

Secondary and Middle School Synthesis Project

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Introduction

I welcome the thoughtful judgment and insight of whomever has either elected to read or has been fortunate enough to receive what I like to call a “Masterpiece of Educational Reflective Practice.” In case you are unaware...a little about me: Currently a senior at the University of Missouri, I am in pursuit of a Bachelors of Science in Education—Social Studies (9-12) with a Minor in Theatre. During this last semester of studies at the university, I am proud of my assignment for student teaching at Oakland Junior High School with the ever-popular Mr. Josh Johnson. This position did not just come out of luck; I had actually spent two consecutive semesters, prior to this one, with Johnson. Although the past three semesters have been dedicated to Oakland, I have had several varying educational experiences as part of the Preservice Teaching component within the Learning Teaching and Curriculum program. Such Preservice Teaching experiences include assisting a fifth grade math class at Fairview Elementary, to mentoring a kindergartener in the Moving Ahead Program, to tutoring and building one-on-one relationships with students in the Hickman Social Studies Resource Center.

In addition to my field experience, I participated in a month-long study abroad program in Carpi, Italy summer 2011. During this program I was placed with an Italian host family where only one member spoke English. I also volunteered in an Italian middle school co-teaching alongside the teacher of English. To classify this program as a summer elective course is truly an understatement of this academically enlightening experience. No list of descriptors could fully encompass the genius of the program. However, I do feel confident in saying that the time I spent in the Italian middle school classrooms, while also living with a wonderful host family, fully immersed me into an unfamiliar culture.

However, these collegiate experiences did not come without their share of challenges. I began my college career as a declared education major. After taking one theatre class my first semester, I knew instantly that I desired to pursue a minor. A few semesters went by, I reevaluated my path, and apparently I reached what I learned is called a “quarter-life crisis.” I was at a crossroads between adding a double major in education and theatre or dropping the education major all together and just focusing on theatre. I consulted family, faculty, friends, and weighed my options. I chose education, ran with it, and have not looked back.

Ultimately, I decided that I could balance my two passions on separate levels—education as a career and theatre as extra-curricular. Through my involvement with the theatre department, I have been able to play an active role: take classes, act in a main-stage production (*Eurydice*), provide service outreach for the community, and serve as Vice President for the theatre honor fraternity, Alpha Psi Omega. I do not look at my love for theatre as a hindrance to my passion for education, because, in a lot of ways, teaching is like acting.

So, on that note, prepare yourself for a spectacle of reflection as I bestow upon you the highlights of field and student teaching, the lessons learned and places to grow, and everything in between.

Self as a Curriculum Decision Maker

Being with Johnson at Oakland has done wonders for me as a curriculum decision maker. Maybe it is because I have been with Johnson for two semesters prior to this semester or he just naturally lets student teachers take the reigns, but from day one I have been encouraged to create, mold, and adapt lessons like nobody’s business. This is not to say that I have not utilized Johnson’s wisdom of fourteen years of teaching nor is it to say that I have I refused to ever look at any of his previously made lessons, worksheets, PowerPoints, projects, etc.; however, I am

very happy to say that I have felt one hundred percent comfortable implementing lessons I have created into our class.

In all reality, the method of lesson planning that works best for me is to create lessons from the ground up. There's something about the way my mind works that makes it extremely helpful to me to know everything that I am teaching. This includes me finding all background knowledge on the subject, creating the PowerPoints, designing the worksheets, and then fitting it all together into a cohesive lesson with flow—all the while working hard to include the constructivist essentials of hard and soft scaffolds, MOE, accordion affect and the like.

This semester I have been fortunate to share a wall with my fellow colleague Erin Wolfe; so, we have worked tirelessly together to create lessons that will keep us on the same track as two separate classrooms while also engaging our students in our own ways to promote learning and growth. For example, with the guidance of each of our host teachers, the weekly PLC meetings, and Oakland's curriculum guide, we not only built an entire judicial branch unit from the bottom up but we also designed our very own Bill of Rights project for our students.

