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Suggestions for Implementing First Year Experience Learning Communities in Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

This article describes the creation of a First Year Experience learning community in a teacher education program. The First Year Experience model was adopted by the university because of declining enrollment, retention, and graduation rates and has been generally successful in the education department. With little information available for teacher educators about this type of learning community, we offer recommendations for implementing and evaluating them.

Keywords

Teacher Education, Problem-based Learning, Field Experiences, First Year Experiences, Learning Communities

Background

Minot State University (MSU) is a four-year public university in northwestern North Dakota, offering more than 60 undergraduate majors in its three degree-granting colleges. In 2015, MSU had an enrollment of 3,348 students, of whom 3,064 were undergraduates and 962 were first-year students. Like many universities across the country, MSU has faced declining enrollments and low retention and graduation rates. Consequently, MSU implemented the First Year Experience (FYE) program in Fall 2009 and encouraged students to participate in learning communities. Following a paired, clustered, or linked courses model (Levine Laufgraben, 2005; Zrull, Rocheleau, Smith, & Bergman, 2012), students take a group of two or three classes in the same semester with 20-25 students in their cohort. Each group of classes is linked with a theme and assignments designed to be interconnected. Some FYEs have two general education classes and an integrated studies class (UNIV 110); others are specific to students in a particular major and use a different combination of UNIV 110 and required courses. The UNIV classes typically link the content of the two other classes and provide ways to further explore concepts and develop academic and communication skills. Each UNIV class has a college student serving as a peer mentor.

When the program began, the FYE was required of students whose profile indicated they might need extra support. This group included students with low ACT scores and grade point averages as well as those supported by the federally-funded TRIO program due to their status as students who are first-generation, from low-income families, or with disabilities. Other students could also register for the learning communities. In Fall 2014, as a part of the new general education requirements, enrollment in the learning communities became mandatory for all incoming first-year students with fewer than 24 credits of transfer hours. By Fall 2016, MSU offered 16 FYE learning communities, which served a number of functions, such as ensuring successful transitions of students to college life and introducing students to foundational content in their majors.

Learning Community Structure

Courses

Faculty in the Teacher Education Department expressed enthusiasm for the FYE model and elected to participate in the program from the onset. This FYE combines Educational Psychology, Introduction to Psychology, a clinical class for 16 hours of field observations, and the UNIV class. During a typical week in this FYE, students spend seven hours in class together. The three major FYE goals are to create course content connections, support student relationship-building, and

provide an authentic introduction to the field of education. In contrast to foundational education courses that are based heavily in content lecture occurring in a university classroom (or what we consider *inauthentic* introductions to teaching), this FYE allows students to explore the field of teaching in K-12 classrooms through collaborative discussion and problem-based learning. The FYE is encouraged for students in any field of education as well as those majoring in communication disorders, since the courses are also requirements for those majors. Students from any major are welcome to join, and we regularly enroll students from psychology, sociology, and history, or those unsure of their teaching interest.

Field Experience

As our department began preparations for our CAEP visit, we researched the new standards, which emphasize increased field experiences (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2013). In response to these standards, we use the UNIV class to observe in the schools and tie the two courses together. During class, we travel to four local schools at primary, elementary, middle, and high school grade levels, spending 60-75 minutes of observation at each. Our students follow the children to music, physical education, and recess to get a full observation experience. The following week, we debrief the visit and categorize students' observations into areas of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, using guided practice within a professional community (Hollins, 2015). The students also observe an additional 16 hours in classrooms of their preferred grade level. The field experiences help students confirm their interest in teaching field and grade level, learn about current practices in public schools classrooms, and provide additional examples of the concepts we discuss in class.

Theme

We selected the FYE title *Great Minds Think Alike. Or Do They?*, which serves as both the theme and an essential question (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013) meant to prompt discussions on similarities and differences among students in classrooms. This theme serves as the key focus in all of our FYE courses; course texts are selected that allow investigation of the theme, including the common reading, *Mindset* (Dweck, 2016). Over the semester, we start by defining the question, researching information, and then presenting arguments for each side. This framework functions as an introduction to research at the college level, and students use both their observations and research to support their opinions. In early iterations of the FYE, we ended the semester with a structured debate but found that too many relationships that we worked so long to build were shaken by taking sides. We recently incorporated structured academic controversies (Johnson & Johnson, 1988), in which students argue both sides of an issue and then find

common ground, and have concluded that students responded much better to the less acrimonious atmosphere.

Peer Mentors

Peer mentors generally attend the UNIV class, accompany us to field experiences, take notes on our field trip debriefing, and observe our students in small discussions. They regularly lead activities in class for the students regarding learning about their strengths and weaknesses, taking notes, studying for tests, and registering for classes. Every semester, they arrange a social activity outside of class, coordinate a speaker to come to class, and regularly contact our students outside of class. Our Center for Extended Teaching and Learning (CETL) provides support and training for faculty members and peer mentors. Following suggestions in research (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015), CETL recruits, interviews, trains, and pays peer mentors a small stipend.

