student teachers. Pre-service teachers often gauge their level of success in teaching by how enthusiastically the students react to their lesson. Past research also shows that when first viewing one's own teaching, comments tend to focus on self and not on the students being taught (Duke & Prickett, 1996, Berg & Smith, 1996). Comments from these pre-service

teachers confirmed that this was indeed the case. Both the experienced (those who had taught in clinical situations before) and inexperienced pre-service teachers alike dedicated part or all of their reflection to comments about themselves. The criticisms most often brought up in these self-focused comments were voice level, talking too much, pacing, lack of clarity in conducting, nervousness and/or lack of confidence. These types of comments are to be expected and seem appropriate for an individual standing in front of a group of students for the first time. A junior, first-time teacher wrote this:

Another thing I noticed was I didn't seem confident. I felt more confident than I looked. If I stand with a good posture, this will help me look more confident. I also noticed that my pacing was really slow. This will come with time as I become more comfortable with teaching.

Another junior, first-time teacher wrote, "I thought my voice level was really good and that I was clearly communicating with the students. I did notice that I was lacking in enthusiasm and they were responding to that negatively."

Video is a wonderful tool for correcting some of these more often mentioned mannerisms such as voice level and posture. All but two students involved in the study reduced their comments on personal mannerisms and voice level or noted improvement in these areas on their second and consequent reflections. A senior, second-time teacher said, "I could hear my instructions clearly on tape and my stance conveyed confidence."

One of the goals of the teacher-educator is to move pre-service teachers from these fairly superficial comments focusing on self to deeper commentaries on the actual instruction that is taking place. This can be accomplished by shifting the pre-service teachers' focus away from self and toward the students in the classroom. After initial reflections were recorded, the pre-service teachers in this study received comments from the supervisor suggesting that they also comment on the student performance in the next video clip. Electronic reflections from the pre-service teachers support the findings of Campbell and Thompson (2007), which state that "it appears that there is a clear desire among pre-service music teachers to create a lasting impact on their students." Our pre-service teachers already possess a desire to have a "lasting impact" on their students; we simply need to remind them to direct their attention toward that goal. By suggesting that the pre-service teachers shift their focus to the students in the class, comments in reflections began to address how to improve instructional methods.

Some of the areas where self-reflection using video proved effective in improving instruction were: reducing the amount of teacher talking and increasing the amount of student playing, structuring of the lesson, and attention to student playing errors. Each of these areas will be addressed separately here.

TEACHER TALKING

Most of the students in the study noticed too much "teacher talking" after watching their first video or during peer reflection with their partner and made comments similar to this one by a senior instrumentalist: "I feel the biggest thing I need to improve on is my ability to state something without *overstating* it." Separate observations of live teaching episodes confirmed that video reflections brought about a reduction in the amount of verbal instruction from the pre-service teachers and increased the amount of time students were able to play. A senior instrumental

major had this to say on his second reflection: “I feel I have a pretty good economy of language and I don’t stumble over my instructions anymore.” This “economy of language” is an important step for beginning teachers to learn. All teachers desire to share what they have learned and experienced over the years with their students, but it takes a maturing teacher to realize that they do not need to share *everything* they know all at once. A few well-chosen words can be much more effective than a long, rambling explanation.

LESSON STRUCTURE

The structure of the lessons themselves was addressed as students continued to reflect. It was fairly common for the pre-service teachers in this study to progress from self-focused comments in their first reflection to those related to the design and flow of the lesson in the second reflection. After coding the reflections for lesson structure, the majority of the pre-service teachers (53 of the 70 students involved) came to recognize when the lesson was not ordered correctly or a key component was missing from the sequence of the lesson. After watching a rather lengthy clip of a brass warm up she did, a senior brass education major said, “I could have done a better job of reinforcing the meaning and purpose behind the breathing (and buzzing) exercises throughout the lesson to save time at the beginning while also applying the concepts to the rest of the music.” Student teachers also realized that variety was necessary in the way basic concepts were addressed. A senior woodwind major said, “I also will strive to find more ways to vary the lesson and find other ways to work on tricky fingerings and other concepts other than just playing it again.”

PLAYING ERRORS

Analysis of these 140 pre-service teacher reflections (two reflections for each of the 70 students) showed a marked lack of comments relating to student playing and specifically, student playing errors. Even after the university supervisor or cooperating teacher on site pointed out playing problems, future reflections still gave little if any attention to this issue. Further, the few teachers who did comment regularly on student playing issues tended to make superficial comments such as this one from a senior brass major: “For my next teaching, I need to know more fingerings and common techniques to help tone quality and intonation. I knew there were issues with the oboe’s playing, but I wasn’t sure how to address it.”

Specific comments related to teaching instruments and the pedagogy that accompanies this knowledge appeared to be of lesser importance to the teachers-in-training in this study. It is expected that pedagogical knowledge on the different instruments will be learned during university programs, but what a student is taught and what is retained or deemed useful are two different things. Researchers have studied university method courses and what role they play in acquiring this knowledge (Haston & Leon-Guerrero, 2008). Music teacher educators have also studied the problem of skill acquisition by focusing on the effectiveness of university method courses (Conway, 2002) while others have noted a “disconnect” in the ability of pre-service teachers to identify what skills they really need to be effective (Campbell & Thompson, 2007). Many university instrument technique classes occur early on in the teacher candidate’s sequence and lack a direct connection to teaching.

It is possible that both the lack of effective undergraduate method courses and the inability for pre-service teachers to “identify” what they need to know to be effective teachers indeed hinders our undergraduate music education population from

becoming fully prepared to teach upon exiting our programs. But the study of these student reflections may also indicate that pre-service teachers must *first* become comfortable with themselves in the role of teacher and then in the ordering and structuring of a lesson before they notice and reflect on the pedagogical knowledge specific to the instruments.

CONCLUSIONS

The music profession should continue to explore ways to make university method courses relevant and applicable to the real world. Ballantyne and Packer (2004) have found that recent graduates most often cite skills specific to teaching music in the classroom as the highest priority for music education programs. But is improving our method courses enough to prepare our pre-service teachers? Teacher educators should also look for more guided teaching opportunities for undergraduate students before student teaching takes place. These added opportunities to teach may help teachers-in-training to progress through the preliminary stages of self-focus and lesson structure to the more advanced stage of error identification and correction within the context of a lesson.

By continuing to allow our pre-service teachers to reflect on their craft, teacher educators can target their feedback to match what the pre-service teachers are noticing about themselves. This in turn will allow the teacher educator to guide the pre-service teacher to deeper levels of reflection. The profession needs to acknowledge what our pre-service teachers are seeing in their own teaching, whether it is the way they look and sound or how much they talk, before we can guide them to focus on other issues such as lesson structure, pedagogy or student learning.

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