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The Benefits of Providing Choice in Pre Service Teacher Education

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The Benefits of Providing Choice in Pre Service Teacher Education

Abstract

Traditionally, teacher educators provide structured lectures for their pre service teachers to impart knowledge of what will be encountered in the field once they begin teaching in schools. However, in this paper, two reading professors who are proponents of constructivist teaching, decide to provide choice in their seminars. Allowing choices provided an opportunity for students to encourage motivation, maximize performance, help increase independence and self-management skills and provide a feeling of control with their learning situation. Choices are evident in both informal and formal assignments throughout the semester. Pre service teachers who were able to share new knowledge in their self-selected forms, were able to show more critical thinking in their responses.

Choice is at the heart of almost everything we do. Choosing what to wear, what to eat, and what to buy, or what to listen to on the radio is usually part of everyday life. We equate having choices with having control (Weinschenk, 2010). Making choices starts very early in life; a toddler chooses which toy to play with, a child chooses which playground equipment he wants to play on. In elementary schools we encourage student choice. Allowing students [K-12] some control over their learning and assignments encourages motivation, maximize performance, helps develop independence and self-management skills (Burden & Byrd, 2016; Gottfried, 1985, 1990). Patall, Cooper and Wynn (2010) also studied the positive effects of allowing choice in selecting high school assignments.

However, this ability to choose tends to disappear in college. A college student has some choice over which course to take and with whom to take as an instructor. However, a college student generally does not have a choice of assignments. Weimer in her book (2002) reveals that most college professors are very teacher centered. Weimer explains that professors make the assignments, construct the way to grade the assignments, and determine how the assignment achieves the learning objective. There is no thought to student motivation, commitment, creativity, or options. Lasley, Fulton & Schweitzer (2011) have also talked about giving choice.

They advocate choice in assignments which they say is not a common practice in university level courses. They contend that the reason many college level professors hesitate to provide choice in assignments is because:

Providing students with a choice of homework assignments may offer some qualitative increase in student enjoyment of the course by allowing them to feel like they have some control of their destiny. However, the cost of providing that flexibility is that students may not receive the same level of learning experience. As a result, their overall performance, and grade can be affected. (Lasley, Fulton, & Schweitzer, 2011, p. 11)

The lack of quantitative research indicates that having a choice over assignments is seldom seen, however it is our goal to determine if allowing choice is beneficial.

The option of allowing choice in the undergraduate course is an example of a constructivist paradigm (Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, and Abghari, 2004). The use of constructivist paradigm in undergraduate courses has been found to be effective (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Oldfather, Bonds, & Bray, 1994), so Tami and Aggie were curious to determine if allowing choice of assignments provides a benefit to the teacher education curriculum. Both authors are instructors teaching education classes at a midsize university in central Texas. They posed the question: Would giving a choice in assignments, or the method of approaching an assignment, encourage motivation, maximize performance, help increase independence and self-management skills and provide a feeling of control with their learning situation? They decided to engage in an action research study to help them answer these inquiries (Mertler, 2009).

Literature Review

The instructors considered this question because they both believe that their students are active and engaged learners who construct their own knowledge. They also understand that their students build their own knowledge about teaching by recognizing the importance of background

knowledge, advocating collaboration, and suggest ways that to engage students so they may be successful (Tompkins, 2012). This study is based on the notion that these instructors feel that it is their duty to involve students in a variety of ways so they may be successful in their classes.

Both Tami and Aggie teach reading at the university, though they teach two different courses. Tami teaches a reading foundations course, and Aggie teaches a word analysis course. In a random conversation, the two instructors realized that they both base their teaching style on the constructivist paradigm. Furthermore, they determined that they were proud of the fact that they provide opportunities for their students to have choice.

Constructivist Paradigm. Both instructors advocate constructivist teaching. They agree with Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, and Abghari (2004) that a constructivist teacher is more of a facilitator than a teacher, who guides students to appropriate information with which students can develop answers to their questions or prompts themselves. The knowledge is constructed from cooperative efforts of the teacher and the students together. Constructivist teachers, or facilitators, encourage the framework where the student is active, creative, and social. Students are active when they are able to participate and engage in the design of their learning, as well as the assessment or evaluation of their learning. This participation and engagement is predicated with the ability to have choice.

