Ways to Improve Lesson Planning: A Student Teacher Perspective

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Introduction

Teacher-preparation programmes spent considerable time in teaching novices how to write detailed lesson plans. In fact, learning to teach from practice lessons is at the core of teacher preparation programmes (Abernathy, Forsyth & Mitchell, 2001; Furlong & Maynard, 1995). But those engaged in teacher preparation do know that there is no consensus regarding how to conduct this important aspect of pre-service teacher preparation. Whereas teacher educators seem more inclined to look at a student teacher's practice teaching from the perspective of programme standards, requirements of the university which awards the degree and to the essential components suggested by regulatory bodies like national council for teacher education (NCTE) and teacher mentors look at a student teacher's classroom performance, coverage of syllabi and completion of lesson in time and how it benefits pupils. The learner, the student teacher is more concerned with coping with the direct demands of teaching a class (Loughran, 2003, 2007; Grossman, 2006), than learning to plan the optimal use of resources.

Need and significance

Successful teachers are invariably good planners and thinkers. Planning lessons is a fundamental skill all teachers must develop and hone, although implementation of this skill in actual teaching can, and usually does, take some time. It is accepted that existing teacher education take the school curriculum and textbooks as 'given' and train teachers to adjust to the needs of the existing school system through fastidious planning of lessons in standardized formats and fulfilling the ritual of delivering the required number of lessons and hence operates with rigid lesson plan formats (NCFTE, 2010). The situation gets aggravated with the sweeping changes

that occur to the school education practice and the attempt to reform teacher education accordingly. For example, in Kerala, the school reform movement has brought in activity centered teaching, constructivist learning and issue-based curriculum within a period of two decades. And, in schools as well as teacher education institutions, in spite of the best attempt from authorities of education department, confusion prevails regarding the exact designs, methods and requirements in school classrooms.

Teachers and teacher educators in this State make different meanings of constructivist learning theory. One decade after the launch of constructivist practices, though teaching community in Kerala accepts constructivist methods as better, most of the evaluation about present classroom practice is nearer to what teachers describe as the quality of the behaviorist teaching learning process (Gafoor & Akhliesh, 2010). All of their definitions were quite different and reflected their own understanding of the term and the text.

Misunderstanding of various approaches to teaching is not limited to a particular society. Behaviorist epistemology focuses on intelligence, domains of objectives, levels of knowledge, and reinforcement. Constructivist epistemology assumes that learners construct their own knowledge on the basis of interaction with their environment. Four epistemological assumptions are at the heart of what we refer to as "constructivist learning" (Fosnot, 1996)

1. Knowledge is physically constructed by learners who are involved in active learning.

2. Knowledge is symbolically constructed by learners who are making their own representations of action;

3. Knowledge is socially constructed by learners who convey their meaning making to others;

4. Knowledge is theoretically constructed by learners who try to explain things they don't completely understand.

With these common assumptions, teacher planning according to the Tyler or Hunter models is no longer adequate. Research indicates that few classroom teachers plan using these models anyway (Morine-Dershimer, 1979; Zahorik, 1975) and usually because of administrative pressure if they do (McCutcheon, 1982). However, few approaches are available for working with prospective teachers or new teachers to organize for learning. Simon (1995) and Steffe & Ambrosio (1995) describe their processes of planning for constructivist learning and constructivist teaching respectively, but these methods are complex and represent the thinking of experienced teachers.

When student-teachers are able to create their own lesson plans, they have taken a giant step toward "owning" the content they teach and the methods they use. It takes thinking and practice to hone this skill, and it won't happen overnight, but it is a skill that will help to define one as a teacher. There is no one "best way" to plan lessons. Good lesson plans do not ensure students will learn what is intended, but they certainly contribute to it. Lesson plans also help new or inexperienced teachers organize content, materials, and methods. Many experienced teachers often reduce lesson plans to a mental map or short outline. New teachers, however, usually find detailed lesson plans to be indispensable. In this context this study attempts to stimulate critical thinking about the teacher education practice for the development of lesson planning competencies among student-teachers in Kerala.

Objectives

This study intends to stimulate critical thinking about the lesson planning practices in B.Ed programmes; via identifying the major difficulties faced by student teachers in the lesson planning; and by suggesting alternatives to remedy these difficulties.

Methods

Sample

Seventy four student teachers who have finished their pre-service preparation, and successfully completed the practical examination and preparing for the theory examination constituted the sample. They belonged to six areas of school subjects namely English (16), Malayalam (17), mathematics (4), biology (10), social studies (10) and commerce (17).

