

Transforming Teaching and Learning: A Professional Development Approach to Increase Self Efficacy through Course Planning

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Abstract

This essay describes one professor's alternative approach to planning and teaching an English language arts methods course for pre-service teachers. Planning for the course began with a needs assessment, much like a needs assessment that practicing teachers would complete in order for administrators to plan professional development workshops. Students were surveyed concerning their efficacy beliefs as they pertained to common tasks English language arts teachers encounter in the classroom. A methods course was then designed to provide a series of professional development-type workshops to boost the students' efficacy beliefs about their abilities to become effective English language arts teachers.

Keywords: English language arts, teaching methods, efficacy beliefs, needs assessment

1. Introduction

Each semester, countless numbers of pre-service teachers enter what many educators label "methods courses" to receive formal training for teacher education. These courses often focus on content pedagogy and instructional practices. Essentially, teacher educators plan ahead for the types of learning experiences their students will need, often without asking the pre-service teachers where they feel they need the most work. We teach our students to diagnostically assess their own students in order to individualize education and yet we often employ the same antiquated teaching strategies semester after semester rather than designing programs that meet their individual needs. Teacher educators should first assess the efficacy beliefs their students have as they pertain to teaching situations common to a majority of classrooms in the form of a "needs assessment" and then build a course based upon the

experiences those students will need to become successful teachers.

2. Why Efficacy is Important

Self-efficacy is the most commonly used term to refer to a person's beliefs about his or her abilities to perform multi-level tasks. Individuals with low or almost no self-efficacy beliefs typically depend upon those around them to either complete tasks, or these individuals simply refuse to participate in situations. In contrast, though, individuals who possess higher senses of self-efficacy beliefs tend to perform better in any given situation (Schunk, 2000). Factors influenced by perceived self-efficacy include (1) choices individuals make, (2) the amount of effort put forth by individuals, (3) the length of persistence exerted by individuals, (4) "resilience" to contradicting expectations, (5) whether individuals purport self-defeating or self-supporting thoughts, (6) the level of stress experienced by an individual, and (7) an individual's ability to perceive accomplishments (Bandura, 1997).

"Because teaching enjoys no professionally sanctioned goals and techniques, teachers are left vulnerable to self-doubt and arbitrary criticism" (Short, 1994, p. 494). For many teachers, these feelings of vulnerability and self-doubt create an inability to function appropriately as educators. A teacher's self-efficacy beliefs develop over time as he or she completes numerous tasks that produce favorable outcomes. As teachers develop professionally, either on their own or through school mandated experiences, developers must realize that while teaching practices and ideas may be supported by research and proven to work, teachers who possess low self-efficacy beliefs will likely hesitate to utilize the new practices. And, because efficacy beliefs directly affect a teacher's judgment about whether he or she can impact his or her students, teachers who perceive this impact as positive are found to be highly self-efficacious (Ashton, 1984; Wong 1997).

According to Wong (1997) and others, efficacy beliefs may be developed and nurtured in teachers; these beliefs are teacher specific. To begin, teachers must be allowed to identify potential weak areas and then given help to improve the necessary teaching skills to affect those identified areas. Also, when teachers, just as students, are given a safe, inviting environment in which they can share and reflect upon their use of new teaching practices, it is believed that teacher efficacy beliefs are strengthened. Likewise, when highly efficacious teachers model these newly found teaching practices, teachers with lower efficacy beliefs, in a sense, receive a mentor.

3. Changing the Directions

In order to more appropriately meet the needs of my pre-service English language arts teachers, I began by ordering texts that addressed the overall needs of English teachers identified through both previous semesters of course evaluations and conversations with local English teachers and principals. Next, rather than determining the order in which we would use each text as a class, I surveyed my current semester's students on the first night of class

concerning their efficacy beliefs about the what I compiled as “common-place” needs in the English classroom. Survey questions focused on planning daily and weekly lessons and units of instruction, managing a classroom, executing activities in the English language arts classroom, leading and promoting discussion, and fostering the idea within students of becoming life-long readers. An additional question asked for other identifiable needs from each survey respondent.

