Final Reflection

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the educational path that I followed throughout my life as a student and as a student teacher. It also provides a framework for educational decisions and perspective shifts as they unfold freely in a classroom, unifying the three aspects of the art of teaching: planning, delivery, and assessment. The third part of this reflection analyzes my teaching beliefs, structured upon ongoing dialogues in the professional field of education and upon my thought patterns and prior experience.
Final Reflection

With skill, passion, and desire to make change, an individual in a position of authority can transform any job into an educational outlet that channels the proper resources and the right measures to bring a collectivity together on the path to success. Thus, the teaching profession is never a goal to reach, but rather an ongoing path, on which educators rest down, step by step, brick by brick, past-reflections and experiences in educational settings, failures and accomplishments as former students, self-assessment of weaknesses and strengths as student teachers, outlooks on what works and what needs improvement as classroom teachers. This final reflection looks at the teaching profession as an art in itself, - an art that draws back upon itself to revere former student years, to impart knowledge unto others, and to change courses of actions on the path to social progress.

Personal Journey from Student to Teacher

With this in mind, in the first part of this reflection, I am going to take my audience on an educational journey from my years spent on the educational bench as a student to the present ones, in which I am putting on teacher’s shoes to show those in position of authority what I am and am not capable to accomplish, yet. Wearing teacher’s shoes involves a myriad of classroom decisions and perspective shifts in building lessons- all these will be explored in the second part of this reflection, which establishes the framework under which my educational career will unfold. The third part will establish my teaching ideology- an ideology that has been shaped by ongoing discussions in the educational circle and by innovative pedagogical measures acclaimed by professionals in the field.

From Student…
A child makes sense of the surrounding world by imitation. We imitate people, behaviors, images, actions, words, gestures, - whatever we see fit in constructing our feelings for the real-life situations we find ourselves in. My deepest reverence always held itself highly in regard to my classroom teachers. I admired their words, scrutinized their classroom behaviors, took pleasure in their nurturing gestures toward our collectivity, felt proud upon their praise and shameful upon my recognized shortcomings.

I wanted to be like them, and, with every school semester, from ever since I can remember being in school, I would tell myself: “I want to be and act like Prof. Valentiriu, Prof. Agapin, Prof. Stirbat, Dr. Lacatus, Dr. Harsan, Prof. Parnuta, Prof. Podoaba, Dr. Caius Dobrescu, Prof. Clennan, Prof. Brown, Dr. Nagelhout, Dr. Becker-Leckrone, Dr. Grubaugh, Prof. Unrue, Prof. Larssen, and Dr. Haddad.” There is an aura surrounding teachers that goes undetected in classrooms, - an unspoken discourse that each and every student has with the teacher, every day, which gradually brings to light students’ natural inclination. And this is it! This is the spark, the moment in which students decide what social role they should engage their propensities in to best benefit the community they represent.

“I have a sincere desire to teach,” I told myself when that spark of creativity finally made its way out of my mental chaos, - a chaos constructed by various attachments incurred by mother and father, by all the conditioned actions showed for the mere pleasure of adults that have nurtured me throughout my moral development. We hold our academic desires as self-evident and inherent to ourselves, when, in reality, they are but the product of an ongoing adult dialogue in one’s household. Or, at least, in my case, it was so. It was decided by the universe that Raluca was to become either a pediatrician because my mother would always cling to the idea of her daughter caring for infants’ health or a computer savvy because, as my father would say, “The
field of informatics could open so many doors for Raluca!” But, this discourse did not last long. That spark of creativity burst out, and shortly, I found myself on my own academic path of becoming a future teacher.

…to Teacher

The journey undertaken from student to teacher is not without its complex pangs and pleasures. Constant revisions and reflections on my role as a student or student-teacher and the observations I amassed in my classrooms did not reach out clean from “many of the preconceptions that [we] hold about teaching” (Borg, 2004, p. 274). But before putting on teacher’s shoes, it is imperative for me to stop for a moment and think of all the job’s aspects that make up the role of an educator.

After all, I am yet another student-teacher who has internalized pedagogical methods employed in classrooms I was part of, and who has admired “frontstage behaviours” (p.274) of model teachers to the detriment of ‘what goes on behind the scenes’ aspect of teaching. The dangers of not developing a critic’s eye to the complex aspects of a teacher’s job are reverting to a “default model” that leads to teaching as taught (p.275) or employing methods of instruction one is most in tune with and which justify any pedagogical weaknesses.

