

The Making of the Minute Masters: Pre-service Teachers' First Steps to Become Novice Conference Presenters and Leaders of Literacy

Lisa Colvin, Ed.D.
Tarleton State University

Anna Fox, Ed.D.
Tarleton State University

Jeremy Adler
Waco Independent School District

Jodi Brown
Tarleton State University

Evelyn Steffek
Great Hearts Maryvale Prep Academy, Phoenix, AZ

Abstract

As previous Texas Association for Literacy Education presenters and university instructors of literacy, the professors highlighted in this chapter knew the value of presenting at the annual conference and wanted to extend that opportunity to their students, challenging them to not only attend a state literacy conference but to also collaborate and participate as co-presenters. Three pre-service teachers embraced this opportunity and were involved in all phases of conference presentation planning. Design and delivery focused on early childhood literacy, specifically the Big 5 components of early reading success identified by The National Reading Panel (2000): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary, and how teachers can utilize spare minutes and transition times during the day to teach and reinforce these critical concepts. The pre-service teachers researched and planned their portions of the session, presented their literacy activities at the conference with participants in a station teaching format, and then reflected on the experience.

Keywords: emergent literacy, Big 5, National Reading Panel, pre-service teacher, leadership, collaboration, co-teaching, clinical teaching, student teaching, self-efficacy

Introduction

When teaching undergraduate pre-service teachers, the goal is not only to develop teachers, but also to cultivate teacher leaders. Encouraging pre-service teachers to participate in activities that can lead to a better understanding of pedagogy of literacy acquisition and development can promote growth within the individual. The purposeful inclusion of an undergraduate pre-service teacher served to provide the student with exposure to and experiences with professional conferences. The pre-service teachers were responsible for developing, planning, and implementing the literacy workshop alongside university professors. In retrospect, the learning opportunities for these students continue to be a positive experience for these three students and the faculty as well. Kouzes and Posner (2010), when writing about learning through experiences, stated:

Learning is the master skill. When you fully engage in learning - when you throw yourself wholeheartedly into the experimenting, reflecting, or getting coaching, you are going to experience the thrill of importance and the taste of success. More is more when it comes to learning. (p. 122)

Theoretical Perspectives

Allowing students to have experiences to increase their knowledge can be based on the concepts and theories of social constructionism and social cognitive theory. Learning theorists Albert Bandura (1986) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) theorized the importance of the social connection in learning and the experiences one has with others. Purzer (2011) explained the difference in the two perspectives:

A key difference between the two is that while social constructivist theory focuses on the cognitive theory scaffolding, the learner receives from interactions with others, social cognitive theory is more concerned

about the learner's internalization of the messages gained through interactions. (p. 657)

Thompson (2015) stated that social cognition theory, combined with Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, explains "how reality is socially constructed and that all learning occurs within the frame of this constructed reality" (para. 1). When pre-service teachers receive the support of the *more knowledgeable peer* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), learning occurs. Bennett (2012), when referring to the preservice teacher's experience, stated that individuals "progressively transform from experiences, and their understandings do not occur in one instance or during one-semester long course but gradually over time" (p. 381).

Minute Masters Presentation Background

This TALE presentation focused on utilizing spare minutes throughout the school day in order to teach and reinforce foundational literacy skills outlined by the National Reading Panel Report (2000) of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary (The Big Five). The idea emerged from a conversation between one professor and a former public school educator and colleague who was now teaching young learners at a childcare facility. While working at the center, she noticed there was 1) wasted time when learning could have occurred, 2) culture of low expectations, 3) lack of knowledge about what literacy skills children need to have when entering kindergarten, and 4) limited academic achievement. That conversation sparked the initial idea that grew into the TALE presentation entitled *Minute Masters: Making the Most of Your Time with Young Learners and Literacy Development*. The professors stepped into the shoes of early childhood teachers and decided to design the presentation targeting the issue of wasted time and critical emergent literacy skills. They researched developmentally appropriate activities that could reinforce phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension,

and vocabulary skills in an engaging way during spare minutes and transition times. In *Reading Essentials*, Regie Routman (2003) urged teachers to make every minute count at school and stated that using transitional times as teaching times is ideal to teach and reinforce literacy subskills more deliberately than incidentally. With the content of the presentation selected, the professors decided to go beyond just inviting students to attend the TALE conference and asked them to consider serving as co-presenters. Three pre-service teachers responded enthusiastically to the call.