According to Eun (2008), the most effective method of improving the teaching process is professional development. Thus, rather than being given a pre-planned methods course for pre-service teachers, each semester’s language arts students began the course by receiving a syllabus with basic course information, including standard projects and assignments associated with methods courses. After viewing the basic syllabus, students were asked to complete the efficacy survey/needs assessment. Upon returning to class the next week, students received a new syllabus containing sequenced readings, planned workshop-style class meetings, and updated assignments to provide maximum learning opportunities in association with the co-requisite basic methods and a 115 hour field experience.

4. Students Impacting Teaching and Learning

My Teaching Language Arts course was comprised of twelve students. Analysis of the twelve respondent’s surveys revealed the following pertaining to their efficacy beliefs about teaching and learning:

Question 1: How well do you believe that you could plan daily and unit lessons for the English language arts classroom? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to do these things? Nine of the 12 respondents reported having weak beliefs in their ability to plan daily and unit plans. The remaining three students were alternative certificate students who were presently employed and believed their experience in the classroom had adequately prepared them to create lesson plans. In response to the follow-up portion of the question, issues such as following created plans, sketching long-range plans, matching objectives and assessments, and creating plans for block scheduling classes were reported.

Question 2: How well do you believe that you could manage a classroom in your certification area? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to manage a classroom? With only three of the students being practicing classroom teachers, the remaining nine students reported having much concern about classroom management. Seven students stated their concern stemmed from discussions they had had with in-field teachers. And, eight of the students reported a belief that with time, their classroom management skills would develop. In response to the second portion of the question, students indicated that receiving information about starting and ending a daily period, creating a management plan, balancing education and entertainment, and finding a teacher voice would likely help increase their ability to manage

the classroom.

Question 3: How well do you believe that you could effectively teach your planned daily and unit exercises to students in your certification area? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to do these things? All 12 students indicated a belief that they could effectively teach a planned daily and/or unit exercise. However, the majority of the students qualified their answer with statements like, “I can teach X more effectively than Y; learning more strategies would make me even better; and I need more work on explaining how to do something rather than telling someone what to do.” When asked what they needed more information on, students shared a need for strategies to address all levels of learners, types of assessments and when to use them, ways to incorporate the state standards into lesson plans, and designs for effective student grouping.

Question 4: How well do you believe that you can effectively lead and promote discussion in your classroom? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to do this? Five of the 12 students identified a weakness in their ability to lead and promote discussion in the classroom. Reasons associated with this weakness included the inability to manage many students talking at once, inability to motivate and engage students concerning the daily topic, inability to release control of the lesson and the discussion, and the inability to manage class time during a discussion. Nearly all students stated that learning to strategically ask question and think through a class discussion during the planning stage would likely improve their ability to lead and promote class discussions.

Question 5: How well do you believe you can promote the spirit of becoming a life-long reader in your classroom? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to do this? Half of the class believed they could promote the spirit of becoming a life-long reader, and the other half of the class believed they should but at that point, they did not know how to accomplish the task. Respondents shared a need for ways to motivate students to read, ways to find books that were age and grade-level appropriate, ways to accomplish this task with the text already purchased by the school system, ways to build in time during the day for students to read, and ways to allow students to talk about what they read.

Question 6: What other things do you need more information about to make you feel as though you are a more prepared English language arts teacher? Responses to question six produced six major topics for further study: teaching grammar, teaching literature, incorporating writing into daily lesson plans, planning units to include all areas of language arts, and managing time and space. While many of these topics were mentioned in association with the previous five questions, they were found to be recurring issues throughout the survey responses.

5. The Professional Development Approach

Once the qualitative survey responses were analyzed for common themes after the first class meeting, I spent hours in my office planning the course, updating the syllabus, and getting ready for our next class meeting. Special in-service type workshops were planned for each three-hour course meeting during the semester. Since teachers will ultimately work in environments where they address a needs assessment and then participate in workshops and programs designed to enhance their teaching abilities as professionals, this format seemed most appropriate for the design of my English language arts methods course.