Measure

Student teachers were asked to appraise the lesson planning practices and to identify the difficulties faced by them. Specifically two questions were raised- 1) What are the difficulties you feel in connection with lesson planning and 2) what are the suggestions you make to remedy the difficulties student teachers face? The first question was a structured one with ten possible answers, any number of which could be chosen by a respondent. The second question was an open ended question and student- teacher s was encouraged to make suggestion in a free environment. While the first structured question allowed the respondents to be acquainted with the nature of the task, the second open question gave the opportunity to express not only the suggestions, but also what the student teachers feels as the reason for the difficulties they faced in the lesson planning.

Data analysis

The frequency of selection of the ten alternatives for the first question was found out (table1). The response to the second question was coded and categories were identified. A model of student teachers' conception of how to carry out the development of lesson planning competencies during teacher preparation was built up.

Results
The difficulties faced by student teachers in lesson planning

Table 1 sunmmarises the difficulties faced by student teachers in connection with lesson planning

Table 1
Difficulties Faced By Student Teachers In Connection With Lesson Planning

Difficulty	Sample of student teachers						
	English %	Malayalam %	Maths %	Biology %	Social studies%	Commerce %	Total %
Choosing learning experiences appropriate to the learners	69	6	100	0	40	94	**51**
deciding and allotting the time suitably for every lesson	69	35	25	70	50	29	**46**
in identifying and developing proper learning aids	38	35	100	60	30	0	**44**
in executing the planned lesson in classroom	69	76	50	20	30	0	**41**
in psychological sequencing of the lessons	44	53	50	10	40	6	**34**
in bringing about necessary adaptations to the lessons according to the requirements of individual classrooms	31	59	25	50	40	0	**34**
in specifying the educational objectives	81	29	0	10	40	29	**32**
In finding and using appropriate teaching methods	38	0	50	70	0	0	**26**
in identifying instructional objectives matching students and curriculum	38	29	25	30	10	18	**25**
in choosing life	44	6	25	30	20	0	21

experiences and illustrations capable of creating the set and motivation in students regarding the lesson						
Lack of content knowledge						
6	0	0	10	10	0	4
48	29.95	40.91	32.73	28.18	16.04	32.59

Table 1 shows that the most frequent difficulties cited by student teachers in lesson planning are : in choosing learning experiences appropriate to the learners, deciding and allotting the time suitably for every lesson, in identifying and developing proper learning aids, and in executing the planned lesson in classroom. One third of student teachers have difficulty in psychological sequencing of the lessons, in bringing about necessary adaptations to the lessons according to the requirements of individual classrooms, and in specifying the educational objectives. one out of five student teachers have difficulty in identifying instructional objectives matching students and curriculum, In finding and using appropriate teaching methods, in choosing life experiences and illustrations capable of creating the set and motivation in students regarding the lesson.

There are a few subject specific difficulties such as: specifying the educational objectives (English), psychological sequencing of the lessons (Malayalam), and finding and using appropriate teaching methods (mathematics, biology). The above difficulties are faced relatively more by the respective subject groups in comparison to the total sample.
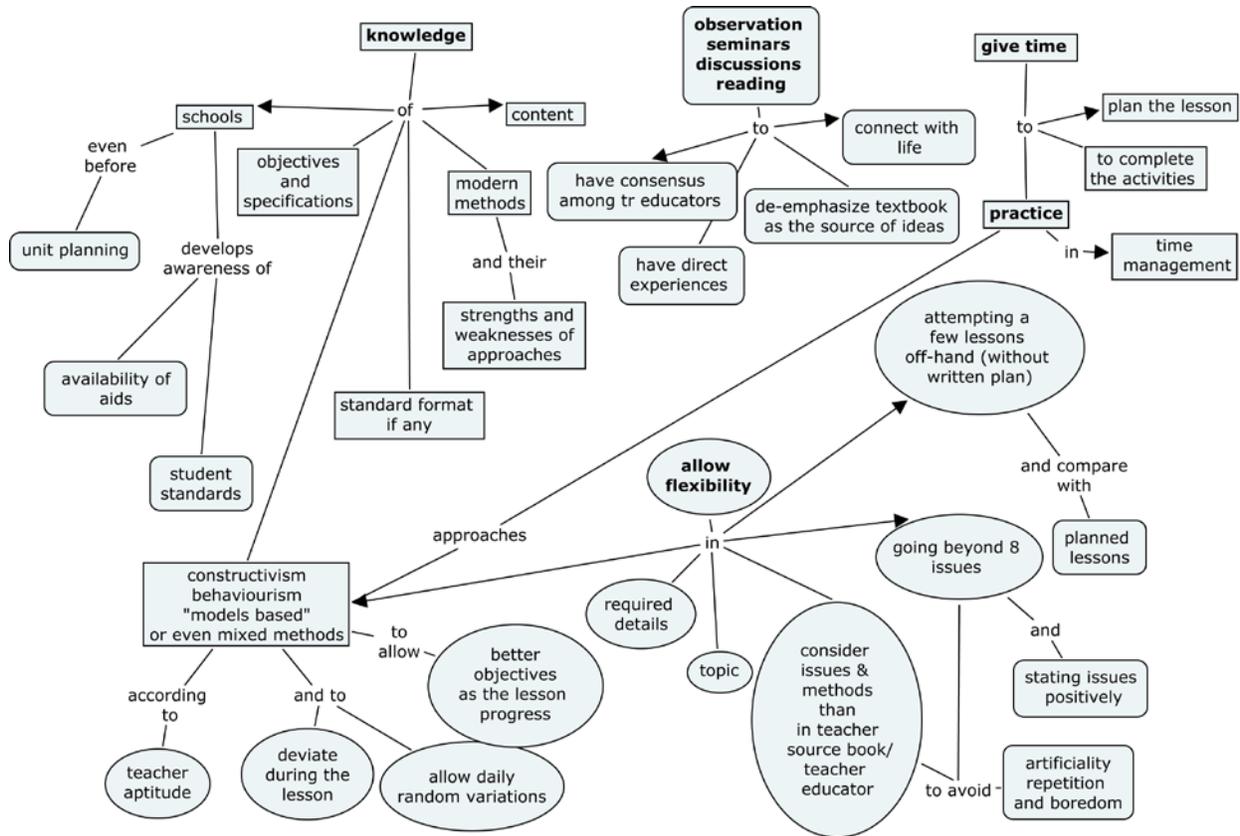
Student teachers' conception of how to carry out the development of lesson planning competencies