Each presenter chose a Big 5 area of focus and selected ten activities to introduce to conference presentation participants. The professors served as guides and mentors through the process of presentation design and found that a review of the Big 5 was needed to ensure that activities were appropriate. Leland (2013) found that a majority of university students who had completed an emergent-literacy course believed learning the importance of the Big 5 was one of the most valuable aspects along with the instructor's enthusiasm for the literacy content. The presenters wanted the session to be hands-on and active just as early childhood classrooms would be. They also wanted to utilize the co-teaching strategy of station teaching to deliver the session content. In this education program, clinical teachers and their mentor teachers are trained to use the seven co-teaching strategies created by Bacharach and Heck at St. Cloud State University (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlburg, 2010). The station-teaching model is a focus strategy even at the university classroom level, and designing the TALE presentation using this format seemed appropriate in that there would be much hands-on content to deliver in a short amount of time. Having five smaller groups of learners rather than one large group is much more manageable for those providing instruction as well as the participants.

Planning the Conference Presentation Session

The three pre-service teachers who chose to participate as co-presenters were embarking on their clinical teaching semester when the planning of the presentation began. Co-presenters met as a group face-to-face twice, once to initially share information about the conference and presenting, to clarify the process and brainstorm, and then again the following month at their field site school to think aloud, share ideas, and hash out the timeline and specifics of the presentation. A collaborative Google Doc served as the space for the five presenters to deposit activity ideas for each of the five literacy components addressed during the presentation. This format served as a template for consistency in the documentation of the activities. The pre-service teachers followed the model that the professors established by including ten activities, each described with a title, when it can be used with children, materials needed, description of the activity, and resources for citation if necessary. This organization allowed each presenter to contribute to a document for use during the presentation and to share with participants after the conference.

Because the pre-service teachers were first-time conference presenters, they naturally experienced feelings of nervousness and anxiety. To give them practice with sharing their activities beforehand, they agreed to a trial run during one of the professor's undergraduate reading acquisition and development classes a week before the conference. The class was divided into three groups that rotated every ten minutes to three stations where the pre-service teachers delivered instruction about activities related to their chosen Big 5 component. The three final semester senior-level students conducted their stations with a class of first semester junior-level students as learners. The two professors monitored the groups, served as timekeepers for rotations, and took notes to share following the experience. The participating pre-service teachers had the

opportunity to share their station material three times with peers by the end of the thirty-minute station rotation experience. They learned from the class participants how that experience was valuable to their own understanding of the literacy concepts and how they could use them in their current early field placement. After this feedback session and a debrief with the professors, the pre-service teachers learned that they would need to have more hands-on demonstrations and activities, be clear and concise with explanations, be more mindful of time management, and be personable and professional. Jeremy, one of the pre-service teacher co-presenters, reflected that “after student attendees had several meetings with the professors to prepare for our session, I felt an increased responsibility to perform at a professional standard. It taught me teamwork and authentic co-teaching strategies.”

Implementation of the TALE 2017 Minute Masters Presentation

This TALE session was scheduled for mid-morning on the second day of the conference, and the pre-service teachers were anxious but prepared and confident. The format for the hour was divided into seven-minute increments for each of the five station rotations, with the professors taking the components of phonemic awareness and fluency to round out the Big 5. The professors and pre-service teachers each chose an area of the room to set up their stations, and session participants rotated through the five stations to learn how to use the selected activities and the value of doing so with young children.

Student Reflections

This authentic experience of planning and conducting a presentation at a state literacy conference co-presenters contributed to the pre-service teachers’ sense of professionalism, sense of leadership, and self-efficacy as instructors of literacy and presenters. This reflection sums up

the experience for Jodi, one of the pre-service students:

It was so much fun to be able to share my ideas, and it was a nice feeling to have them say that they loved the ideas and wanted to use some of them in their own classrooms. I also loved hearing some of their ideas as well. It was a very productive session because I felt that we could all bounce ideas off of each other. I learned that I do not have to be a veteran teacher to feel like I could contribute something meaningful. It was intimidating to share ideas with people who had already been teaching for a long time, but I had a blast doing it!