Faculty

Over the years, the most successful combinations of the FYE involved faculty with a shared vision for their teaching and learning. Our department employs a constructivist philosophy; most of the teaching methods include discussions, formal debates, collaborative activities, and occasional direct instruction. We emphasize understanding educational concepts and how these apply not only to pre-service teachers' future students, but also to themselves as learners. Our faculty members also believe that social, emotional, and physical challenges in the first year of college affect the academic development of students. During weekly meetings, faculty and the peer mentor discuss a number of topics, including reflections on the current week and plans for the upcoming week. These meetings begin with a check of which of our students missed classes or assignments. When appropriate, faculty share information about their FYE students, especially if this involves physical and mental health issues, questions about campus policies and procedures, student dispositions, and academic challenges, such as reading, writing, and organization. This collaborative structure is effective both for good teacher education programs and effective learning communities (Lichtenstein, 2005) and has allowed us to reach out to students who may need extra support over their entire academic career.

Integrated Summative Assessment

One aspect of our FYE that has been particularly important for the social and academic learning of our students is a summative performance assessment that requires students to integrate concepts from their two content-focused courses and the field experience. The Educational Psychology instructor implemented problem-

based learning (PBL) in his FYE course to allow students to learn through research and collaboration with peers, their FYE instructors, and the peer mentor. PBL is a student-centered, collaborative pedagogical model in which learners collaboratively research to solve authentic, ill-structured problems (Savery & Duffy, 1995). This project was designed so that students engage with real-world problems from their K-12 field experience observations. PBL is typically challenging for undergraduate students. It involves complex research processes, from generating research questions to performing literature reviews and analyses. However, it can facilitate teacher candidates' understanding of authentic issues experienced in their field placements (Genareo, Sansale, Zidon, & Adjei-Boateng, 2015).

The instructor used common issues the students encountered in their FYE observation trips to form their groups. The groups researched relevant literature related to one or more of their observed problems, which were teased out through their reflective discussions in UNIV 110. They also used their UNIV 110 course as a way to continue the brainstorming sessions that were begun in Educational Psychology and to work on identifying other research avenues and constructing their final research posters. This approach reinforced that their PBL project was not simply a class assignment—it was a larger effort of the FYE team, including the peer mentor, to unite the important issues from all of their FYE experiences.

The PBL assignment allowed students to develop their research and analytical skills necessary for successful teaching careers (Genareo & Lyons, 2015). Students incorporated their course textbook, as well as the text and reading materials from their other FYE course (Introduction to Psychology) as part of their resources, allowing them to conceptualize and apply the vertical alignment between the two content areas of Psychology and Educational Psychology. This project took two weeks of guided, instructor-facilitated class time and outside work (estimated to be about five hours a week) to complete. During one class session in finals week, students collaboratively presented the research poster of their observed problems, research findings, and proposed solutions as a way to cooperatively demonstrate their competence to the course instructor, the UNIV 110 instructor, an FYE director, their peer mentor, and peers.

Suggestions for Improvement

Although our students and we largely feel our FYE has been successful, we offer four suggestions for teacher educators considering adopting an FYE learning community model.

Suggestion 1. Strong Course Connections

The first goal of our FYE is to help students make connections across curricula within a semester. Since class topics often overlap and faculty members encourage preservice teachers to use new vocabulary terms in multiple contexts, we see the students apply terminology and theories from Educational Psychology in their reflective field notebooks and UNIV 110 discussions. We recommend using a collaborative process to plan, monitor, and reflect on the FYE (Graziano, Schlesinger, Kahn & Singer, 2016) since our experience confirms that careful planning and close collaboration among faculty and peer mentors produces a more positive experience for students (Lichtenstein, 2005). Additionally, intentionally integrating the field experiences with the course content through assessments, such as our PBL project, may help students better conceptualize the course content and their future role as teachers (Moyer & Husman, 2006).

We continue to be challenged by changes in program faculty, which tend to disrupt the continuity of the program. We know the classes work best when all faculty members share the same philosophy of teaching and learning. However, turnover in our department is regular, and shifting duties of faculty members often draw their time away from the FYE. This makes it clear that a strong set of guiding FYE objectives should be in place to mediate the effects of faculty rotation. These objectives may relate to the FYE principles and learning outcomes, purpose, and the essential questions or theme. We recommend faculty carefully coordinate syllabi and projects and organize them so topics deliberately emerge in a way that is logical for concept introduction and reinforcement. Performance assessments, such as our PBL assessment, can ask students to explicitly cross-reference other courses. This should be clear on the syllabi and assignment rubrics.

