

## After school arts program serves as real-world teaching lab

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*This paper describes how an after school elementary arts program served as a teaching lab for undergraduate pre-service teachers. The program was designed and implemented by an art education faculty member as an undergraduate service-learning course and research investigation on the outcomes of an inquiry-based K-12 art curriculum. It also became a setting in which the author was able to serve as an instructional role model for her undergraduate pre-service education students. In the community-based teaching lab, the author was able to bring to life her own teaching philosophy and pedagogical approach in the presence of her students. The setting presented, as well, an opportunity for professor and students to collaborate on the creation and implementation of a classroom management system, enabling the undergraduates to build confidence in managing and leading a class.*

Teacher education, service-learning, classroom management, inquiry, critical thinking

### INTRODUCTION

As an Assistant Professor in an art teacher education department which graduates approximately 40 undergraduate students a year in an initial teacher licensure program, I have supervised students in both practica and student teaching placements which occurred in public schools. In each case, I have observed a student in action and then commented on their practice teaching performance, both verbally and in writing. I have also conducted classes on campus in which students presented lessons to their classmates, and to me, as though they were presenting a lesson to a Grades K-12 group of students. These classroom simulations have also served as practice teaching experiences for students.

Over three years of conducting evaluations of students in these types of clinical settings, I have often felt that there was a disconnect between my role as observer and professor, and the 'teaming with life' reality of actually delivering instruction to a Grades K-12 class. Sitting back and watching my college students teach Grades K-12 students, or their own college classmates, limited my available tools of instruction to verbal suggestions, observation and evaluation. But recently, I was able to close this gap between observation and the actual delivery of instruction through an after school arts program for elementary school children that I have organised as both an undergraduate service-learning course and a research study. The study investigates whether an inquiry-based arts curriculum delivered through the after school program impacts on critical thinking ability in both the children enrolled in the program, and the college students participating in implementing it. But there has been an additional outcome of this study in that my college class is now taking place in the field, and my students' teacher education is occurring in a setting where I am able to role model my teaching philosophy and demonstrate the methods I espouse for effectively teaching Grades K-12 students. Demonstrating how I instruct Grades K-12 children is a much richer form of pedagogy than suggesting to my students how they might teach. Additionally, with the class as a group serving as a team of instructors in the after school arts program, we have the opportunity to learn from each other and to share our observations and

reflections with one another every step of the way. This has created a valuable real world teaching lab for me and the eight undergraduate students in the course.

### **AN INQUIRY-BASED CURRICULUM IN ACTION**

The first day of the after-school arts program began with me leading the instruction of a group of children, aged 8 to 11 years, who had enrolled in the program. The first artmaking experience these children engaged in was the creation of expressive ‘identity boxes’ which reflected each child’s unique personality (Barrett, 1997). It has been several years since I worked as a Grades K-12 art teacher, and during my delivery of instruction in the after school arts program, as I once again experienced ‘the smell of the tempera paint,’ as it were, and helped children to handle paint brushes and the application of paint and to make choices of collage materials which reflected their personalities, I noticed that the undergraduate students in the service-learning class in which this program was implemented were closely watching and listening to me. In the year-long process of planning the program, I had been focused on the creation of the inquiry-based curriculum to be delivered as a ‘treatment’ in the research study. As I actually delivered the curriculum, with my students observing my instructional methods, in anticipation of shortly taking a turn at instruction themselves, I realised the unexpected outcome resulting from this program. Not only was I delivering inquiry-based arts instruction, I was also role modelling instructional techniques that I continuously recommend that our undergraduate students use when they had the opportunity to teach. My tone of voice, the specific language I selected for my instructional dialogue, the way I looked at the children and listened to what they asked me, were a form of instruction that teacher education students rarely received from their professors. The laboratory settings of our university classrooms, or the silent observations of our students in other teacher’s Grades K-12 classrooms, can not put into practice the pedagogical theories that we teach in class as effectively as we can in our own delivery of those instructional techniques with children, in the presence of our students.

There is a strong emphasis in the inquiry-based curriculum that we are delivering through this after-school arts program on classroom discussions. Managing a classroom discussion about art is not a simple undertaking with elementary school children. I designed the program so that I would lead the first instructional sessions for the children’s identity boxes, and then the undergraduate students would work in teams to deliver the remainder of the sessions—with me present to assist every day of the program. Once the children had finished creating their identity boxes, I began a discussion with them about their work.