What I needed, as all student-teachers do as well, are pedagogical methods that stretch this “limited view of teaching” (Grossman, 1991, p.349) acquired during the observation apprenticeship to reach beyond “teachers’ actions” to their actual “thought processes” (p.349). Overcoming this apprenticeship of observation means precisely a rethinking of the familiar (p. 349). Trials, errors, and successes of pulling out of my comfort zone and from the pedagogical ways I was exposed to, familiarized with, and preferred to embrace all along my career proved
no easy task. I gradually learned to step away from the instructional role of an expert to that of a facilitator.

I have learnt that pedagogical skills are not finite, but rather, they represent a measure by which I will constantly train myself to embrace revisions and various angles of approach to instruction, angles that will move me away from the familiar, stabilized, fixed aspect of teaching to rather innovative, challenging, and fresh angles of academic exploration. Thus, the boat on which I will embark my students on this educational journey depends as much on my skills at rowing in the right direction as it depends on the collective classroom’s voice at providing desired directions of knowledge.

A Framework for my Teaching Career

This second part of the reflection is meant to establish the general framework under which my teaching career will unfold and my pedagogical skills will develop. This framework represents a product of all perspective shifts employed in building my five lesson plans, of the classroom decisions taken during my Practicum I journey, of the theoretical guidelines consulted for constructing a meaningful analysis of standards and effective lessons to deliver in my classroom.

Planning

Instructional planning rests at the core of the art of teaching. Planning any aspect or angle of the teaching job proves effective when developed and built with an eye for the ‘real.’ By this term, ‘real,’ I mean the actual student collectivity that comprises a classroom, the community and global situations of here and now or of the past to help build upon the new, the actual living people and lively gestures or thoughts of today, neatly compacted in all sorts of literature and
academic journals. Planning remains sensitive to the moral needs of young adults and aims at
placing them as “subjects rather than the objects of study” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.162).

Planning for the instruction of young adults is multifaceted. Teacher-centered methods as
well as student-centered methods have been employed to ensure that students’ learning styles
and academic needs are met with appropriate means of instruction. From presentation planning
to inquiry planning, the content of the lessons delivered has taken the students through an
educational journey in which they were exposed to literary designations and themes such as
Universal Ideals, morality plays, allegorical characters, to concepts such as Justice, whose lens of
observation they could employ for drawing parallels with other real-life situations, to
collaborative work to define traits of Abstract Objects, and, finally, to presentation of inquiry by
means of enacted debate, staged by student teams.

Planning for the three practicum lessons kept in mind the needs of an Advanced
Placement classroom. I aimed at subject-matter, namely, debate over controversial, modern
topics; cultural theories constructed around a simple object of child’s play, a toy; philosophical
considerations of universal applications on the concept of happiness, that is meaningful for a
Language and Composition course at an 11th grade level and conducive to higher-level thinking
skills, which penetrate deeper aspects of literary texts, going beyond the already-exposed literary
situation.

Meaningful planning of lesson content should not only start with a consultation of
Standards for English Language Arts, but also use these as the skeleton for defining what
students should gain from the material. However, the language of standards being difficult at
times, I often found that reliance on standards to build my lesson plan is more of a hindrance
rather than an enhanced guidance. And that is precisely what standards should represent, -
support for planning. On the contrary, at times, I found myself trying hard to accommodate the language of a standard after the creation of my lesson plan. To put it in the words of Maureen Geraghty, teacher at Reynolds Learning Academy in Oregon, “those of us who live in these rooms…we close classroom doors, proceed to spin magic” (Karp, 2013, p. 12). Behind classroom doors, each experience is unique, each connection established between teacher and student is sacred, and each lesson built cannot but deviate from the approach of Standards build upon a language that unifies planning across our nation’s schools.

**Delivery**

Whereas planning focuses on content and subject-matter of choice, delivery focuses on methods of implementation to ensure that students will grasp the content with the academic ease of their preferred learning style. However, these two steps should not be considered as separate entities, as Lee Shulman, Professor of Education at Stanford University, advocates,- subject matter and pedagogy should balance each other and intersect at every step of the teaching process (Shulman, 1986, p. 6). For all my lessons, I aimed at steering the discussion on pertinent aspects of textual analysis and at allowing various students to answer or calling on the ones who were not raising their hand.

