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Exploring Feedback Mechanisms for Preservice Teachers' Lesson Plans

By Dana Kan and Uma Soman

Although written lesson plans are a standard requirement in teacher training programs, limited information exists about effective methods for reviewing and assessing these documents. University supervisors determine how to evaluate lesson plans, and methods and expectations vary widely across training programs. Consequently, preservice teaching candidates might not receive the support they need to maximize their abilities to plan effective lessons for children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

In response to this concern, we designed and implemented a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research study to evaluate the impact of in-person and written feedback to graduate students pursuing their master's degree in deaf education at Vanderbilt University. SoTL is an inquiry-based research method that strives to improve teaching in postsecondary education. It requires university instructors to apply the same skills we teach our students—such as systematically analyzing and evaluating the strengths and weakness of our teaching methods—to our own higher education classes.

Our graduate students' main opportunity to learn about lesson planning occurs during practicum. Unlike traditional coursework, practicum pairs teaching candidates with experienced teachers who mentor them as they practice planning and implementing lessons with the experienced teachers' students. Although mentoring teachers provide positive and constructive feedback to the teaching candidates, university supervisors formally evaluate the candidates' written lesson plans.

Written Feedback on Lesson Plans

Lesson plans are complex products that consist of numerous details, such as information about the students to be taught, learning objectives, instructional activities, materials, and evaluation procedures. All these details must align with the communication, academic, and social/emotional needs of individual students. Teaching candidates must make a copious number of decisions within a single lesson plan to maximize the likelihood of growth for their students.

Photos courtesy of Dana Kan and Uma Soman



Above: A deaf education graduate student conferences with her university practicum supervisor.

Given the multifaceted nature of lesson plans, we designed a detailed grading rubric to evaluate the written lesson plans submitted by our graduate students during their practicum experiences. The rubric consists of 54 items grouped into the following eight categories: 1) knowledge of students, 2) measurable objectives and learning standards, 3) materials, 4) instructional sequence-activities, 5) instructional sequence-strategies, 6) evaluation and data collection, 7) reflection, and 8) technical aspects. Each item is scored as *emerging/absent* (0-3 points), *developing* (4-6 points), *effective* (7-8 points), or *superior* (9 points). Based on the individual items, a score from zero to nine is assigned to each of the eight categories. The category scores are then summed to determine the candidates' final grade. In addition to the rubric, we provide personalized written comments throughout the graduate students' lesson plans.

Despite these detailed feedback procedures, we noticed some graduate students made recurring errors. We contemplated possible reasons for their lack of improvement and identified the following areas of weakness associated with written feedback:

- Written feedback requires the graduate students to dedicate time to assignments that have already been graded, possibly making them seem less pressing than assignments

that are still due. The graduate students might view their assignment grades but not allocate time to carefully read our written comments or review the graded rubrics.

- Written feedback is reviewed independently by the graduate students, so it is possible they might not understand our comments or rubric decisions.
- Written feedback is not provided until after the graduate students have taught the lessons. As a result, opportunities to apply the feedback immediately are eliminated, potentially reducing the likelihood of generalization to subsequent lesson plans.

In-Person Feedback Adding Conferences

In response to these concerns, we systematically incorporated structured pre- and post-lesson conferences with individual graduate students in addition to providing written feedback through the detailed rubric and comments. Pre-lesson conferences occurred during the week before the graduate students implemented their lesson plans during practicum; post-lesson conferences occurred within the week following implementation. Each conference lasted 30 minutes and addressed specific prompts given to

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Left and below: Graduate students teach lessons to groups of students as well as work with students individually.

the graduate students at the beginning of the semester. In general, pre-lesson conferences were intended to strengthen the graduate students' lesson plans before they were implemented, while post-lesson conferences supported the graduate students' reflection process after implementation.

It should be noted that we routinely provided in-person feedback to the graduate students after our on-site observations of their practicum teaching. The structured pre- and post-lesson conferences differed from these meetings in that they focused on the lesson planning process rather than lesson implementation, and our role was to facilitate the graduate students' thought process about lesson planning rather than to provide feedback from our observations of their teaching. Thus, although we typically observed the lessons that were conferenced, it would be feasible to implement pre- and post-lesson conferences without observing the lessons' implementation.

To evaluate the impact of in-person feedback on the graduate students' lesson planning skills, we randomly assigned each graduate student to a university supervisor (i.e., one of the two authors). The university supervisor conducted the pre- and post-lesson conferences with her assigned graduate students for two of each graduate student's six submitted lesson plans. At the end of the semester, the other

university supervisor—who was unaware which lessons had been conferenced—graded the graduate students' written lesson plans using the rubric. We also

surveyed the graduate students about their experiences with the rubric, the written comments, and the in-person conferences.