In this first critical inquiry session, my goal was to facilitate an open-ended talk about the childrens’ work to aid them in the development of critical and aesthetic awareness and reflective thinking. I was attempting to foster divergent thinking and encourage an atmosphere of trust, in which students felt comfortable expressing their individual opinions without any pressure to conform to my opinion or that of the other students (Stewart, 1997). I began the discussion by explaining to the children that I had all of their names on index cards in an envelope and that I would pull out one name at a time and we would talk about the work of the student whose name I had randomly selected. I did this so that I was not in a position of openly making judgments about the work and selecting one child’s work over another’s to talk about. We did not have enough time to talk about each student’s work in the first session, so my goal was to utilise a fair system of selection by randomly selecting names. I explained to the children that we would use this card system to ensure that all of them would have a chance to have their work discussed—that those selected today would not have their names in the envelope next time.

I then held up the work of the first child selected and asked the class to describe what they saw in the work, and what they felt it expressed about the student who created it. After many children had been called on to say what they saw in the identity box, I asked the child who created it to explain what she had attempted to express. During this discussion, there was some giggling at

some of the responses which were meant to be serious, and when this occurred, I reminded the children of the class rule: to please show respect for everyone in the room.

In this critique session, all children in the group showed great enthusiasm for talking about each other's work in an objective manner, and for explaining their own work when they were given the opportunity to do so. Through the discussion, a positive classroom climate was created, in which elementary aged children openly discussed their ideas about art and about what they had attempted to express about themselves in the identity boxes. Critical and aesthetic inquiry took place, and my personal teaching philosophy was observable for my teacher education students.

### A TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Through the delicate process of developing a classroom climate that enabled all children to feel safe from ridicule when sharing their ideas and feelings about their artwork and the work of others, I was able to implement an approach to teaching that would serve as a model for my students to reflect upon as they formulate their own teaching philosophies. It is my belief that each teacher is unique, and that our pre-service education students need to have the opportunity to observe many different teaching styles and philosophies as they formulate their own philosophy, based on their individual personality and on the examples they have witnessed.

The teaching philosophy I model is built upon my belief that a classroom is an important social unit in the life of a child. In the opening pages of his book, *Social Organisations*, Ahrne (1994) explains that there are

common features in basic social units such as families, enterprises, clubs or states. They are combinations of forces that make people part of social entities. We will call these entities organizations....The reality of organization is as old as mankind. The roots of affiliational bonds stem from the earliest forms of families and tribal relations. (pp. 2-6)

In social organisations, says Ahrne, an individual becomes affiliated, and recognised. "As an affiliate of an organization the other affiliates give you an identity, they begin to recognize you and they care about what you do, when you come and when you leave....You mean something" (p. 5).

Classrooms are "basic social units" (p. 2), and they are most definitely places where "human actions are transformed into social processes" (p. 2). Those social processes are the engine of education. To name just two of the social processes that occur in a classroom: (a) students construct an understanding of information presented in the class, and (b) they construct an understanding of how to participate in an affiliated group, the basic unit of society.

In a classroom, students are affiliated with other students, the teacher, and with the institution or organisation the classroom is housed within. This affiliation helps students forge an identity, aspects of which they will carry with them into whatever they do and wherever they go. I believe that the social organisation of the classroom carries with it the gravest responsibility. In classrooms, teachers hold the minds and identities of students in their hands. Student identities can be either eclipsed or illuminated, based on how they are treated and taught by the teacher and by other students. House (1996) says "above all, teachers must get to know the students and their work, even the way individual students think. Students must get to know each other and the teachers" (p.13).

Not only do teachers carry the responsibility of facilitating the acquisition of knowledge in a student, they also carry the responsibility of acquisition of the self in a student. Rubin (1985) explains that "what we must have are teachers who know both their subjects and their students, who have the essential pedagogical and interpersonal skills essential to their intent, and who are themselves positive, informed, and observant" (p. 58).