Among other methods of delivery, I constructed charts on the board, so that students can discuss concepts in groups and complete tasks in an active and engaging manner, and brought in visual aids, - pictures taken in the rows of various toy stores, criminal data and statistics of capital punishment. It is important for teachers to “vary the manners and vehicles employed to keep things interesting and accessible to students with different learning preferences” (Clark, 2002, p. 41). Thus, when I think “delivery,” I plan for integration of print and nonprint resources, visual
aids, and poetry or lyrics to enhance connections across subject fields and spark classroom discussions.

Assessment

Assessment is not an end result to instruction, but rather a rooted component of effective teaching. Everything a teacher does, from planning to delivery, from scaffolding groups of students to calling out on one for an answer, from posing self-reflective questions to guiding peer feedback, is assessment of teaching and learning. Assessment is everything and everything is assessment (Dr. Haddad) in a classroom in which active learning and active teaching go hand in hand.

As with the other two dimensions of teaching, variety is key to effective evaluation of knowledge and learning. Clark proposes traditional and alternative forms of examinations: oral exams, take-home tests as well as self-evaluative procedures and involvement in evaluation of instructional process (Clark, 2002, p.43). For example, making students part of the thinking and crafting process that goes behind evaluation rubrics is an excellent way to include students in the assessment process and to ensure complete understanding of expectations.

Teaching Ideology

This third part of the reflection exposes my teaching beliefs as a future professional in the field of education. These beliefs have been shaped by my own reflections and patterns of thought as well as by ongoing discussions in the educational circle.

A White standard of accountability has long been the norm of academic instruction in schools across America, - so long, in fact, that we forgot we constructed it, and, in turn, take it as the natural, spontaneous way of teaching in a classroom setting. We have to cure ourselves of this unhealthy view which hinders true social progress of a country that is made up by such a
diverse citizenry. Take your pick and observe the various ethnicities and cultural baggage of students across classrooms! They offer a remote reality from the dream of a White, traditional, mainstreamed student body.

We have been accumulating an “educational debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.9) since the first non-White child ever stepped foot in an American classroom. This educational debt must be addressed (p. 9) because it stands at the root of all educational inequalities, funding disparities across schools, resource allocations, and canonic testing measures, all of which go against real-life experiences of multicultural students.

This is not a question of whether to address this issue or not, to attempt it or not, and to fight against White manifestation across classrooms or not. Rather, I am going to pay the debt! I refuse to limit my knowledge of a child from a classroom’s perspective because “only a part of that child is present in the classroom” (Moll et al, 1992, p. 137). How can I give students my best if I am not aware of their best? How can I offer suitable academic guidance with the mere glimpse of a limited classroom context? Thus, embracing students as a whole means tapping into the precious “funds of knowledge” (p. 133) that are to be found in a student’s natural environment, community life, and household atmosphere. These aspects provide the key to recognizing natural abilities and learning tendencies in children in order to guide teachers toward practicing complex classroom pedagogy.

I, for one, have faith in the work of my future students. Although I have not met them yet, I know what they bring to me. They are those students who look up to me for an answer, who eagerly want to find out more, who desire to give meaning to their own learning, who need scaffolding because they do not want to disappoint me, who want to show me what they know and involve peers in discussions, who feel lost and need an uplift from me, who communicate
with me the pains and pleasures of being a student and of completing assignments, who work with me for solutions and improvements, who are not ashamed to tell me what went wrong and where. I will reach up to them, individually, in good faith, and with a baggage of questions that only the outside-of-the-classroom environment can grant me.

**Conclusion**

So, as future educators, please do yourselves a favor: know your students and allow them to know you! Allow them to know the real you, - with your classroom trials and errors, strengths and failures as a student and as a teacher, as a being in society. “And how can I accomplish this?” you might ask. Well, the answer is simple: share experiences! Students and teachers should share experiences every day. Teachers should find meaningful ways to connect lessons with students’ real life situation, and students should be encouraged to confess experiences, to seek classroom advice, so that conversations become genuine, spontaneous, and inspirational. The authentic factor that places individuals in a certain situation, - if embraced and allowed to transpire across classrooms, if reflected upon in conversations, - is real progress for society.
References


Karp, S. (2013). The problems with the common core. *Rethinking Schools, 10-17*


