

Programs in Practice

An Andragogical Model: Learning through Life Experiences

by Sandra Harris

“It isn’t supposed to be like this,” a frustrated and disappointed student in my alternative-certification class told me after her first week of teaching. On their campuses, my students—despite their newness to the profession—were treated no differently than other teachers, and many of them coached or sponsored clubs and other before- and after-school campus activities in addition to their regular teaching responsibilities. Though they felt well prepared by their university course work in educational theories, they found putting these theories into practice in the classroom to be a tremendous challenge.

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Individuals accepted into this state-approved alternative-certification program must hold academic degrees from regionally accredited institutions of higher education and meet certain other prerequisites for admission. Students in the program serve as teacher interns who are hired by a school district and work as full-time teachers with all the responsibilities of a regular teacher. During this internship, students also attend university classes and complete course work.

Despite full days that frequently extended into evenings, students had to come to my class to satisfy the requirements. I was determined to make their class time valuable. To support these new teachers, I had to help them make the critical connections between the theories they were studying and what they were doing in their own classrooms. As I created the syllabus, I considered the structure—the unique characteristics of the adult learner; I considered the strat-

egy—by reviewing the literature on teaching new teachers how to teach; and I considered the format of the scenario in the process of reflection.

The Structure

Knowles (1990) defined *andragogy*, a term European adult educators had been using as a parallel to pedagogy, as the art and science of helping adults learn. Learners, as he characterized them in the andragogical model,

- are self-directed;
- enter educational programs with a great diversity of experience;
- become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or do something;
- are life-centered, task-centered, or problem-centered; and
- are motivated by internal self-esteem, recognition, better quality of life, and self-actualization.

In addition to these inherent assumptions, learning occurs in context; its significance relates in part to its impact on those contexts; and learning from experiences is a unique meaning-making event that creates diversity among adult learners (Kasworm and Marienau 1997). The basic format of the andragogical model is a process design that uses life experiences.

Recognizing the importance of using the andragogical model to structure class for these post-baccalaureate interns, I queried students at the beginning of each new semester to discover what they considered their greatest areas of need. In each class, the same five areas of need were identified: discipline, motivation, classroom procedures, parent-

teacher relationships, and special education modifications. We would structure our learning around these classroom issues through our readings, discussions, and writings.

The Strategy

Too frequently, novice teachers experience “reality shock” when they leave college and enter the classroom as teachers (Checkley 1997). According to Onslow, Beynon, and Geddis (1992, as cited in Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon 1998), teacher educators tend to see student teaching as a time for beginning teachers to examine nontraditional ways of teaching, apply content knowledge, and reflect on their teaching experiences. Preservice teachers, however, believe that student teaching is intended as an opportunity to practice and gain experience. “Survival appears uppermost in their minds” (Wideen et al. 1998, 157).

When confronted with the actual classroom experience, beginning teachers generally revert to their original belief systems; the technical aspects of their teacher preparation are, therefore, of little use to them. Bullough, Knowles, and Crow (1989), for example, described how three novice teachers structured their teaching based on perceptions of themselves and their students, rather than relying on the knowledge learned through the teacher-education program. In fact, in Wideen et al.’s (1998) comprehensive review of the literature, the most common suggestion made by researchers was to have beginning teachers examine their prior beliefs as the

first step in the process of learning how to teach.

Featherstone, and Chin and Russell (both 1995, as cited in Wideen et al. 1998) studied the effects of restructured programs where the student-teaching experience occurred prior to or during campus learning; in these studies, student teachers indicated that personal meaning connected to theoretical knowledge enriched their understanding of teaching. Grossman’s (1989)

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study analyzing teachers without professional preparation indicated that candidates were empowered when supported by program, peers, and classroom situations that also encouraged reflection. Subsequent recommendations called for structuring programs to be more consistent with constructivist theory (Fosnot 1996; Richardson 1997). Such a program is offered at the University of New Brunswick in Canada, where preservice teachers focus on authentic, real-life situations.

In an effort to reduce “reality shock,” I encouraged my students to voice their personal belief system about education through reflective writing. At the same time, students were asked to focus on critical incidents within the classroom and construct possible solutions that would

openly contribute to a connection between the classroom practicum and the knowledge base being formed within the university setting.

The Scenario: Format for Process of Reflection

The process of reflecting on the teaching day’s experience is a valuable learning tool that tries out new actions, tests understandings, and affirms decisions; and helps individuals make changes (Schön 1987). Frequently, reflection is the “supervisor” that encourages teachers to continue what worked and correct what isn’t working. Taking time to consider the day’s events and respond to them in an analytical manner can reveal underlying trends, motives, and structures in a teacher’s practice (Tripp 1993). In addition, the process of reflection helps individuals cope with dilemmas through reexamination of what they already know, which leads to restructuring strategies (Eby 1997). Thomas Green (1985, 4) referred to this act of an individual judging his or her own performance as the “conscience of craft.” In fact, teacher reflection is essential for growth (Brown and Irby 1997), and that growth requires “reflective, rational and conscious decision making” (Brubacher, Case, and Reagan 1994, 18).