Creating both the judicial branch unit and the Bill of Rights projects on our own has been a proud accomplishment of my student teaching experience. Creating lessons and projects from scratch is one of those things you know you will have to do as a teacher or at least should attempt to do, but you just do not know what it will be like until you try it. And, then you have to worry about how students will respond. Based on the lessons that I created with Erin, my students responded well each day to the tasks at hand, and at the end of the unit performed well above average range on the exam. When it comes to the Bill of Rights project, because of the snow days Erin and I had to adapt the curriculum to fit a one week only period of teaching all of the Bill of Rights content. This was a challenge, but we prevailed. In the attached documents in this

synthesis project, you will find an example lesson dealing with political cartoons, a rubric for how each lesson would be evaluated each day, and a final project guideline that details the essential components to be included in the students' final Bill of Rights projects. Essentially, the students were making a synthesis project of their own; because, the students were given back all work completed throughout the week (which was designed to scaffold their learning from day to day) and then expected to compile that information into one project that showcased everything they had learned.

As a curriculum decision maker, I have learned the significance of researching topics, heeding advice of those around you, and ultimately knowing what lesson designs are best for your class. It is important when implementing lessons that there is a great variety in lesson structure so that students are wondering what each day will bring. While students claim to enjoy PowerPoint and lecture over student driven, constructivist learning, it is my belief students do not actually enjoying it nor are they necessarily learning more from it. Students enjoy lecture-based learning because it is easy; it requires less of them to complete an assignment. By working hard to design lessons to challenge students each and every day, we as teachers can build curriculum to set a new standard for the classroom.

Self as Culturally and Socially Responsive

Coming into this semester of student teaching, I was fortunate to have already developed some strong relationships with the honors block students that were part of my Preservice teaching during the previous semester. This gave me something to look forward to in my day until I was able to build even more relationships with students in the other classes. It really was no time at all until I had connected with students from the regular classes and established the

routines and procedures necessary so they could become familiarized with my ways of teaching as I became familiarized with who they are as students.

Oakland is a vastly different schooling environment than what I am used to. This is one of the main reasons I aspired to stay in Columbia in the first place. The community is much more diverse than mine back home in the suburbs of Saint Louis. However, I did not truly understand the dynamic of Oakland until this semester of student teaching by being exposed to a wider mix of students. There are students from all levels of socioeconomic status. There are students from all sorts of cultural backgrounds. There are very excellent students while at the same time many students who struggle to succeed (though failure is not an option and every child should be set up for success).

Day after day while watching students, talking to students, listening to conversations, etc. I began to feel for these kids in a very different way. It made me rethink the purpose of schools. I'm still trying to combat this battle of the purpose of schools in my head, but one of the most profound thoughts I had came to me during a meeting with a group of teachers I attended as Johnson's sidekick. In the meeting, there was a reading we discussed that was basically reiterating many points I had already been exposed to in TDP 2000, but said that we as teachers need to learn students' currencies to be able to reach them; and that each student has a different currency so we must adapt our currencies to fit each student's needs. But the bigger message I took away from the reading is that schools are a safe place. First, we must recognize that schools have to be a safe place and then we can work on the currencies. So, this got me thinking: Are schools no longer a place to come and learn basic facts and skills for life? Have they become zones of safety where we just watch the students and look out for them? Or, is there some balance that we as teachers must find in order to provide a necessary education to prepare

students for the future while also creating this network of safety and acceptance. I think the later is what we are striving for. Again after observing the students it is clear that while many of them pretend to resist school, they still come. Why? It is a safe place for them to be; a place for students to turn when their homes are not as such. So while the teachers struggle to find ways to make the learning environment as engaging as possible, the students are also struggling to find ways to accept the learning environment in order to have a safe place in which to escape. This was difficult for me to understand at first. I was not afraid of my home...it was safe; and, I loved to learn. Therefore I did not hate being at school. But, with a group of students like those at Oakland, the game of school has to change to fit students who deserve a good education but also might need a safe place to turn.

Self as Instructional and Classroom Manager

Classroom management is one of those areas of teaching where I feel like there is always room to improve. Very few seasoned veterans will even admit they are exceptional at classroom management, though many of them are. I think it is important to constantly reflect on our role as teachers in the classroom to see how best to manage our students. The best way to manage a class is to be organized. Organization goes a long way in the classroom and students notice it. By being an organized teacher, students will see that there is an order, which makes it more difficult for students to break or question the established order. It is also important to have well made lessons that keep students engaged, focused, and on task. The way to achieve this is to build a great deal of scaffolding into each lesson.

