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EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF CRITICAL REFLECTION THROUGH THE USE OF SERVICE-LEARNING AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING

By

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ABSTRACT

In an ongoing effort to address the needs of 21st century teachers, a service-learning project was designed which coupled structured reflection and technology. The reflective practitioner model through the use of traditional methods course work has long been viewed as the most appropriate model for the development of teachers (Hall, 2012). However, deep reflection is difficult for most pre-service teachers, and is often viewed as assignments that need to be completed in order to successfully complete a course, instead of being viewed as a powerful learning tool that can be used to empower and engage in their own development (Stenberg, 2010). One way of evidencing this reflection and deep learning is through the creation of digital stories (Barrett, 2006). This case study presents the application and outcomes of a service-learning project between an urban university and an elementary school in which pre-service teachers utilized digital storytelling as a method for critical reflection and application of content methodology. The focus on the pre-service teacher's understanding of content skills, reflective inquiry and enhanced technology skills also supports the National Educational Technology Standards.

Key Words: Pre-Service Teachers, Digital Storytelling, Academic Service-Learning, Reflection, Community Partnership.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, teacher education programs across North Carolina are in the process of transformation due to the implementation of new professional teacher standards. These standards are the basis for teacher preparation, teacher evaluation, and professional development. While technology integration and application is inherent in these standards, the National Educational Technology Standards, 2008 (NETS) are utilized as a source for performance indicators.

In response to these standards, North Carolina Central University (NCCU) revised its Teacher Education Program. The main issues that emerged were the need for increased substantive field experiences, diverse reflective techniques and increased technology skills for teacher candidates. It is believed that the implementation of a service-learning framework offers an avenue for addressing all of these issues. To this end, the School of Education at NCCU employed service learning pedagogy in select methods courses. Currently, there are a handful of professors who have worked to sustain this practice by implementing service learning projects in place of standard field service experiences.

The "The Man in the Mirror" case study reflects an effort to increase the reflective capabilities of pre service teachers and extend their learning through an integrated use of a culminating digital storytelling project. By building a strong partnership with a local elementary school, a professor worked closely with the administration and teaching staff at a Title I elementary school (where 50-100% of the students receive free or reduced lunch), to design a service learning project that not only met the instructional needs of the K-5 students, but also supported the content integration skills of the education course.

This sixteen week service-learning project provided multiple opportunities for the pre-service candidates to increase their content knowledge, skills and dispositions.   While reflection is already an inherent quality of a strong service learning pedagogy, the addition of the digital storytelling project proved to be the most important aspect of the course. This addition, served to provide a structured outlet for the candidates to voice their ideas, concerns and

thoughts about issues that they faced during the semester. The project ultimately challenged the candidates to critically reflect on issues that impact K-5 learners. This study explores the theories that framed the service learning/digital storytelling project, presents an in-depth look into the collaboration, noting the strengths and complexities and discusses recommendations in an effort to support other collaborative projects.

A New Vision for Pre-Service Teacher Education

A 21st century vision of teacher quality dictated new roles for teachers in classrooms and schools. These roles required teachers to have the propensity to be critical and reflective thinkers, to be proficient in their understanding of content, as well as, to be able to integrate technology as a means of enriching the content. In order to accomplish these goals, teacher education programs must focus on a new way of conveying the information. Service-learning, has emerged as pedagogy for rejecting the "banking model of education, where the downward transference of information from knowledgeable teachers to passive students is conducted in minute increments (Smith, et al, 2005)." It is defined as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities with the following attributes:

1. Students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with schools and communities;

2. It is integrated into the students' academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the service activity;

3. It provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real life situations in a community; and

4. It enhances what is taught in the classroom by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others and civic engagement (Wolf and Laurier, 2006 and Wurr and Hamilton, 2012).

A major focus of service-learning is to ensure a reciprocal benefit between the pre-service teacher candidate and the community partner (school, classroom or student) (Novak & Murray, 2009 and Evans, 2013) and even though, there is substantial evidence that supports the benefits, an extensive national survey of pre-service teacher training programs found only a few cases where service-learning was central to teacher preparation. This issue may contribute to the documented ongoing gap between pre-service teachers and their students (which continues to grow) due to the fact that teacher education programs are still struggling to find ways to re-orient their candidate's dispositions, content knowledge and skills (Kesten, 2012, and Stenberg, 2010).