Psychology Connections. However, no research has been found to support the option of giving preservice teachers opportunities to have a choice in engaging in the design of their learning. Yet research has been found in the field of psychology. Dr. William Glasser introduced the choice theory in 1998 (Zeeman, 2006). Glasser's (1998) choice theory supports the idea that students excel in academics when they are able to have choice. Glasser explains that each person has five basic needs in order to be satisfied: survival, freedom, power, belonging, and fun (Irvine,

2015). He continues in explaining that a person's behavior is based on his or her perceptions. Furthermore, people will behave in a way that makes the most sense to him or her and creates a person's 'quality world-the pictures in our head' and then turn and try to satisfy what they want (Glasser, 1998, p.14). Key to Glasser's theme is the development of an individual's self-esteem. The term self-esteem can be used interchangeably with self-concept which is used to define a person's or student's thoughts, opinions, attitudes about his or her own capabilities and successes. Success is described as doing well academically, behaviorally, and socially (Zeeman, 2006).

Pre Service Teachers. While Glasser believed that choice theory would be important to students in grades K-12, we believe that this theory is also appropriate and meaningful for preservice teachers in a teacher education program. Preservice teachers are exposed to extensive content and pedagogy that prepares them for their future classroom. As constructivists, we draw upon our preservice teacher's prior knowledge while being guided by more knowledgeable others to solve any teaching problems or situations (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). We also begin instruction with modeling. We model both instructional practices, and our examination of content. Modeling exemplifies how different procedures and techniques can be incorporated into their future classroom. Modeling also bridges the gap between the textbooks' explanations and true classroom practices. Knowing that many researchers agree that preservice teachers gain critical knowledge and instructional tools from instructors of education (Risko, 2009), both authors agree that they hope that the instructional tools and pedagogy they share will have a lasting effect as well.

Our Approach

Even though choices are made every day, some choices are flexible, while some choices are limited or constrained (Wyke et al, 2011). In college your choice of majors and electives is flexible. However certain courses are mandatory, the choice is the time you choose to take the course and with whom you take the course (constrained choice). “Which choices you make, and, thus, the actions you take, are largely dependent on the range of options you are able to choose from” (Wyke et al, 2011). In the education courses taught, the state has mandated certain requirements be mastered before a preservice teacher progresses to a final license (constrained choice). The choice was given in the manner the requirements were achieved.

Keeping in mind constrained choices and flexible choices; Tami and Aggie examined three semesters of archive records of two related courses (Word Analysis Skills and Reading and Literacy I) taught at the same satellite campus of the university. Participants in both classes were mainly non-traditional students in their junior year majoring in Education. Both instructors began the semester with specified assignments; no choices or deviations were encouraged. The semester moved into constrained choice, then flexible choice. Each instructor’s requirements differed and the method of assigning and assessing assignments differed. The common denominator was choice.

Methodology

The authors used the constant comparative method for this study. The constant comparative method is a qualitative study in which emerging themes guide the data collection. The authors continued to collect data until the end of the semester. They met often to work with the data--summarizing, coding, and writing the analysis (Mertler, 2009). They decided that the best way to present their research was by detailing each course separately. Aggie shares her specific choices with her assignments.

Aggie's Choices. At the beginning of the semester in the Word Analysis Skills course, students were given no choice. They were presented with a graphic organizer for their first assignment and were told to read the introductory chapter (Developmental Word Knowledge), how to complete the graphic organizer and to conclude the assignment with a brief summary of what was learned and questions that the chapter rose. The same process was with the chapter on Organizing for Word Study (Assignment #3) and Traditional Learner in the Within Word Pattern Stage (Assignment #6). However, assignments for Learners in the Emergent Stage (Assignment #2), Beginners in the Letter Name-Alphabetic Stage (Assignment #5), and Advanced Reader and Writer (Assignment #8) were over more complex chapters. Students were given a constrained choice and allowed to choose their graphic organizer and their conclusion. To allow standardized grading, all graphic organizers were graded with the same basic rubric.

Assignments #4 and #7 were projects. Each project has a broad topic and subtopic. For example, Assignment #4 was a project to develop activities for the learner in the Emergent Stage of reading and Assignment #7 was a project to develop activities for the learner in the Beginning Letter Name Stage of reading

When the students in Word Analysis Skills were given the assignments and told how to complete the graphic organizers, everyone did complete the assignment, however, the summary and responses were minimal. In 15% of the completed assignments the graphic organizer was very detailed, 60% was moderately detailed, 20% had limited details, and 5% has minimal details. The conclusions were limited ranging from 1 sentence to 3 sentences.

When the students were allowed to choose their graphic organizer and the conclusion was a comment about how the chapter would help them when they became a teacher, again, everyone did complete the assignment. Even though the material was more complex, in 20% of the

completed assignments the graphic organizer was very detailed, 70% was moderately detailed, 10% had limited details. All the conclusions were very extensive; the shortest being 6 sentences; the longest being 18 sentences.