Each pre-service teacher co-presenter elaborated specifically how this experience impacted them personally and professionally.

Jeremy’s Reflection

As an undergraduate student, it is important to take any opportunity to learn outside of a traditional classroom setting. What purpose does theory serve without testing it? Incorporating classroom theory with practicum is my way of modeling my determination to advance my knowledge with higher-level thinking, just as I expect for my students.

To prepare for my station, I spoke to a retired teacher who gave me some great ideas for teaching comprehension with young learners and also referenced several textbooks I used during my university courses. The practice session at the university was greatly appreciated as I needed the practice to ensure proper timing. I also gained confidence in my ability to present information at the conference. I strongly suggest having a mock exercise to anyone who is planning a presentation either as a novice or with a new delivery strategy.

Presenting at the conference was the first time I had collaborated with teachers, instructors, and other professionals in the education field. I felt humbled and welcomed by everyone. My mentor teacher suggested that I “don’t chat, but interact.” In other words, I

offered my suggestions on activities I shared before opening the floor for modifications or additional ideas. Part of being a leader is understanding other individual's ideas.

I found that I became better at presenting during each of the five mini-sessions during our presentation. Instead of just telling them information about comprehension with young learners, I started to provide examples and even incorporate participant ideas and passing them on with each of the five rotations.

As a student, it was a relief to be in such a warm and welcoming environment where I was treated as another professional. The participants in our session were non-judgmental and supportive. I could see it in their eyes when I felt nervous to speak in front of the whole group, and because of the comfort I felt, I overcame my fear and was able to speak and develop my confidence.

Learning to adapt was something I took away from this experience. We did not know how many participants we would have, who would be in the audience, or what our presentation room would be like. Within minutes, with the help of our professors, we set the room up and made a plan for how our session would run. I just cannot say enough about how much they guided us during this experience. I am so humbled to have been a part of it and did not even feel at the time that I deserved to take part since I was a student amongst so many professional educators. I learned so much from them and the other participants and other presenters I got to see. I am now less hesitant to seek out options for professional development and have the courage to take risks and step out of my comfort zone. I would highly encourage other students to take any similar opportunity offered by their professors so they can guide them in developing their leadership skills. I feel grateful for the opportunity, and it will positively impact my career as a professional educator.

Jodi's Reflection

I chose to participate because I knew that the experience would be a chance for me to learn about myself and my profession. I was apprehensive because I was not sure what I was going to be able to share with experienced teachers. I felt that, if anything, I should be attending every TALE session I could, trying to get as much information about literacy instruction as I could. If I have learned anything from my professors, it is to never be afraid to try something new and be confident in my knowledge and abilities. I embraced the opportunity to share my ideas with others and learn along the way. I was motivated by my feeling that literacy is one of the most important skills that a human being can possess. I am motivated to learn as much as I can about teaching literacy so that I can be an effective teacher for my students, giving them the tools they need to be successful throughout their lives.

My first step in preparing my station was to think about my clinical teaching classroom. I considered the extra time during the day that could be better used, the skills that the first and second graders were learning, and the types of activities that would be effective for this age group. My next step was to look at the phonics standards in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills that PK-2 students are expected to master. This helped me to get a better idea of the focus of my chosen activities. I then researched to find activities that I could use or modify to fit my focus and compiled a list examining each activity closely to make sure that it focused on phonics and then selected my favorite activities to include in the presentation.

Presenting at TALE gave me a feeling of confidence that I wasn't expecting. I discovered that even as a new teacher, I had a lot to contribute. I heard comments such as "I never thought of that before" and "that's a great idea" from many of the teachers participating in my station. Hearing that allowed me to see that my ideas can help others and that I should never be afraid to speak up and share my thoughts.

The experience gave me the determination to continue to learn and share my ideas throughout my career. The presentation experience showed me that I already know a lot about literacy and am capable of using that knowledge in the classroom. It also opened my eyes to the importance of continuing to learn about literacy throughout a teaching career. By continuing to be a learner, I am giving my students the best opportunity to learn. I also felt that I have a duty to share my knowledge with others in the world of literacy. As we continue to learn more about effective literacy practices, it is important that we discuss and share ideas with others. This presentation experience gave me the confidence to know that I can be a leader and a voice in literacy instruction. I was initially terrified to present in front of people at the conference, but now I am more confident in my ability to share my ideas with others in such a setting. It was a wonderful feeling to be among people who shared the same passion and desire that I have. We all had the opportunity to learn from each other as we strive to be more effective in our teaching. The presentation experience gave me the confidence to know that I can take what I have learned, by myself and from others, and share it in a meaningful way.