Luckily, teacher preparation programs across the country have been moving toward a more holistic conceptualization of the pre-service teacher experience, which are marked by more substantive field experiences that support ongoing reflection and an increased collaboration between universities and public schools. Collaboration and reflection have been found to be the main ingredients to build a strong school-university partnership where both entities are working toward increased student achievement (Ledoux and McHenry, 2008, Thomas, et. al, 2012). Even though, this project focused mostly on the development of the pre-service teacher's increased achievement, as reflection has always been viewed as an integral component of pre-service teacher growth and development.

Reflection has been defined in many different ways. It usually includes or is prompted by some level of uncertainty that needs to be resolved. The process of reflection involves a continuum, which is defined as a gradual transition from one condition to another without any abrupt changes (Daniels, Patterson and Dunston, 2010). Moreover, reflection is a critical component to the success of service learning projects and is supportive for students, teacher candidates, and site leadership because it allows all involved the ability to critically examine the experience of the project and learn from both positive and negative experiences. Although, critical reflection doesn't occur by accident; it is essential for faculty to design structured

reflection activities in order to ensure that critical reflection is an outcome of the service-learning experience. Structured reflection has been found to refine critical thinking skills that support being receptive to a variety of ideas and anticipating the significance of one's own actions (Brannon, 2013 and Ledoux and McHenry, 2008).

Digital Storytelling, Reflection and Pre-Service Teacher Education

Digital storytelling at its most basic core is the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories. There are a wealth of other terms used to describe this practice, such as digital documentaries, computer-based narratives, digital essays, electronic memoirs, interactive storytelling, etc.; but in general, they all revolve around the idea of combining the art of telling stories with a variety of multimedia, including graphics, audio, video, and Web publishing. Digital storytelling usually consists of a short, 3-5 minute video, produced by someone who is not a media professional, and usually constructed as a thought piece on a personal experience (Rivera, 2011) The creation of the digital story includes incorporating multimedia components such as images, music, video and a narration, which is usually narrated in the author's own voice (Dogan and Robin, 2008).

In a review of the literature, Long (2011) revealed a good deal of information on the use of digital storytelling with pre-service teachers. The author noted that Barrett (2006) has advocated the use of digital storytelling in conjunction with pre-service teachers' digital portfolios, and states that it "…is a highly motivating strategy that can make reflection concrete and visible. While, Li and Morehead (2006) conducted an exploratory research project which engaged college students (teacher candidates) in using digital storytelling as one of the approaches to build their e-portfolio, through reflection and self-assessment of the learning process. The researchers found it to be "…a useful tool in the enhancement of teaching and learning new literacies in today's technology enriched environments." (p. 6)

It was further found that in 2009, Kearney supported the role of digital stories in the development of teacher portfolios. Kearney found that "…digital stories can help address the problem of reflection being perceived by students as over used and that students can use new media to, "…initiate reflective processes in compelling ways…" (p. 8) and called for further research into the use of digital storytelling with pre-service teachers, which he terms, "…a crucial but underdeveloped area of research into teacher learning." (p. 9). Additionally in 2009, Drazdowski investigated the use of digital storytelling with teachers. He found that the effort to train teachers in the use of digital storytelling definitely had merit, and that digital storytelling has a great deal to offer education. Drazdowski also states that, "We in teacher education now face the challenge of infusing these digital storytelling skills throughout the teacher education curriculum." (p. 3) (Long, 2011).

Daniels, Patterson, and Dunston (2010) offered that if students are to reach higher levels of reflection to support their professional development, it is essential that they have a strategic and systematic way of capturing the process in an effort to guide accountability. Additionally, Bullough (2011) suggests that in order to continuously progress, candidates must be guided to do more than "just think hard about what they do." The process should involve posing questions, searching for alternative answers, and seeking a deeper meaning of what is done. To be useful, reflection should include both individual and collaborative questioning about what is taught and how it is taught. Initially, reflection may focus on "what," which is referred to as the technical level, where they may only be interested in refining teaching strategies. At this stage, typical questions that occur are prompted by challenges about the quality of teaching or the effects of teaching on students. For example, a candidate may ask themselves, "I thought those changes I made for Alicia in the math materials for today's lesson were exactly what she needed. I wonder why they didn't work very well!" The contextual level is marked by the realization of cause-and-effect relationships, where a candidate might ask themselves, "My response to Mary's behavior was great yesterday. I know what she did today is due to the same reason, but she didn't respond as well. I wonder what else was going on that could be getting in the way?" They may also ask questions that focus on the relationship between their actions (and the actions of others) and specific situations that occur in the teaching