Having reviewed numerous texts prior to the beginning of the course, three texts were chosen for use with the course: a basic guide for English teachers, a grammar text, and a writing workshop text. These texts provided the topical information for each of the workshops, but students were encouraged to read ahead and bring questions to each class meeting. To address the planning needs of the students, each workshop involved some type of make-and-take session where students generated ideas and shared them with their peers before the end of the workshop if possible; if time did not permit sharing, students were able to share all of their coursework via our college of education's adopted on-line course management system. See Appendix 2 for a list of workshop topics.

As follow-up and discussion are key components to effective professional development, field experience hours associated with the co-requisite practicum were used during the week to allow students to begin practicing what they learned in each workshop. In addition, students were encouraged to discuss state course of study issues with cooperating teachers in the field; this offered varied perspectives on incorporating objectives and how these objectives were assessed. Students were asked to be prepared to share from their field experience time at the beginning of each workshop. As students shared situations, successes, and even failures with their peers, we, as a group, generated suggestions, comments, and sometimes just words of encouragement for the sharer. Each student left the weekly workshops with a clear plan of what he/she would attempt during the days leading to the next workshop. This plan kept the students focused and driven to find successes where they could.

As the semester ended, I conferenced with each student to determine his/her readiness to begin the formal internship period before certification was issued. During each conference, I referenced the student's responses on the original efficacy beliefs needs assessment and discussed each question as a form of post-assessment. An overwhelming majority of the students reported a noticeable increase in efficacy beliefs in each of the five areas on the survey. End of course evaluations reviewed well after the end of the course supported these claims as well.

While the increase in efficacy beliefs about the readiness to teach was pleasing to say the least, I took nearly as much satisfaction in the conferences where students were able to admit where they still felt inadequate and was not ashamed to voice their needs. In these

situations, I thought it best to encourage the student to keep in touch with me during the internship so that I could offer any necessary remediation or coaching, and I also provided topic-related articles from current educational journals and texts for further reading.

6. Conclusion

This approach to planning and teaching methods helped foster a bond between the previous semester's students and myself that most teachers only hope for. I look forward to informally monitoring their progress throughout their internship, and even plan to invite some of them back to lead a workshop or two. This new approach to methods has allowed me to model needs-based education and assessment for pre-service teachers who will impact countless numbers of children. Just as the future semesters promise to bring a new group of English language arts pre-service teachers, so do they promise to bring with them unique sets of needs. My nearly blank syllabus is ready for the first night of class along with the efficacy needs assessment. I anticipate very similar themes emerging as I view future semesters' surveys, but I am hopeful, too, for new challenges.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. ESE 404/422 Survey

Name _____ Date _____

ESE 404/422 Survey

Directions: Please answer the following survey questions to the best of your ability. This survey will not in any way affect your grade for the above courses, nor will it affect or influence your relationship with Jacksonville State University. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask.

Self-Efficacy refers to your beliefs about your ability to perform a given task in a given situation. You are about to become a certified teacher, and I am interested in how you would explain your efficacy beliefs concerning some of the following questions.

1. How well do you believe that you could plan daily and unit lessons for the English language arts classroom? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to do these things?
2. How well do you believe that you could manage a classroom in your certification area? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to manage a classroom?
3. How well do you believe that you could effectively teach your planned daily and unit exercises to students in your certification area? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to do these things?
4. How well do you believe that you can effectively lead and promote discussion in your classroom? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to do this?
5. How well do you believe you can promote the spirit of becoming a life-long reader in your classroom? What types of things do you need more information about in order to have higher beliefs about your ability to do this?
6. What other things do you need more information about to make you feel as though you are a more prepared teacher?

Appendix 2. ESE 422 Workshop Schedule

1. Literature Circles and Grouping
2. Reading Comprehension Activities
3. Vocabulary Strategies
4. Instructional Conversations
5. Teaching Skills using Minilessons
6. Long-range Planning for Writing
7. Using the Alabama Course of Study to Plan
8. Writing Workshop: Setting the Course
9. Writing Workshop: Maintaining the Momentum
10. Image Grammar: The Brushstrokes
11. Image Grammar: Assessing
12. Thematic Units and Literature