One of the things that I enjoyed the most about the presentation experience was being part of the team that put it together. I enjoyed discussing ideas with my professors and classmates. I look forward to being able to do this with members of my team throughout my career. There is so much to be learned and shared when talking to other professionals. After this experience, I know that I want to be a member of professional organizations and attend conferences. Having two professors whom I admired and trusted by my side made this experience very worthwhile and fulfilling. I had the support that I needed to succeed and now know that I am capable of being a presenter. The experience further reinforced my desire to continue learning throughout my career. I enjoyed the entire experience so much

and truly felt that it helped me to grow in all aspects.

Evelyn's Reflection

I chose to participate because I wanted to reach and achieve something higher...something extra. I thought this would be good for me personally and professionally. I also decided to be a presenter because when I considered myself struggling with my part of the presentation, I remembered I had assured guidance from my professors and support from my peers who were presenting as well.

Before I started planning, I reviewed and refreshed myself on current vocabulary practices. This allowed me to renew my foundation and build strategies on what educators are already doing in their classrooms. In choosing the strategies I presented, I researched vocabulary methods and collaborated with my professors and peers for starter ideas. I took these ideas and added in my own creativity, turning some into games and other engaging activities. I stretched these ideas as much as I could to squeeze every ounce of vocabulary exposure out of them.

When we practiced at the university, I learned to show confidence outwardly even when I did not have it inwardly. I also learned the importance of rehearsing, how to speak and introduce my strategies more clearly, and how to engage a higher percentage of listeners by using my own tone and rate of speech as well as my own excitement.

This experience of presenting at TALE shaped my self-confidence and leadership. It was a rewarding feeling to grow professionally by having experienced being a conference presenter as an undergraduate student. Taking this extra step forward toward my goals allowed me to create newer and even higher educational goals. I found that my self-efficacy with presenting and with literacy content grew as I taught my vocabulary strategies to other educators, educators who have been in

classrooms longer than I have and have an even more developed educational background. I took delight in seeing them taking notes on things I had to say. When they spoke of how they liked the ideas I had developed or when I could see their excitement that came from learning from me, I was honored and felt elevated in my knowledge as an educator.

I know that after having worked on this presentation, my work ethic has increased and my motivation to go above and beyond the standard has increased exponentially. I can see how this will benefit any team I work with because of my newfound confidence to research and share my ideas. My leadership and motivation may impact the people, teams, and communities I will work with in the future, but I think the greatest impact will be on my future classes. This eagerness to learn will continue to fuel my passion to teach them new strategies and methods in literacy. Above all this, I hope that this enthusiasm to learn will be adopted by my future students.

Professor Reflections

We began this journey with no experience working with students as conference co-presenters, and we learned that students who are enthusiastic and motivated are highly capable when equipped with the tools for success. We found that including them from the beginning stages of conference preparation as co-planners and co-constructors of knowledge, being clear with the vision and outcomes for the presentation, and allowing for choice all contributed to pre-service teachers' general sense of autonomy and responsibility and overall success of the experience. Blanchard (2007) discussed how to approach working with the beginner who "is enthusiastic and ready to learn, despite his lack of skills" and is "curious, hopeful, optimistic, and excited" with the directing leadership style as they require a step-by-step guide for self-development (p. 90-91). Blanchard (2007) further explained that for enthusiastic beginners to experience success

when they have very limited knowledge in particular context is to teach and show them what experienced people do in such situations and then let them practice with supervision and support. Vygotsky (1978) would call this working with a "more knowledgeable peer" (p. 86) in the Zone of Proximal Development. Framing ourselves as learners and leaders of literacy and extending that framework to our students created a shared space to work on this project as collaborators. Instead of seeing us as merely professors who hold the power and knowledge, through this experience, the students viewed us as more experienced colleagues who would help them navigate the path towards the collective destination.