situation as well as in the context of a program, the school, and/or the community. Lastly, the critical level occurs when the candidates find themselves contemplating issues about teaching and its impact on larger systemic issues. For example, "How is access to healthcare related to how students learn?." This is the broadest form of reflection and may focus on ideas such as social justice. Researchers have noted that these levels are developmental and not everyone will progress through all levels to reach critical reflection (Daniels, Patterson and Dunston, 2010).

Expounding on this work of (Daniels, Patterson and Dunston, 2010), a systematic and strategic system was developed to orient and engage pre-service teacher candidate's reflections through these developmental stages. In an effort to hold the candidate's accountable for the process, Qualitative Reflection Journals (QRJ) were used to prompt the candidate's to think about their content knowledge, skills and dispositions as they related to the course readings and the larger context of society. These journals were the initial step in holding candidates accountable for the reflection process. Specifically, the goals were for the candidates to:

- think about the teaching,

- challenge and/or validate beliefs, and

- develop and test cause-and-effect theories related to connecting the teaching to outcomes for students

The Digital Storytelling Project (DSTP) was used as a means to bring innovative and additional structure to the reflective process that supports teacher education, additionally, as an educational technology tool, it utilized almost all of the skills that 21st century skills that students are expected to have (Dogan, 2012 and Jakes, 2006). This project sought to meet the following NETS (2008) goals and performance indicators:

Facilitate and Inspire Student Learning and Creativity

1. Teachers promote, support, and model creative and innovative thinking and inventiveness.

2. Teachers engage students in exploring real-world issues and solving authentic problems using digital tools and resources.

3. Teachers promote student reflection using collaborative tools to reveal and clarify students' conceptual understanding and thinking, planning, and creative processes.

Model Digital-Age Work and Learning

1. Teachers demonstrate fluency in technology systems and the transfer of current knowledge to new technologies and situations.

2. Teachers collaborate with students, peers, parents, and community members using digital tools and resources to support student success and innovation.

Given the fact that the research in the use of this technology for pre-service teacher reflection is limited, this project sought to build a platform for the sustainability of this framework.

The case study presents the strengths and challenges to providing pre-service teacher candidates with an authentic service-learning project that incorporated structured reflection through technology integration. The engaging candidates in these types of experiences enhances teacher education by producing practitioners who are better prepared to positively impact the quality of experiences for K-5 learners.

The Partnership

George Watts Montessori Magnet Elementary is a unique public school set in the heart of Durham, North Carolina, that serves 380 students. The school's population is very diverse with a healthy mix of White, African-American, and Hispanic families attending. Within each ethnic subgroup there are varying levels of cultural and economical differences. Although officially considered a Title I school, having over 60% of families qualifying for free or reduced lunch, the remaining families fall into the middle and upper end of the economic spectrum, making for a truly diverse school culture. As a result, members of the school community (staff, parents, and outside community members) have worked to build a strong extensive network of partnerships with local businesses, non-profit organizations, neighborhood associations, community centers and churches to support the needs of the school. Since the school is just a short drive from North Carolina Central University, there is a strong element of support

community service and service learning from the university. This project has allowed NCCU to continue the tradition of building and sustaining community partnerships within the context of need. The schools surrounding the campus view the university as a partner, which supports them with a myriad of needs (technical assistance, volunteers, financial, etc.).

Schools and universities have long history of partnering together because each can benefit from the resources that they can provide for each other. Trust is a staple of any partnership and this is true of universities and academic departments who embark on partnerships with community agencies. Chang, et. al. (2011), stated that in order for service-learning partnerships to work, continuous relationships must be sustained from semester to semester and year to year. It is essential for the viability of the program as well as, to send a message to the community partners that the university is committed to working with schools and K-12 learners. Although, this is often hard to accomplish as students move on, faculty instructors teach different courses and the needs of the community change.