For example, if teachers create lessons where students have to move from task to task with minimal downtime, there will be no moment for students to stray from work. I have done several lessons in the format of: hook, mini-lecture, use of media (i.e. YouTube clip),

introduction of assignment, think-pair-share, whole class discussion. The idea with this being that each task builds upon the other so the students' learning grows as the tasks grow. It is important for the teacher to be on top of his or her game as well during lessons like this so that students can recognize the ever presence of watchful eye in the classroom. The classroom environment Johnson and I have created has a comfortable flow. Students respond to the routines and procedures, such as coming in and completing the warm-up activity each day, spending a few minutes analyzing and discussing the fact of the day, talking about the objectives for the day, and then going right into the engagement for the lesson of the day as described above.

I have taken many personal tips from Johnson on classroom management, but by far the most common reoccurring issue is students not returning to their seats after a group activity. And this is my fault a lot of the time. I seem to forget to have students return to seats for class debrief, but it really does make a world of difference to have all students back in their original seats for discussion time. This helps prevent any chaos that might erupt, and I'm still working to make this a common routine in the classroom.

As far as discipline in the classroom goes, it's very difficult to master. There are ways to discipline that are from a very assertive style with raised voice and calling out students right then and there. And, then there is the complete opposite, like I used a lot with Montessori education, where it's a lot of compassion and choosing different words to use with students in order to achieve the desired result. The solution: find a delicate balance between these two polar opposites. I had to establish this very early on in my student teaching. Luckily, the students I was given to teach are generally well-behaving students and respectful toward each other and the teacher. However, they are kids and all have their moments that inhibit learning in the

classroom. I come off as a very happy-go-lucky kind of person so I knew that if I didn't show that I could be different than this is times that were necessary, then students would find ways to walk all over me, and that is just unacceptable for a teacher in a classroom. In the beginning, I was not afraid to raise my voice and be more assertive with students when they did something that interfered with the learning environment. Students responded. Johnson even had a talk with student he coached for basketball in which the student told Johnson something along the lines of, "We were so shocked when Mr. Niewoehner said what he said today. We thought he was so nice. But, man we really listened after he got onto _____." There were moments after this in which I still had run-ins with a few repeat offender students and I just did not like having to use this method of correcting behavior. So I started adopting the choosing of words method (based on the Montessori way of teaching) but adopting it to create high school acceptable lingo. For example giving students choices, expressing that you (as the teacher) are sorry they did not make the right choice, and using the BIST system also lends itself to making this method effective. I found that having a more lax style of disciplining students that tells them exactly what you expect from them in conjunction with an assertive demeanor is the best way to receive desired results from students.

Self as a Professional Educator

A big fear of mine in life is disappointment. I never want to let people down. Therefore, I have striven to ensure that I am always open to conversation, around to help out, and a team player. Our weekly PLC meetings have been great outlets for me to work on building a presence as a professional educator. Many times Erin and Garry had relied on me to present our plans during meetings and speak as one for our trio. I was always prepared to bring something new to the table to showcase what we had been working on as a student teaching team.

One of the ways I have tried to help out around the school is by getting out and volunteering with the school play. The drama teacher asked me to help go over lines with struggling student actors and set the lighting for the show. Theatre is a big part of my life and I loved every minute of helping out a director and seeing kids working hard behind the scenes to make a show come alive. In addition, Johnson has asked me to help out with events, such as assisting on judging panels for government projects with other classes, working track meets hosted by Oakland, and presenting awards to students during a night of special acknowledgments.

I have felt and continue to feel very welcome in the school. This makes me feel not only like an accepted and honorary faculty member, but it also helps me want to make a difference that much more.

Conclusion

My ambition to teach social studies comes from a love for the field, a dedication to student learning, and an optimistic outlook for the future. Blessed does not even begin to describe my feelings regarding the education I received as a child. Sure, there were those teachers who did not put forth the greatest effort, but my will to teach does not come from them; it is strongly rooted in the positive relationships from the teachers that highly impacted my life. I want to be one of those teachers for students; I want my students to walk away from their day at school still thinking about school and always curious of the educational opportunities their futures hold.