Suggestion 2. Build Relationships in and out of Class

Relationship-building is a vital component of professional communities of practice (Au, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), which are typically emphasized in education programs. We highly recommend taking advantage of working closely with the peer mentor, who can help the FYE group members connect through social media and other technology platforms. Anecdotal evidence from our FYE, in the form of course discussions and end-of-course evaluations, suggests that our students highly value the peer mentors as tutors, social development facilitators, and models for a teacher candidate in the program. It is also good practice to connect the learning communities with campus student affairs and/or residence life groups to help maintain these relations between students outside of the classroom FYE context (Jaekel, 2015).

Suggestion 3. Integrate Field Experiences

We have confronted two major challenges in our FYE field placements. First, some schools or teachers were less than ideal experiences for our students; it is important to anticipate that this may take some time to get right. Another challenge is the difference in experiences in classroom grade levels. Our students entering elementary classrooms for their addition hours of observations often encounter teachers skilled at incorporating adults into classroom activities, while our students entering middle and high school classrooms are more likely to encounter classrooms with little to do but observe. As is always the struggle with field experiences, some of our students get vastly different experiences than others.

We have seen the benefits of field experiences for helping our students make personal and academic connections in their FYE groups. We concur with recommendations that teacher education learning communities have a structured field experience component with opportunities to contextualize the experiences in classroom debriefing (Burant & Kirby, 2002; Chang, 2009; Coffey, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Heafner & Plaisance, 2012; Zeichner, 2010). Our strong relationships with schools have facilitated this. However, we are challenged by our rural location and limited number of placements, so we have chosen to structure field experiences as short blocks of unobtrusive observation time, which is often still enlightening for pre-service teachers.

Suggestion 4. Formally Evaluate the FYE

One of our challenges is evaluating the FYE. Our institutional research of all FYEs confirms the social and academic benefits of learning communities (Bliss, Webb, & St. Andre, 2012; Friedman & Alexander, 2007; Gansemer-Topf & Tietjen, 2015; Hill & Woodward, 2013; Jaffee, Carle, Phillips, & Paltoo, 2008; Keup, 2006). Before FYEs were required of all students, our FYEs consistently demonstrated that students who participated in the FYE had higher retention rates than those who did not (See Appendix A). Our first cohort with this model, Fall 2013, appears to be on track for a 69% graduation rate, significantly higher than typical graduation rates, which range from 30 to 45%. Our informal assessments of students coming in with the clinical hours (started in Fall 2016) show they have a better familiarity with differences among students and how teachers need to work with those differences; have a better sense of whether or not they want to continue in education; and have a better sense of the complexities of teaching and learning. The FYE evaluations must be systemically structured in all stages, from the planning to post-FYE phases. Evaluations should first identify FYE outcomes and their role in reaching accreditation and educational standards within the Teacher Education programs. The course assessments within FYEs should align with departmental outcomes. Further, in states that have transitioned to standardized performance assessments as a means of evaluating student learning (Darling-

Hammond, 2013), those assessments may serve as outcome evaluations to determine the content learning that has occurred in the FYE students.

The process evaluations, measuring the efficacy of the programs, must be developed to inform and guide the continuous improvement of the FYE structures and procedures. These can include technically adequate (valid and reliable) qualitative and quantitative surveys of stakeholders, such as the students, FYE faculty members, peer mentors, and teachers in the field placements. They can also include interviews and focus group interviews of stakeholders, preferably led by someone outside the FYE staff. These may ask for participants' perceptions, experiences, confidence, and interests before, during, and after involvement in the FYE. We highly recommended that similar evaluation processes be performed with peers not in the FYEs to provide a contrast group with which to compare potential similarities and differences regarding evaluation findings. To begin evaluation discussions within your departments, we recommend readings on teacher education evaluation (see Darling-Hammond, 2013) and educational evaluation guidelines (see Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2010).

There is a paucity of research on the benefits of pairing FYEs with teacher education classes. However, studies from Australia and New Zealand show benefits similar to ours (Donnison, Edwards, Itter, Martin, & Yager, 2009; Harlow & Cobb, 2014). However, our efforts to change our approach have been challenged by the fact that many transfer students do not participate in the FYE. Additionally, not all students enroll in the clinical class offered in our FYE. These disparities complicate our assessment and indicate that we need to develop and refine our evaluation methods in ways that will assist us in measuring the outcomes of our FYE and also integrating the data into our teacher education accreditation process.

Conclusion

Few descriptions exist of first-year learning communities specifically designed for education students, and no literature has yet explored PBL as a means of student collaboration, relationship-building, and public demonstration of competence in FYE cohorts of such students. In this FYE case, we feel we are achieving what we set out to do: to expose our students to the authentic field of teaching, build relationships among faculty and students, and help retain the students who truly want to become teachers. We hope other education programs consider these suggestions, which have emerged from years of successes and challenges.

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Appendix A: Retention for First Year Students

Academic Year	Overall Retention	FYE Retention
2011-2012	61.9%	69%
2012-2013	65.8%	72.4%
2013-2014	63.1%	68.02%
2014-2015 (FYE required for all)	75%	-