The projects consisted of creating and presenting materials which could be used as guided or independent practice. There were several constrained choices: The material had to reinforce concepts learned during the Emergent Stage (Assignment #4) or Beginning Letter Name Stage of reading (Assignment #7). The material could be related to technology but could not be an already made program. The student had to construct, implement, and assess a developmentally appropriate lesson that met the state mandated curriculum in Language Arts. The project also had to take into consideration the characteristics and instructional needs of students with varied backgrounds, skills, interests, and learning needs. The material had to motivate students to become active, engaged learners while maximizing students' thinking skills. Since most of the constraints had been explained in previous education courses, these concepts were not new. To make sure that there was not a pattern of designated assignment followed by a free choice assignment, Assignment project #4 and #7 were reversed. The first project (assignment #4 for Emergent Stage) was free choice and the second project (assignment #7 for Beginning Letter Name Stage) of reading was assigned. See Table 1.

Table 1

Choices in major topic assignments in the Word Analysis Skills course

| Assignment | #1 | #2 | #3 | #4 | # 5 | #6 | #7 | #8 |
|------------|------|------|------|---------|------|------|---------|------|
| Choice? | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No | No | Yes |
| Format | G.O. | G.O. | G.O. | Project | G.O. | G.O. | Project | G.O. |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Grading format - by whom | Checklist - Instructor | Checklist - Instructor | Checklist - Instructor | Rubric - class & Instructor | Checklist - Instructor | Checklist - Instructor | Rubric - class & Instructor | Checklist - Instructor |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|

G.O. = Graphic organizer with concluding synthesis

Aggie’s Findings. In all 3 semesters the scores for assignment project presentation #4 (the Emergent Stage), were very high. All groups rated between 21 – 24 points [out of 24 points]. Comments from members of the class were mostly positive and some of the various comments included:

- Excellent game,
- I even learned something.
- This was an attention getter!
- It was easy for me to do, but I know it would be a fun challenge for students.
- You had to think – great idea.
- I like the versatility of the game. .

Scores for assignment project presentation #7 (Beginning Letter Name Stage) were not as high as the ones for project #4 (the Emergent Stage). All groups rated between 17 – 22 points [out of 24 points]. The majority of the comments from different members of the class were not all positive and included:

- Instructions were confusing, did you really understand the concepts?
- It was fun, but not very motivating.
- It could be improved for students that were on different spelling level.
- Very pretty, not very substantial.

When looking for reasons why there was a difference in the evaluations for project presentation #4 and project presentation #7 Author 2 looked at many factors. While the composition of the groups for assignments the projects were the same and there was an equal number of topics available for both projects, the material for project #4 was not more difficult than that for project #7. Assignment project #4 was earlier in the semester, but it was not during an exam period, or before Spring Break, or before a big event as Homecoming. Yet in all 3 semesters, the scores were higher when students had a choice in their projects and presentations.

At the end of the Word Analysis Skills course, an exit slip was given to each student. Students were asked not to put names or ID numbers on the exit slip. The slip would not affect their grades and the instructor left the room as they were writing their slip and leaving it in an envelope. The purpose of the exit slip was to see if a choice in assignments was or was not a positive experience for the class members and why they chose the assignment format they chose. The results of the slips were very enlightening. See Table 2.

Table 2

Exit Slip for Word Analysis course

| Exit Slip | TRUE | | FALSE | |
|--|------|------|-------|-----|
| | n=75 | % | n=75 | % |
| 1. Assignments were relevant to the objectives of the topic/module. | 75 | 100% | 0 | 0% |
| 2. Education classes talk about accommodating the needs and style of the individual learner. Giving the class a choice in assignment formats demonstrates that idea. | 75 | 100% | 0 | 0% |
| 3. All assignments should not be the same for each module or topic discussed. The format of assignments should change from topic/module to topic. | 68 | 91% | 7 | 9% |
| 4. All assignments are really about the same. They just look different. | 38 | 50% | 37 | 50% |

| | | | | |
|--|----|-----|----|-----|
| 5. I would rather have the same format for each assignment so I know what to do. | 12 | 16% | 63 | 63% |
| 6. I liked being able to choose the format of assignments. | 74 | 99% | 0 | 0% |
| 7. I chose the assignment format because (choose all that applies): The directions were easy to understand - 62 It looked like I could do it quickly - 32 It looked like a strategy I could use when I teach - 37 I like the way it was organized - 61 I wouldn't have to read the chapter to do the assignment - 2 It looked like fun - 26 I have used this format before and I like it - 32 It looked easy to do - 44 I felt I would learn something from the way it was organized - 62 The format looked like how I learn - 61 The format would show what I learned about the topic - 56 Others were choosing it – 10 | | | | |

