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A Year on the Rock: A Methods Professor Returns to the Classroom

Bradley J. Burenheide

After 10 years in the higher education setting, I was experiencing a crisis of professional doubt. As a professor of social studies methods at a Research I institution in the Midwest, I was confident I was staying apprised of current research and trends in the discipline, but there was a nagging doubt if my Personal and Practical Theories (PPT) of teaching were applicable after 10 years of being outside the high school classroom. To combat this concern, I found it was appropriate to reevaluate my PPT of teaching in a field placement setting. At my local high school, I negotiated an agreement where I would teach a Current Issues class as an elective, every other day on their block schedule. This article explores the following facets of this experience: (a) the theoretical framework employed in this experience, (b) an overview of the experience, and (c) a discussion of how this experience can help improve teacher preparation and instruction.

Theoretical Framework

There were two distinct theoretical pieces that helped conceptualize and frame this experience. The first is the work done on Personal and Practical Theories (PPT) of education (Chant, Heafner, & Bennett, 2004; Cornett, 1990; Cornett, Elliot, Chant, & Stern, 1994; Cornett, Yeotis, & Terwilliger, 1990). After hearing a presentation of this framework at a conference, I reevaluated my own PPTs by analyzing my syllabi, lessons, and instructional techniques for the methods courses I taught. By doing so, I identified and classified the repertoire I shared with pre-service teachers (Levin & He, 2008). While not the crux of this article, there are simple categories to the PPTs I identified through coding of data gathered during observations and field notes. These identified categories are as follows:

1. Sound fundamental strategies applicable to all situations
2. Sound classroom management strategies
3. Engaging content specific strategies
4. Developed relationships with students

Again, to discuss the specifics of these four categories is not the focus of this article, Appendix A has a brief synopsis of the key references for these pieces of my PPT. Upon examining this PPT, it is necessary to double check and make sure this is meaningful and useful for teaching candidates in the methods process, which leads to the second part of the theoretical framework (Bloom & He, 2013).

The second part of the theoretical framework is based upon the work of Christenbury (2006), who wrote a seminal work in English education preparation. Christenbury returned to the classroom to teach language arts in a secondary high school. There she was able to test her teaching strategies as well as document the process of what it was like over the changing period of time from the start of her teaching career to her matriculation to higher education. Ideas such as this led to the framework for which this project took place. As Christenbury saw this as a documentary of the development of an English teacher, I saw this as an opportunity to evaluate

my teaching by putting it to the test of teaching in a classroom. This inspiration led to enacting the process to make it happen.

Once permission to explore the possibility of inserting myself into a classroom was enthusiastically achieved at the university level, the subject was broached with a local school district with which I had a positive relationship. When the idea to insert me, the professor, into the classroom was brought up with the principal at the district's high school, the process was very simple. The offer of a pro bono teacher to teach an elective social studies class was quickly accepted by the principal. As I had kept my teacher certification as a 6-12 teacher, this sped the process for administrative approval quickly. It was at this time that some difficulty occurred. I submitted and received IRB approval after a lengthy discussion with the legal teams of both the school district and the university. The tenuous point was that the school district wanted to ensure that no liability would befall the school district as technically I would not be under district employment, though treated as such. The university wanted to ensure that I, while doing work meaningful to the university would be protected in a potentially litigious situation. As it required delicate negotiations and understandings from both parties, an addendum was added to the IRB protocol and memorandum of agreement between the two institutions. With all other protocols approved, I was allowed to teach in the school district.

The class I was allowed to teach was "Current Issues," the only social studies elective available in this school. The school is a relatively rural school with a 9-12 enrollment over 250 students and was within a half-hour of the university. Additionally, my children attended the school. The school, as well as the district, is award winning and highly regarded in the state and is growing in size rapidly in comparison to other schools in the region. Due to this growth in size and limited resources, the social studies department of the school was able to offer only the core required classes, but has the ability to offer concurrent credit classes in conjunction with a local community college. As word of the class being offered spread amongst students during enrollment, a sizable class was registered and numbered 22 students during the first semester, and 18 during the second semester. Given a classroom, a class, and administrative permission to manage the curriculum as desired in the name of pedagogical research, the stage was set for me to return to a high school classroom with my name on the door for the first time in more than 10 years.

The process utilized to gather data and analyze it was rooted in a qualitative observational case study. This model features the researcher being an active participant in the research and provides a first-person account of the data. To record the data, I kept a personal journal of experiences and ideas in a word document and at the conclusion of each day wrote of the experience. At the conclusion of each semester's course, I spent time coding the data, looking for themes to help coalesce the components of my PPT of education. After evaluating the coded data, the strategies employed in lesson plans, and receiving student evaluations at the end of the class, I was better prepared and able to identify what was truly in my PPT when juxtaposed to the original perceived PPT (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 1998). Appendix A depicts what I developed as my current PPT, which is similar to the previous listing.

The Experience and Sample Lessons Learned

The Current Issues class was a semester-long course for sophomores, juniors, and seniors at the research setting. Over the course of the semester, through the permissions of the parents of the research participants and the school administration, I was allowed to utilize creative strategies and pedagogical techniques to engage the students in instruction. With this research setting, I was allowed the opportunity to try unique strategies such as simulations and instructional games, but the key element to this freedom was the informing and constant communication with both the administration and the parents. If trying something new, by presenting the information to these relevant parties, there was legitimacy to the techniques, as well as having the parents invested in the class. By using unit guides and communication with parents and students, greater interaction was shown amidst students and parents, leading to discussions between them.