To cultivate reflection, Hole and McEntree (1999) recommended the use of a guided protocol for individuals and colleagues to use in shared reflection that includes identifying a story, asking what happened, why it happened, what it might mean, and what implica-

tions it has for practice. Narrative accounts that give the teacher voice contextualize an experience and encourage a rich understanding of what is actually occurring in the classroom (Brubacher et al. 1994).

For our classes, therefore, it was important to incorporate the process of reflection into the design of the syllabus, to allow for focusing on specific incidents of the teaching day. The scenario format was used as the guiding tool. Following the structure of the adult-learner model, the recommended strategy from researchers that new teacher-preparation programs be more constructivist in acknowledging the belief system already present, and the process of guided reflection, reflective writing, and discussion using the scenario format were an integral part of the course work in this alternative-education certification course for beginning teachers.

Scenario Activity: Lesson Plan

Class sessions centered on the greatest areas of need identified by the students at the beginning of the semester. Students were expected to come to class with a brief scenario of a critical incident that had happened during the week, written in the format illustrated in Figure 1. Working in groups of three or four, students brainstormed additional possible solutions for each of the scenarios in their group. Students then took their scenarios home and completed them by adding the possible solutions suggested by the group; writing a brief section explaining their chosen plan of action and their rationale for selecting it; and,

Figure 1 Critical-Incident Reflective Scenario

Problem

My seventh-period class has always been my most challenging. Not only is it the last period of the day, but it is also my class with the most “testing” students. I was out on a Friday, so my students had a substitute. When I returned on Monday and read the substitute’s notes, it was clear that my classes had been on their best behavior—all except my seventh-period class. Comments about my other classes included “nice kids, polite group, paid close attention.” When she described my seventh-period class, however, she said, “Not interested. Talked through the video. Five were throwing spitballs.” I knew that I couldn’t just let this slip by. I had to decide on disciplinary action, even though I didn’t know who the five students were.

Players

Seventh-period regular Biology class (9th and 10th graders)
Substitute teacher
Myself

Possible Solutions

Solution 1: Punish the whole class by taking away their next video day.

Solution 2: Privately ask a trusted student exactly who was throwing the spitballs, and then give all five of them detention, no questions asked (and pretend like the substitute left their names).

Solution 3: Explain to the entire class that they were the only problem to my sub all day (and read them her comments about my other classes). Demand that students involved in the spitballs voluntarily admit their inappropriate behavior in a written apology to me that also explains why they behaved the way they did. Tell the class that if I don’t get a written apology from every student who was involved, the entire class would lose their video day, and that the rest of the students would not be too happy with them. Don’t tell them I don’t know who was involved.

My Chosen Plan of Action

I chose to try Solution 3.

Rationale

I didn’t want to punish the whole class, because I knew that not all the students were involved. I also didn’t want to get into an argument about who was involved and who wasn’t, and I didn’t want to have to accuse (after all, I wasn’t even there). What I wanted was for the problem students to admit their own guilt, apologize for the behavior, and hopefully realize their mistake.

Outcome

The first thing that happened when I told the students what I expected from them was that several students ripped out a sheet of paper and handed it to one particular student in the back. By the end of the period, I had five written apologies. Four of them seemed sincere and admitted the behavior was inappropriate. The other one, from the student the others identified, wrote one simple sentence: “I’m sorry I threw spitballs, but the movie sucked.”



finally, describing the outcome—what occurred after their chosen plan of action was put in place.

Students found this experience so meaningful that they asked for copies of the scenarios to use as a future resource. At the end of the semester, each student selected the two most meaningful reflective critical-incident scenarios they had written and copied them for everyone in the class. Each student went home with 90 different critical incidents that would likely happen during their careers and, even more, with a list of possible solutions to help them solve these or similar problems when they occurred.

Real-World Connections

Student comments regarding this class format of reflecting on real classroom experiences and connecting them to university learning through guided discussions have been consistently positive. Students have described class discussions as *enlightening*, *provocative*, and *stimulating*. “I like the scenarios,” commented one student; “They give me a good idea of what to expect in the

future, and how I may deal with it.” Another said, “Everyone’s class experiences were real, and I got to hear about them without actually experiencing them. This was about the best and certainly the most relevant of my education classes.” Another student expressed that he liked the format of reflecting on actual experiences and discussing the issues because it was “real talk from real teachers.”

Based on three major assumptions, this formula for connecting university classroom learning with student real-world practical experience appears to enhance classroom learning through acknowledging life experiences. First, the structure of the adult learning model empowers learners to bring their rich life experience into the classroom. Second, the strategy of teaching new teachers how to teach by acknowledging their need for reflection encourages constructivism. And, finally, the use of the scenario in guided reflection further encourages connection of learning through the activities, issues, and readings to critical incidents

experienced in their own lives.

This process encourages “real talk from real teachers.” It also enhances learning.

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