Another challenge to this type of project is ensuring that faculty understands the need for effective instructional design in regards to reflective activities. To negate these limitations, a collaborative effort was established in an effort to design a course for pre-service teacher candidates. The course, EDU 3150: Instructional Planning and Classroom Management was redesigned to support early pre-service candidates who have just been admitted into the Teacher Education Program (TEP). This is one of the first courses that are taken in the TEP. During the academic year (two semesters), the course is taught 3-4 times. In a typical year, between 60-80 pre-service teacher candidates and over 550 K-5 students are impacted. During the first year of implementation, the course was redesigned to meet the needs of the diverse learners in the school while giving the candidates an opportunity to reflect on the most appropriate teaching and learning strategies. This article reflects one sixteen week semester, in which 15 pre-service candidates spent 2.5 hours a week developing their own content knowledge and reflections skills while developing the writing and math skills of 120 Kindergarten

through fifth grade students. Each pre-service candidate was assigned a class to work with. The unique nature of the Montessori program allows for multi-level grading, therefore all classes are comprised of different grade levels; Primary (Pre-K and Kindergarten), Lower Elementary (1st-3rd) and Upper Elementary (4th and 5th). This combination of levels provides an opportunity for the pre-service candidate to work with more than one grade level at a time, additionally; a teacher could opt to work with more than one pre-service candidate.

While the pre-service candidates were involved with working with all of the students in the classroom, for the purpose of the project, they were instructed to work with small groups of 6-8 students. The elementary learners were selected by the teachers and represented a variety of academic levels, 24 Primary students, 68 from Lower El. and 28 from Upper El. The common variable across all grade levels was the need for additional assistance to improve writing and math skills. This focus had previously been identified by the school, as specific academic needs. An additional unique aspect of this collaboration included access to not only the classrooms but also the school building during the day. The administration and staff made logistical accommodations so that the class could be held in the school building during the day. This benefited the candidates in many ways; it allowed them to have direct access to the K-5 students and for the administrators and teachers to have direct access to them. Additionally, the faculty instructor was available during each class session. While the candidates were completing their service (teaching lessons), the instructor and/or a teacher/administrator were observing and evaluating to provide critical feedback. This collaboration sought to support the candidate's content knowledge and skills, while the DSTP was guided and evaluated only by the course instructor.

The students were instructed to follow a set process and given the overall criteria for the DSTP, however, they had the freedom and flexibility to create and develop their own reflective story.

Digital Storytelling Process, Criteria and Content

Each family of a K-5 student, who was selected to

participate in the small group lessons, was asked to sign a parental consent form for videotaping. This was an additional measure, as the school system requires that each family sign a document at the beginning of each year that allow the children at the school to be photographed and videotaped for educational purposes. Pre-service candidates who volunteer and work in the schools are covered under this document. Once the children were selected and had submitted their consent forms, the candidates wrote a series of 4 sequential lesson plans that focused on literacy or math (that were approved by the professor, their supporting classroom teacher and the assistant principal), and after the lessons were approved; they were required to videotape and journal their reflections of the lessons. These lessons and journal reflections became the basis for the DTSP. The process of creating the content for the DSTP took on three to four major components:

1. Videotape the lessons.

2. Review the recorded lessons and answer a series of reflective questions (What were the positive aspects of the lesson? What was challenging about the lesson? How did you handle classroom management? What could you improve? What are the specific steps you will take to improve this lesson?).

3. Reteach the lesson, review the recorded lesson and answer a series of reflective questions (What were the positive aspects of the lesson? What was challenging about the lesson? How did you handle classroom management? Note three ways that the lesson improved and cite the reasons why?) Repeat Step 3 if requested by professor, supporting teacher or administrator.

4. Complete a QRJ after each lesson is viewed.

The criteria for showcasing and evaluating the content of the DSTP took on four components:

1. The story displays a clear focus and purpose.

2. The story is visually appealing and the use of images and media match the tone of the story.

3. The story includes appropriate detail and reflects each of the lessons that were taught.

4. The story clearly demonstrates the candidate's engagement with the content.

5. The story clearly demonstrates the candidate's reflection of content knowledge and/or disposition of each lesson.

Each of these criteria became the basis for a rubric, which guided the final evaluation of the product. Candidates were given the rubric at the beginning of the semester and were reminded to use it as they developed their individual projects.