While the initial thoughts about including students as co-presenters were limited in impact potential, we found that this opportunity gave these three students an area of growth that other students in their peer group did not have during their teacher preparation. Pomerantz and Condie (2017) studied pre-service teachers' lessons and how they melded knowledge and practices learned in the university classroom with real-world school curriculum. They determined that the ability to transfer knowledge and practice resulted in categories on a continuum of knowledge transfer with expert transformation as the highest level. This level is described as the ability to transform knowledge to meet student needs in planning and enactment. We see these three pre-service teachers as moving toward that expert transfer level on the continuum as this experience has added another layer to the many other experiences they have had that contribute to the scope of their preparation. They researched their specific literacy topic, selected activities based on criteria, and taught them to groups of participants at a professional conference making in-the-moment decisions depending on the needs of each group about delivery during each of the five station segments.

Additionally, we see ourselves on a continuum of learning as well. We are

beginners in our understanding for how to elevate the university classroom experience to include other experiences for pre-service teachers that will deepen and broaden their knowledge, practice, self-efficacy, and leadership. In *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water*, Vaill (1996) discussed qualities of the reflective novice who thinks and reflects to improve his or her ability to be a beginner over time. Modeling this risk-taking for our students helps them see that professional educators should always be open-minded, lifelong learners who are on a quest for being beginners in many areas, pushing the boundaries of what is and what was, and finding new areas of growth and leadership.

During the closure portion of the Minute Masters presentation, session participants, who primarily included pre-service teachers, professors, and early childhood teachers, commented how much they appreciated learning from these three pre-service teacher presenters. Some participants were in their junior year of their education preparation programs; they expressed gratitude and admiration for our students' initiative in taking on this challenge and sharing their learning by applying it in a format such as a professional state literacy conference. They modeled for other students and professors the possibilities for student leadership in this area.

Conclusion

We embarked on this first-time experience of including students as co-presenters with an open mind and high hopes that pre-service teachers would want to participate and embrace the opportunity wholeheartedly. Their participation surpassed all expectations, which is not surprising considering their caliber and strength of character. Instructors have noted the commitment of these students to their education and personal professional development demonstrated during their time at the university. As we move forward as university professors having lived this experience with much initial success, we are encouraged that we can replicate this practice with future students and for future conferences. Feedback from all sources was entirely positive, so even though it takes much work, planning, and guidance, the results are worth the extra energy expended. Students' contributions to the planning and implementation of the presentation added dimensions and depth beyond what we could have done on our own. Our advice to professors who are accustomed to presenting but have not considered including students is to step out of the box and grab their hands. Despite challenges, the process of contributing to our own leadership and students' self-efficacy as leaders of literacy is really what it is all about.

References

- Bacharach, N., Heck, T.W., & Dahlburg, K. (2010). Changing the face of student teaching through co-teaching. *Action in Teacher Education*, 32(1), 3-14.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundation of thought and action: A cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bennett, S. (2012). Effective facets of a field experience that contributed to eight preservice teachers' developing understandings about culturally responsive teaching. *Urban Education*, 48(3), 380-419.
- Blanchard, K. (2007). *Leading at a higher level: Blanchard on leadership and creating high performing organizations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Blanchard Management Corporation.

- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2010). *The truth about leadership: The no-fads heart of the matter facts you need to know*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Leland, K. M. (2013). The impact a teacher preparation literacy course on pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching young children how to read. *SRATE Journal*, 22(2), 65-70.
- National Reading Panel (US), National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (US). (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature and its implications for reading instruction: reports of the subgroups*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health.
- Pomerantz, F., & Condie, C. (2017). Building bridges from pre-service experiences to elementary classroom literacy teaching: Challenges and opportunities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 64, 211-221.
- Purzer, S. (2011). The relationship between team discourse, self-efficacy, and individual achievement: A sequence mixed-method study. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 100(2), 655-679.
- Routman, R. (2003). *Reading essentials: The specifics you need to teach reading well*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Thompson, S. (2015). Social cognition. *Research Starters: Education* (Online Edition). EBSCOhost. Retrieved from zeus.tarleton.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=89164447&site=eds-live.
- Vaill, P. B. (1996). *Learning as a way of being: Strategies for survival in a world of permanent white water*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.