

A Self-study in Teacher Education: Learning to Teach in Higher Education After Teaching the Arts to Young Children

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The arts are a key developmental area in early childhood education. Subsequently, it is important that generalist teachers know how to teach suitable arts knowledge and skills. As a teacher educator, the responsibility of this falls within the author's teaching. It is her job to teach future teachers suitable arts knowledge and skills. This self-study explores the author's pedagogical approach to teaching the arts, as the author moved from teaching in an early childhood context to teaching arts in higher education. As a beginning teacher, the author explores the "ups" and "downs" she encountered during her first year as a beginning teacher education. As a beginning teacher educator, she realized that she was working in isolation and given little guidance on suitable practice in higher education. Subsequently, this study acts as a form of professional learning to help me (the author) reflect and improve on my own pedagogical practices. Through the use of narrative, the author is able to transform her own teaching to provide better models for student learning in my future courses.

Keywords: self-study, teacher education, arts education

Introduction

As a beginning teacher educator, no one gives you a manual on what to do. You teach in isolation. Having previously been an early childhood arts educator with young children, I (the author) decided to enter higher education to teach adults about teaching the arts with young children. As a teacher educator, I was aware that my (the author's) teaching pedagogy would directly influence future teachers entering early childhood education.

Arts education is an important learning area for future early childhood teachers. Research suggests, however, that many beginning teachers have lower perceived competence and confidence to teach the arts (Garvis, 2010). As a teacher educator, I wanted to ensure that the students passing my course had adequate confidence and competence to teach the arts.

During my first year, I decided to conduct a self-study into my pedagogical approaches that would also aid as a form of professional learning for improving my own teaching practice. Over the course of a year, I document the "ups" and "downs" I encountered during my experience with adult learners. I am able to compare this experience with my prior experience of working as a teacher for young children. Through my reflection, I am able to see ways to improve independent learning and the importance of developing a CoP (community of practice) in the classrooms. Through the use of narrative, I am able to transform my own teaching to provide better models for students learning in my future courses.

Literature Review

Generalist Teachers and the Arts in Australia

The arts are a key learning area recognized in the newly implemented “National Curriculum” (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, 2011) for all of the formal years of schooling (foundation to year 12). The arts (dance, drama, music, media and visual arts) are considered as an important venue for children to explore and communicate the world around them. In early childhood education, the arts are also considered important in the “Early Years Learning Framework for Australia” (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). The framework is for all young children across Australia aged birth to five years. Furthermore, according to the “National Education and the Arts Statement” (MCEETYA (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment and Youth Affairs), 2007), all children and young people, irrespective of their location, socio-economic status or ability should have equal opportunities to participate in arts-rich schooling systems (MCEETYA, 2007).

Australian research suggested that generalist teachers do not have the perceived capability or confidence to teach the arts compared to literacy and numeracy. This has been reported in early childhood education (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010) and primary classrooms (Garvis, 2010). Moreover, the arts are positioned as a supplemental tool to teach other learning areas as opposed to a developmental tool with its own set of skills and knowledge (Garvis, n.d.). The arts are given little time in formalized early years’ classroom planning (Garvis, 2012) and considered an “add-on”, if there is time left over.

In pre-service education programs, it is expected that early childhood teachers gain skills and capabilities to teach the arts. Insufficient teacher training in music and the arts, however, is known to impact negatively on teachers’ perceptions of their confidence and competence to teach their curriculum areas (Bartel, Cameron, J. Wiggins, & R. Wiggins, 2004). The teaching of the arts is also influenced by life experience, personal experience and perceptions of confidence (Robinson, 2001).

CoPs (Community of Practices)

The term “CoP” was defined as a purposeful social structure where teachers regularly come together to work for the collective benefit of students (Lave & Wenger, 1991). CoPs could be a starting point for helping improve the teaching of the arts in teacher education.

Using a collaborative approach to teacher practice has become more common-place as both a top-down and bottom-up initiative as both policy and reform directives either mandate or encourage teachers to move away from the traditional isolation of a single teacher classroom (Little, 2002). As a recognized key strategy for improving practice (Fullan, 1993), CoP and the resultant collaborative practices have been implemented as a part of school improvement initiatives. These initiatives have been seen as a means of improving outcomes for students and improving teacher practice through the shared learning and individual and collective development of the community members (Fullan, 1993).

Within early years’ CoPs, practitioners make practices, such as lesson planning, personal pedagogy, assessment of and for learning and observations overt, and also engage in joint teaching to facilitate performance monitoring. Making these practices known establishes a sense of collaboration and community between teachers within the setting. This action serves to perpetuate and further develop the established pedagogy and look to improve practice. A community practice seeks to locate the learning in the process of co-participation (building social capital) and not just within individuals (Hanks, 1991). In the case of arts

learning, it would be the process of co-participation to increase each other skills and knowledge.