One of my first actions was to employ a curricular technique reinforcing the ideas of student engagement. Based on a presentation by Deinhammer (2015) at the Spring iPad Summit in San Diego, I allowed students to select the topics for each individual unit during the semester. The students were able to share information about the preferences, their interests, and their prior knowledge. In their evaluation of the course, the students shared they valued the topics that were discussed and, likewise, appreciated the opportunity to guide the curricular choices allowed by the teacher. Specifically this was a rather rare opportunity for the students to engage in and one that allowed them to become more engaged in the content. Letting students become involved in the selection of curriculum led to greater student engagement and participation as noted in the class evaluations.

To allow time for me to prepare these lessons based upon student input, the first unit of instruction that took place was a review of learning styles (Dunn & Dunn, 1993), multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993; Kagan & Kagan, 1998), and how they can share their learning. The results of this “mini-unit” prompted students to understand for the first time their modalities for learning and encouraged them when creating products to demonstrate learning proceeded to find ways they had never utilized before. As noted in the evaluation piece, students stated that this freedom was greatly appreciated and was illustrated in their projects. Consistently in the class, students created a great variety of projects with a high level of creativity.

One of the next research pieces was evaluating the use of a discussion strategy. The strategy involved the use of poker chips to monitor contributions to the discussion as well as encourage students to mindfully contribute to the discussion. The students understood that this was a research activity and complied with the activity, but knowing that this was something I wanted to evaluate encouraged them to offer suggestions as to the efficacy of the strategy or how it was implemented. This denoted a few specific things to consider from the study:

1. If the students know that it is research, and have forged efficacy in the class, they will input freely to the research.
2. If the teacher/researcher is doing the things that a good teacher does, such as forging relationships with students, it may affect the research, often times denoting the student-teacher relationship rather than the effectiveness of the tested strategy.

Another pedagogical approach utilized over the experience was the use of the Current Events Game. This weekly event in the class involved the use of a commercial product, Current Events Weekly, which was a set of questions in eight different categories regarding events that took place over the year. I treated it as a cumulative game, switching teams each session and appointing the ultimate champion each semester. The winner for the semester received cookies that were shared with the entire class at the conclusion of the semester class. What was interesting was the increase in the number of points earned by students as the semester went along. The total class points steadily increased through the first half of each semester and remained steady throughout the second half of the semester. In looking at this development, it became evident that students began paying more attention to the news in relation to the class, but as several students indicated, they wanted to do better for the Weekly Current Events Game.

This study took place over two years time and involved the teaching of the semester long course four times. Each semester the concept was the same, but the content was different based upon the solicitation of topics from the students. Consistent themes throughout the classes were the understanding of economics (which was not offered at the school), the 2016 election and subsequent first 100 days of Donald Trump, military conflicts around the world, and the development of Russian-United States relations. Given the opportunity to have a say in what they wanted to study, high school students do have the desire to learn about significant social studies topics; it is merely if the current curricula in place provide the opportunity to discuss them.

Conclusion

In reviewing the entire experience, there are three distinct takeaways from this study: (1) the school benefitted from my presence as a researcher; (2) I benefitted from the experience; and (3) the use and review of PPTs lends itself well to rejuvenating teaching methods.

The school benefitted from my presence as a researcher through several means. The first and most obvious is that the school was able to utilize free manpower to offer an elective for students who are interested in the field of social studies where there is dearth of offerings. Furthermore, the experience enhanced the relationship between the university and school. I already held a developed relationship with the school through internships, offering professional development, roles in the community as a youth sports coach and public address announcer at sporting events, and served as a local church educator. But having me in a position with the school allowed for a formal relationship to develop. I could serve as a liaison between the various student teachers the school had, as I was there on a consistent basis. This relationship between me as a professor and the school established a conduit where the school had a pipeline to the university. An additional benefit was the opportunity for collaboration among me, my college students, and the students and faculty of the university. A new colleague of mine at the high school asked if the college students under my tutelage could serve as student judges for a career interview activity. This collaboration was a boon for both parties and could lead to greater relationships and partnerships between the students of the College of Education and local schools.

I gained quite a bit as well from the experience. To be able to teach the methods course in conjunction with the experience in the high school was extremely beneficial. At various times, I

was able to bring my university students into the secondary classroom and see first-hand what is done in a veteran teacher's classroom beyond their field experience. Additionally, the use of field stories I encountered gave additional merit to my instruction as a methods professor to the pre-service teachers. By using the experience to reflect upon the efficacy of my own PPTs of teaching, the content of my methods course gained some validity when these theories were corroborated with what worked in my secondary school setting. The expanded relationship between the school and me leads to additional opportunities to develop further research, possible internship opportunities, and collaborative activities between the two entities.

Finally, the rejuvenation that occurred for all parties was plentiful. My experience was positive and provided an escape as someone who thoroughly enjoys working with youth in formal educational and informal settings. The time-consuming the experience was well worth it in terms of content for my college students. This experience was so beneficial that after a year of catching up with work within the college, the school district and I will resume the setting for two more years. The "new" high school colleagues who worked with me sustained a bit of rejuvenation with new energy and activities taking place just down from the classrooms they had been in for several years. The students at the high school were able to engage in new content and new ways of learning. Their excitement was palpable, especially when I utilized new strategies and research projects outside the normal realm they had participated in during their high school education. Emboldened by this experience, I will spend the current year writing about the novel strategies and ideas that presented during the two-year experience before returning to the school to serve another two-year experience in the secondary classroom conducting research and teaching to benefit students at this local school, my college of education, and myself.

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Appendix A: Key References to My Personal and Practical Theories

1. Sound fundamental strategies applicable to all situations
2. Sound classroom management strategies
3. Engaging content specific strategies
4. Developed relationship with students

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