The suggestions of student teachers to remedy the difficulties faced by them in lesson planning included among other things: acquiring knowledge through observation seminars discussions reading to develop knowledge   of   standard format if any, modern methods,

constructivism behaviourism, better opportunity for direct experiences with schools, which may develop awareness of student standards, availability of aids, getting more time to practice different "models " or even mixed according to teacher aptitude. Student teachers require their educators and mentors to de-emphasize textbook as the source of ideas. Flexibility to attempt a few lessons off-hand (without written plan) and compare the results with planned lessons may make student teachers aware of the benefits of systematic planning. Flexibility is required by them in allowing daily random variations in formats and to consider issues and methods other than those suggested in teacher source book, and to select topic of their choice. This will help to avoid artificiality in the process, feeling of repetition and ensuing boredom.

Practice in time management,   unit planning, better knowledge of objectives and specifications, knowledge of content. Student teacher s want teacher educators themselves to have consensus among them about the lesson plan formats, approaches and procedures. A few student techers want freedom to state the curricular objectives positively than the negative statements suggested by the issue based curricular practices prevalent in the state schools.

Four major themes in the above suggestions were knowledge, reflective observational and dialogic experiences, time for practice and flexibility. The four themes were connected to the important factors in lesson planning and the student teachers perspective of how to carry out the development of lesson planning competencies was constructed (Figure).

Figure 1: **Student teachers' conception of how to carry out the development of lesson planning competencies**

Conclusion

Moving from a behaviorist approach to planning for teaching toward a constructivist approach to designing for learning requires that dialogue be real in pre-service education classroom. Prospective and beginning teachers benefit from experiencing constructivist learning and having the process of designing for learning made visible by mentors. Inexperienced teachers can be engaged in learning, inquiry, and reflection before they have the maturity to move away from planning for teaching and toward designing for learning. Rich subject matter knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition for teaching for understanding (Shulman 1986). Dialogical model of lesson planning emphasizes context-dependency but also sees

planning itself as a practice (John, 2006). Building a learning community will develop trust and encourage risk-taking (Gagnon & Collay). Learning to become a teacher is sharing and learning from experiences in close cooperation with practice teachers and teacher educators (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Day,1999; Edwards, Gilroy & Hartley, 2002).

During the early phase of their professional learning, student teachers need to know what a lesson plan actually is, as well as understanding the crucial nexus that exists between planning and teaching (John, 2006). Flexibility is required as student teachers do not fancy to adhere to educators plan rigidly. The given format is simply a roadmap. If teachers fail to make adjustments based on how their class is going, they will miss valuable learning opportunities and to develop alternative plans. Each teacher is different. Once basic elements of lesson planning are understood one can modify the process to reflect on whatever makes him or her comfortable (Center for Excellence in Teaching,1999). Efforts to impose a uniform system of lesson planning on teachers meant that often they did not draw on the full range of their expertise when planning lessons in diverse contexts (Bage *et al*., 1999). Hence, student teachers should be encouraged to personalize their plans—as they do to so many other aspects of their classroom practice.

'Naturalistic' or 'organic' model of Stenhouse (1975) claim that the mismatch between specific objectives and the complexity of classrooms means that teachers need to consider more naturally-emerging planning structures. The endemic uncertainty of classrooms (Lortie 1975) mean that statements of objectives can only explain and connect with a small number of the variables that are typical of classroom interaction. Naturalistic planning, therefore, involves starting with activities and the ideas that flow from them before assigning objectives.

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