Beginning Teacher Educator

Becoming a teacher educator is often filled with tension. As teachers enter graduate school, they often make the transition to the role of teacher educator with little formal support from the university institution for continuing development (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Korthagen, Loughran, & Lunenberg, 2005). Thus, the socialization from a school teacher (in my case early childhood teacher) to teacher educator is filled with tension, as teachers attempt to re-establish their identity within their new roles with new expectations.

Many teacher education courses within Australia are now accredited by external government agencies. In the state of this study, there is a teacher registration agency that dictates to teacher education programs what content must be covered. Subsequently, courses have been transformed to meet the regulations of the agency. Of particular concern is the possibility that teacher education focuses too much on content and too little on authenticity, presence and transformation (Gibbons, 2011, p. 11). Such an emphasis on skills and content knowledge occurs at the expense of opportunities for the transformative self. Dall'Alba (2009, p. 34) believed that, "The transformation of the self is integral to achieving such practice". The transformation requires more than just simple programming to teacher particular things in a particular way. Rather, there must be a sense of openness that being is not predetermined by a tertiary institution or government and that the purpose of education is necessarily one of forming an identity (Novinger & O'Brien, 2003).

Focus of Study

My journey into teacher education is constructed from "a metaphorical three-dimensional inquiry space" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) and is an engagement with my "story as data" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7). It enables me (the author) to capture and communicate the emotional nature of my lived experience as well as capturing the dynamic nature of these lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This self-study explores my change in pedagogical approaches, as I moved from teaching arts in early childhood education to teaching arts in higher education. The study provides a narrative of the "ups" and "downs" I have had to encounter as a beginning teacher educator. I also explore different levels of independence from student learning in both of the two contexts.

Method

Researching one's teacher education practices provide opportunities to uncover understanding about the complex relations between learning and teaching and putting that knowledge into the practice of teaching teachers (Loughran, 2007). It is an important tool for teacher educators. Pinar (1980) suggested that if one always taught by themselves, it was crucial that teacher educators engaged in rigorous self-study in order to develop self-understanding and an understanding of education for others. I decided to conduct a self-study to examine the impact of my pedagogy for developing relationality and care. Self-study researchers recognized that, "There is an important relationship between personal growth and understanding and public discourse about that understanding" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 15). Writing about oneself provides opportunities to analyze experiences, which enable one to construct understanding that enhances the possibility for relocation through personal change (Kamler, 2001).

Through a narrative approach, I explored understanding acquired over time from the data. Data sources included personal journal entries and observations I had made of student learning.

Data was analyzed using coding and categorization (Creswell, 2002) with the resultant common units of meaning presented in an autobiographical narrative chronicling the impact of my pedagogy. Three broad categories were identified and are discussed below each narrative. These were “moving to transforming the self”, “CoPs” and “transforming my own identity”.

Findings and Discussion

Moving to Transforming the Self

After starting to teach the suitable content knowledge and skills that were outlined in the teaching syllabus, the students were not engaging with the same level of enthusiasm that I had wanted. I began to question the reason why the students appeared to be giving little effort to what I was trying to do in the class activities where I would ask students to sing, dance, engage in drama, etc.. My answer came soon enough when two students came and saw me at the end of the lecture. “Can you make sure that you never choose us to model activities to the rest of the class” they said. “Why?” I asked. The two students said:

Well, we just do not feel like we are capable or confident. It is a big ask to get somebody to stand up and sing or dance in front of other adults. It is really confronting and stressful. Maybe, if we all had dance and singing training throughout our lives that would be fine, but we have not, so we do not want to do it.

I could not believe my ears. The pre-service teachers did not appear to have strong self-confidence for the arts. Alarm bells were ringing in my class and I sent around a class survey looking at how comfortable and confident pre-service teachers were towards each of the arts forms. The results spoke for themselves. Many of the students had negative experiences towards the arts (a music teacher may have said they had a poor singing voice) or had limited opportunities during their schooling to engage with the arts. This was the reason why the activities were not going the way they should. Children spontaneously engage with the arts and enjoy singing and dancing with the teacher. The opposite appeared with my pre-service teachers.

Before I could begin teaching suitable content knowledge and skills, I realized I needed to work on issues of transforming the pre-service teachers’ beliefs towards the arts. I re-designed activities that were designed to allow pre-service teachers to work through their negative beliefs and realized the importance of the arts and that anyone could engage with the arts. Everyone had equal opportunity to access the arts. I began to observe a transformation in many of the students (though not all which was frustrating). Students engaged in transformation started to see the importance of the arts for young children. Students who did not start to engage in transformation were not prepared to challenge their own beliefs and understanding about the arts. I found that once students underwent a transformation of beliefs, they were better able to engage with the content knowledge.