SoTL Project Promising Results

Our data showed the graduate students improved their lesson plans when they received both in-person and written feedback as compared to written feedback alone. Specifically, there was an improvement of four percentage points for the mean rubric grade of lessons that were conferenced over lessons that were not conferenced. For example, a graduate student who scored an 86 percent on the rubric for lessons that were not conferenced would, on average, have scored a 90 percent on lessons that were conferenced. This is the difference between a B and an A- using a standard letter grade system.

Qualitative data supported our quantitative results. Out of 18 graduate students, 16 felt feedback provided through in-person conferences caused the greatest change in their performance as teachers when compared to the written comments or

completed rubrics. Similarly, when asked to evaluate the influence of each feedback mechanism on their development as teachers using a 5-point scale, where 1 meant *no impact* and 5 meant *strong impact*, the graduate students' average rating of conferences was the highest: 4.28 for conferences, 3.24 for written comments, and 2.65 for the rubric.

As expected, one disadvantage of written feedback was its lack of immediacy. Approximately a quarter of our graduate students reported not reading the comments or reviewing the rubric until more than a week after the feedback had been provided; one graduate student reported not reading the comments or reviewing the rubric at all. Even when the graduate students reviewed their written feedback, only 61 percent reported reading the comments carefully and only half reported reviewing the rubric carefully.

Our concern that the graduate students might not understand our written feedback also seemed accurate. Although the feedback in general was mostly understood, 100 percent of the graduate students rated the conference feedback as mostly or very clear compared to 72 percent for the written comments and 50 percent for the rubric. The in-person format of the conferences gave the graduate students opportunities to solicit additional information, thereby eliminating any confusion about our feedback.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence supporting the importance of in-person conferences came from comments made by the graduate students themselves. One student said, “[The conferences] helped me get inside the head of an experienced teacher who could guide me to the best version of



my ideas for a lesson. The conferences were something I really looked forward to and took the most from.” Another student felt “the conferences were very positive and encouraging ... a great way to ensure the lessons had all the appropriate pieces.”

The graduate students also made positive comments regarding the helpfulness of the immediacy of the feedback from conferences as compared to the delayed feedback provided by the written comments and rubric. Specifically, they appreciated the increased confidence they felt when implementing the lessons and were encouraged by the increased learning opportunities they felt they were offering their students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Additional Benefits Lasting Impact

Adding in-person feedback to written feedback on our graduate students’ lesson plans had positive quantitative and qualitative outcomes. In addition to improving the graduate students’ lesson planning skills, individual pre- and post-lesson conferences gave the graduate students the opportunity to explain the numerous lesson plan decisions they made—a useful skill for collaborating with future administrators, colleagues, and families.

The conferences also afforded us individualized time with our graduate students, allowing us to connect with them on a more personal level than was possible through didactic coursework. As knowledge of our graduate students has increased, we have been better able to customize our instruction to them. Subsequent classes of graduate students have had consistent results, and we continue to include in-person conferences as a standard part of our practicum requirements. Given the impact teacher quality has on student learning, we expect the improvement in our graduate students’ lesson planning skills to have a positive impact on the children they teach after graduation.

Individual Conferences: Suggestions for Implementation

By Dana Kan and Uma Soman

Although every training program is unique, university personnel who supervise teaching candidates might find the following suggestions helpful as they incorporate in-person feedback into their students’ practicum requirements.

- **Structure the conferences.** We created pre- and post-lesson conference preparation forms that each included five prompts we would ask, along with examples of strong responses. The prompts are given to the graduate students at the beginning of the semester and are intended to extend their thinking beyond description of their lesson activity. For example, one of the pre-lesson conference prompts asks the graduate students to analyze how their knowledge of their students informed their lesson plan. The graduate students are not required to submit written answers; rather, we use the graduate students’ responses during the conferences to engage in meaningful discussions.
- **Include a prompt related to the students’ professional development goals.** During the pre-lesson conference, the graduate students are encouraged to consider their personal goals for learning as well as specific ways they plan to reach those goals. During the post-lesson conference, they reflect on how they grew as teachers after implementing each lesson. The graduate students appreciate these prompts, noting that they regularly think about their students’ growth but often neglect to consider their own development as teachers for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Professional development goals have included ensuring data collection does not interrupt the lesson activity, capitalizing on opportunities to improve language development by responding to student-initiated conversations, and incorporating techniques to promote student independence and confidence.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Although we have been tempted to support our graduate students with easy answers rather than thought-provoking questions, we trust them to effectively determine how to plan strong lessons for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Sometimes this means patiently giving the graduate students time during the conferences to consider our questions; sometimes we provide additional support to facilitate their construction of new knowledge.
- **Limit pre- and post-lesson conferences to 30 minutes.** Our graduate students overwhelmingly feel a half hour is adequate for substantive discussion without burdening their busy schedules. When necessary, we schedule additional time for conferences to support candidates who either request or who are in need of extra assistance. Although complaints about the conferences are minimal, scheduling is the most often cited criticism.