Of the 78 slips taken, 75 were returned. All that were returned thought the assignments are relevant to the objectives of the topic/module and that giving choices was a good practice. Most of the students (99%) liked being able to choose the format of the assignments. Ninety-one percent agreed that the format of assignments should change from topic to topic. Half of the students also thought that the content of the assignments was about the same; the assignments just looked different. It was not amazing that 48% said the format was chosen at first because it looked easy, could be done quickly, or it would get them out of completing the assigned reading. Only 30% reported that formats were chosen because of the organization, the format, or that it related to their teaching and learning. The most amazing revelation was not in the multiple choice but in the comments from various individuals:

- First I chose something I thought would be easy. When I got to it, it wasn't so easy. But I learned a lot from having to put my own ideas into what I read.

- My first choice was because I thought I could do it quickly. But the [sic] wasn't the case. I had to think and that was good. I had to figure out how I was going to use it [the information].
- I had seen some of these [homework formats] before and thought I knew how to do it. But it was different because I was learning something different and I had to process it different.
- I wasn't too happy with having to choose what to do for homework. Homework is homework and it is a grade. Afterwards I found out that I could do better with an outline approach to learning. So I chose that style from then on. That is called metacognition.

Tami's Choices. In the reading foundations course, the instructor also serves as the course coordinator for the department. She helped to provide assignments for the course that would be acceptable in all sections of the course, regardless of the campus it was provided. During this semester there were five sections of this reading foundations course. In order to meet the requirements for Texas Educational Agency (TEA), standards are covered through the inclusion of assignments. They are then evaluated, so instructors are able to determine if each student successfully met the objective. So, though the assignments were constrained, each semester the instructor considered various approaches to covering the standard. Tami wanted to feel more confident that her students understood the content in her introductory reading foundations course.

Each semester Tami had students maintain a journal throughout the semester. Initially the instructor had students write a journal entry each week summarizing the textbook chapter or the supplemental article assigned. Different methods were given each week, so students could

practice using several graphic organizers or note taking strategies. The popular strategy was the double-entry journal (Joyce, 1997), though they also used the Cornell Method (Pauk & Owens, 2001), or summarizing strategies. Students were required to compose twelve (12) journal entries during the semester. This was completed by a majority of the students. However, several students indicated on student evaluations or face-to-face that they felt that these journal entries were seen as “busy work” and they did not feel as if knowledge was gained by this experience.

In an effort to bring in further opportunities for her students to take ownership of their work, she decided to revamp the journal assignment. The instructor decided to provide choice the next semester. Students were still required to maintain a journal during the semester, however they were only asked to write eight (8) journal entries. Undergraduates were able to choose which textbook chapters and supplemental articles they would like to write about. They were also given the opportunity to choose the way that they were going to present their material; double-entry journal, Cornell Notes, or using a summarizing strategy. Again, a majority of the students finished the task of writing journal entries. Students with this journal requirement met less resistance.

Tami’s Findings. In addition to selecting textbook chapters to summarize, the instructor also provided prompts for students to select based on their personal interests. They were called Choice Questions. In an effort to cater to different learning styles, undergraduates had an opportunity to select a Choice Prompt that included technology, art, and creative formats. Students selected the choice prompts that invited visual and kinesthetic learning (question was selected by 88% of students). Undergraduates also felt comfortable with technology and selected the second choice prompt as their next preference (20%). The third Choice prompt was selected by 2% of students. See table 3.

Table 3

Choice Prompts, Learning Styles, and Students Who Select Choice Prompt

| Choice Prompt | Learning Styles | Percentage of students |
|---|--------------------------|------------------------|
| How will you organize your classroom? Draw and scan your future classroom map, highlighting your places for reading instruction. | Visual, Mathematical | 88% |
| Find a YouTube or video that gives information on the different genres of text that you believe would be helpful to your teaching. Provide a hyperlink, and then explain why it would be helpful in your classroom (150-200 words). | Verbal, Visual | 20% |
| Locate a scholarly article on dyslexia or nonfiction texts. Read and respond to it by identifying three (3) important points and explaining why they are important. | Visual, Intrapersonal | 2% |

Choice in Literature Circles. Tami also provided opportunities for choice in other required assignments in this reading foundations class. Each semester, students participated in a literature circle. The basis of all literature circles is that it is an instructional strategy that is based on choice. Undergraduates are able to select their books, lead the discussion, and create a project showing their gained knowledge (Daniels, 2002). While this strategy is used often in K-12 classrooms, they are not often used in undergraduate classrooms.