In this short narrative, I realized that the most important component of beginning to teach arts education to pre-service teachers was examining prior beliefs towards the arts. Once this was done, it was possible to see the value, leading to greater engagement with content knowledge and skills. I began to realize that in future teaching in this course, the introductory weeks must address pre-service teachers reflecting and challenging their beliefs towards the arts. If such a process does not take place, the students will continue to show limited effort towards the value and place of the arts in early childhood education classrooms.

CoPs (Community Of Practices)

I realized that if I wanted to transform the pre-service teacher’s self and also my own teaching pedagogy, I

needed to adapt a CoP in the classroom. It would only be through a supportive environment that the pre-service teachers would be prepared to take risks in the arts in front of their peers. I realized that it was important for me to sit in on every tutorial for the subject (even those that were conducted by tutors) to help develop the supportive environment. I was hoping that as pre-service teachers saw me more, they would be able to trust me and come and join the CoP. I participated as an active member of every tutorial, modeling my actions to the students of how to support and express verbal support to each other. I was soon excited to see that a few students started to replicate my modeling. The next week the number of students grew until at least 80% of the class was trying to support one another in arts activities. I realized that as an arts educator, I wanted the students to know what it was like to be within a community of like-minded learners and how collaborative learning could support their own individual learning.

The CoP that was established was designed to help support the pre-service teachers in their learning about the arts. It was based on sharing, understanding and supportive knowing. Establishing CoPs is important in early childhood education and I wanted the pre-service teachers to know what it felt like, how to establish and how to contribute to a CoP. While these skills were not assessed in the course, I found them crucial for future teachers entering early childhood classrooms.

Transforming My Own Identity

As a beginning teacher educator, I realized my own identity began to change, as I reflected on my teaching. Previously, I was still within the identity of “early childhood teacher”. I wanted pre-service teachers to experience the arts by engaging with the different arts forms. This is a common pedagogy in early years’ classrooms. Children learn about the different arts forms by experimenting with different materials, techniques and styles. Children learn the smell, taste, feel, sight and sound of the arts. I soon realized, however, that my identity as an early childhood teacher was a hindrance. This was how the students saw me—not as an intellectual who had also completed a Ph.D. like other staff members at the university. Soon, my idea of learning through experience began to fall apart.

“This is what children do, why do we have to do it?”, asked some students. I began to recite theorists that we had discussed, such as Dewey and how we are learning through experience. “We know but we are at university. This is not university teaching”, they replied. I soon realized that the students were not ready for learning by or through experience. I decided to return to traditional modes of teaching (two hours’ lecture with students in desks) followed by a workshop where students discussed readings. The students seemed to have greater respect for me, as we began the traditional university style.

From this experience, I realized that my identity was not shaped by own feelings of being a teacher educator, rather it was shaped by the pre-service teachers expectations of what a teacher educator was. Even though I taught through experiences in my early childhood classrooms when I was an early childhood teacher, these same teaching styles did not seem to be favored by the pre-service teachers, who were used to a pre-conceived notion of what a teacher educator was, regardless of the knowledge that I was also teaching early childhood education that tries to envisage a holistic approach. It was difficult for me to return to traditional formats of me standing at the front of the lecture room talking, but this seemed to improve my teaching evaluations. My identity, however, is blurred. I still know that this is not the best way to learn. As future teachers, I assumed that they would like to observe modeling of suitable practice for early years classrooms. I thought it was important that they know and could experience examples of arts activities. I realize that my identity is in state of transition.

Conclusions

Studying one's journey as a teacher educator is useful as a form of professional learning. In this study, I was able to examine my own pedagogical content and work out better ways to provide curriculum knowledge and skills in the arts but also engage the pre-service teachers in transformation of self. In my classroom, my approach to developing a CoP for early childhood arts education helped embed a supportive environment to allow the pre-service teachers to engage in transformation. Some students, however, did not want to engage in transformation and were still stuck in a deficit model of thinking towards arts education. As future teachers, this is of concern to my own beliefs of arts being an important developmental area for children. As I continue to examine and reexamine my practice, I question how I can achieve transformation of all the students (especially in such a large cohort of over 160 students), given that I have limited time for teaching (two hours a week) and some pre-service teachers already have strong beliefs about the identity of an early childhood teacher.

Nevertheless, I have found this self-study beneficial to my own way of teaching and it has allowed me to engage in continual reflection about my own teaching. As a beginning teacher educator, I realize the importance of self-study for anyone working in isolation to help reflect on and improve practice for pre-service teacher learning. It has also allowed me to better understand my own identity and ways of working. I hope that as I continue to grow as a teacher educator, I will be able to achieve transformation of nearly all students.

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