Once the candidate had recorded all of the lessons and completed their journal reflections, they were invited to begin to craft a story of reflection for the final DSTP. The project goal was to showcase their growth and development in the content area (lesson planning) over the course of teaching the four lessons. This provided a distinctive opportunity for them to enhance their content knowledge and increase their technology and reflection skills.

From a pedagogical viewpoint, much like service-learning, Digital Storytelling appeals to students with diverse learning styles and can also foster collaboration when students are able to work in groups, and provides value in enhancing the student experience through personal ownership and accomplishment (Yang and Wu, 2012). Moreover, when students use digital storytelling, it provides a strong foundation in many different types of literacy, including information literacy, visual literacy, technological literacy, and, media literacy (Brown, Bryan and Brown, 2005). This aligns with what they describe as "Twenty-First Century Literacy," which is a the combination of:

- **Digital Literacy** -the ability to communicate with an ever-expanding community to discuss issues, gather information, and seek help;

- **Global Literacy** -the capacity to read, interpret, respond, and contextualize messages from a global perspective;

- **Visual Literacy** -the ability to understand, produce, and communicate through visual images;

- **Technology Literacy** -the ability to use computers and other technology to improve learning, productivity, and performance;

- Information Literacy -the ability to find, evaluate and synthesize information (Brown, Bryan and Brown, 2005).

A Digital Story is Worth a Thousand Words (or more)!

In the context of this project, Digital Storytelling was the method used for student reflection in which a digital video was created that showcased their growth through the service learning project. This approach was selected over others because of the strong evidence that people seem to be "hard wired" to both tell; listen to and remember stories, as well, it is noteworthy to use this particular pedagogical tool (Williams, Bedi & Goldberg, 2006). The authors further note that, "for students, digital storytelling grounds learning in their personal history and broadens and deepens the learning as a result." This multimedia project allowed the students to tell a story about themselves and their transformation as pre-service teachers from the beginning of the project to the end. In this story, they had to show clips (either still shots or video) of their work with the children, and also simultaneously reflect on their lessons. Additionally, they were asked to reflect on issues of social justice that may or may not have affected the project.

This service-learning project supported student engagement, increased academic, leadership and technology skills, as well as gave candidates the opportunity to learn content in an authentic manner. The pre-service teachers remarked at how much more they felt that they learned by completing the digital storytelling reflections. They noted that they were better equipped to reflect on their own challenges and successes through turning the "lens" on their teaching. Because they were constantly reflecting on their content knowledge, teaching skills and dispositions in a meaningful way, they were able to ask themselves hard questions, change behaviors and view their work through a more critical lens. The digital storytelling component offered a unique opportunity for deep reflection yet at the same time the experience allowed the pre-service candidates to connect their personal stories to those of the children who they worked with in the schools. This connection was imperative to helping them begin to recognize the contributions of diversity and to be better prepared to take action in order to

change and or challenge an aspect of their own or some other's condition (Chang, 2011 and Sapp, 2002).

Conclusion

As teacher preparation programs work toward increased pre-service teacher quality, the requirement for pedagogical shifts in field experiences has challenged infrastructures. Service learning pedagogy has emerged as a theory that has considerable potential to support the 21st Century Teaching Standards. Moreover, at one HBCU, a successful framework for learning is representative of a strong collaborative partnership and structured service-learning reflection activities that incorporate technology. The present case study suggests that when coupled with technology integration, service-learning is a pedagogy that supports critical reflection.

While this study provides valuable insight into service-learning, critical reflection and technology integration, several limitations must be mentioned. It is imperative to have a system and culture in which technology and technical assistance are warranted and valued. The successful implementation of this projects and projects that wish to emulate this one, hinge on the ability to have the support from the department and access to current technology and training. In a study of Digital Storytelling and in-service teachers, Dogan and Robin (2008) found similar challenges, and added "time" as an additional challenge to taking on projects such as these. Additionally, this study utilized a relatively small sample size and relied on data that was self-reported (surveys, journal entries, self-reflection assessments etc.). Thus, any attempts to generalize the results beyond similar students, courses, evaluations and teaching standards may yield different outcomes. Additional research in this area may seek to focus on longitudinal studies, which ascertain if the pre-service teachers utilize digital storytelling as a means for critical reflection within their own classrooms.

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