The students appreciated the fact that they could select their own literature circle role sheets. Students considered what type of information they would like to offer, and then selected an appropriate job. The job choices available were discussion director, connector, illustrator,

correspondent, or word finder (Coley, 2012; Daniels, 2002). The discussion director was able to lead the discussion. He or she generated questions based on the required number of pages that were read. The connector job was a popular position. Students preferred having an opportunity to make personal connections to the required reading pages. As a correspondent, students were asked to correspond news from the required reading pages. This was most often prepared as a letter to a character, or a letter between two characters. Artistic and or visual students often selected the illustrator role sheets. As illustrator, students had to provide an image to illustrate a self-selected part in the required pages. Lastly, students could select the role of word finder. The word finder reported words that were significant in the pages read. Oftentimes words were selected that represented another language. Though these literature circle role sheets were catered for elementary age students, undergraduate students appreciated the different perspective that each role brought to the discussion.

Discussion

During these semesters the authors reflected and asked themselves the following questions: Why were we giving choices? What outcomes did we want from offering choices? Will we continue to allow choices and how did providing choices benefit us as instructors? Through their analysis of grades, comments, and conversations with students, the authors learned that giving choice resulted in positive engagement. Though each author had different modes of offering choice, they still had similar outcomes and reasons for providing alternatives.

Tami's Takeaways. In the reading foundations course, the instructor decided to incorporate more choice in her assignments to make her students more critical thinkers and teachers. In previous classes, her students often represented concepts in very creative ways in her

seminars, whether it was a sharing the meaning of a concept in a chart, poster, brochure, or even poem. She decided to allow choices in her assignments because she wanted her students to participate in a similar interactive way when working independently. After the past three semesters, the instructor decided to continue to have choices in her assignments. Her students have appreciated having different modes of showing their understanding. It was noted in student reflections that role sheets were helpful:

- I think having individual roles within the circle was a creative way to keep the reader engaged in the text in a multitude of ways whether it was through making real world connections or visualizing the text. Personally, my favorite job was illustrator! My section of the book had a really interesting scene that I was excited to draw.
- I thought providing roles for each individual member held people accountable and motivated them to search the text more deeply. I personally liked the role of discussion director because it seemed to have me reflecting on the text in a different way than I would normally.

Ultimately, the instructor was pleased with the results: more creative and engaging responses that showed understanding of pedagogy.

Tami concluded that she would incorporate more choice in her assignments to increase critical thinking. However, she found that the important critical thinking was the result because her students were able to choose their own format to respond to material and they internalized the material more effectively. This was seen in their ending comments and summaries as well as in their exit slips. Choice seemed to give them freedom to synthesize in their own manner and made them feel as if they were in control over their learning. It impressed upon the students that the material they were learning was needed for them to be effective teachers. Their comments

showed how they began to project themselves as future teachers. Tami will continue to use choice in her sections, and will encourage other faculty members to do so as well.

Aggie's Takeaways. Ultimately, Aggie will still begin the semester with a non-choice assignment. She wants to provide a platform to show them that she wants thought in their assignments, not quotes from the book. Moving from constrained choice to free choice has proven to be a good progression for her course and style of teaching. As she moves into the free choice options, she learned that students were more motivated to learn the content. The choice assignments were constrained choices, so the expectations were still high regardless of the assignment. Aggie will continue to provide choices to assignments with her students.

Conclusion

Even though it took a little more effort on the part of the instructors to generate choices, we soon discovered that creating choices allowed each student to capitalize on their abilities and use their own style of learning to their advantage. Students were more engaged and tended to realize the purpose of the assignments and analyze the concepts being presented. By doing this, they tended to develop a deeper understanding of the material and relate it to being a teacher. This was the reason we were teaching the courses.

Both Tami and Aggie understand that grades are a factor for college students and working toward or for a grade are part of a college education. However, we sensed that choice helped the students select activities that were in their comfort zone. This helped them to take ownership and be more successful; students were also satisfied with their grades.

While the authors also understand that providing numerous choices is not always good (Schwartz, 2004), we contend that having an option is beneficial. Results indicated that they had

a positive effect, and students were challenged. It also increased motivation to complete assignments. Tami and Aggie will continue to use choices in their courses and look for additional ways to expand the choices for each course.

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