A fine balance must be struck by teachers as they assist students in forming knowledge of the world and of themselves. Ahrne states that “this is not to say that organisations are inherently just and that affiliates are always taken care of and treated fairly. On the contrary, organisations are often repressive and terribly unjust” (p. 6). But because they are entrusted with the vulnerable and fragile minds and identities of students, I model for my teacher education students the philosophy that teachers have a moral imperative to be just and fair.

There are various ways a teacher can uphold their responsibility to assist students in the acquisition of knowledge and the illumination of self. One of these is for the teacher to control the organisation of a classroom in such a way that it is a safe and healthy place for each student to learn and grow and discover more about the world and about him or herself.

If a classroom is chaotic, not only is it unlikely that a student will successfully acquire the knowledge and skills the curriculum is designed for, but there is also a danger that the teacher may not be able to discern when interactions between students are harmful. As facilitator and guardian of the processes of social organisation in a classroom, I believe that a teacher has the responsibility to control or manage that organisation in such a way that learning goals are met, and there is adequate awareness at all times, of how students are generally being treated by other students within the organisation of the classroom. Teachers must take care to ensure that students are not unduly criticised, or negatively labeled in the social organisation of a classroom.

Recent research into how to prevent school violence has shown that rewards and sanctions can have a positive impact on students in classrooms. In the article, *Creating Peaceful Classrooms: Judicious Discipline and Class Meetings*, Landau and Gathercoal (2000), explained that

researchers who are also teachers, administrators, and specialists in Michigan, Minnesota, and Oregon are documenting how the constitutional language of rights and responsibilities, incorporated into a democratic management framework.... can support equitable, respectful, and safe classroom environments. (p. 450)

### **A CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

Classroom management that promotes a democratic, productive environment requires a fair, sensitive approach by teachers. It takes artistry to strike a balance between control and chaos in the classroom, so that students feel encouraged to express themselves. The teaching lab that was created through the after school arts program my students and I implemented afforded me the opportunity to collaborate with students on the creation of a classroom management system appropriate for the context we were working within.

It has been my experience with pre-service teachers that classroom management is one of their primary concerns as they prepare for work in Grades K-12 schools. Leading a classroom is often viewed as a daunting task for undergraduates, and many of my students have voiced concerns to me about a lack of experience in managing students. Because we are working as a team of instructors in the after school arts program, my students are gaining experience in the formulation of a classroom management system for the program.

As the undergraduates in the service-learning course assumed responsibility for instructional sessions, I noticed that some struggled with managing classroom discussions. During the discussions, some children would call out responses meant to get a laugh, or they would laugh loudly at another child’s answer. This frustrated the undergraduates and some voiced concerns to me about how they would manage these discussions when it was their turn to teach. In hearing these concerns, I decided we needed a more elaborate classroom management system than the frequent reminders to children about the class rule: to please show respect for everyone in the room.

So I devised a rewards based system in which there would be a drawing for small prizes, such as a pen, or a puzzle, at the end of each program session, and each child would begin the day with 3 chances per session, but would have chances removed if he or she needed to be reminded more than once about the class rule. I then posted a description of this system on the online discussion board for the undergraduate service-learning course and asked the undergraduates enrolled in the course to comment on it. I revised and adjusted the system based on their comments, and we continued to make adjustments after it was piloted and used with the children.

Enabling pre-service teachers to participate in the creation of a classroom management system brought to life Susi's (1995) suggestion that pre-formulated behaviour management systems might look good on paper "but may not work well for specific teachers and their students" (p. 36). Our system started out as one thing on paper, but then it evolved. And in this evolution it served as an example of action research as we implemented the system and made adjustments to it based on its utility within the specific context of our program.

### CONCLUSION

In addition to providing our pre-service undergraduates with opportunities for observing cooperating public school teachers as teaching role models, education professors may want to consider contexts in which they are able to model their own teaching philosophies, methods of instruction, and classroom management systems in Grades K-12 educational settings. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways: professors might develop community after school programs in which they are the lead instructor, or they can offer to serve as guest teachers in public school Grades K-12 classrooms, with college students in attendance in rotating groups. Or public school classes may be invited for field trips to college campuses to participate in teacher education classes. Adding ourselves, as education professors, to the mix of role models our students observe, enables our education students and future teachers to witness a rich example of pedagogical theory in action.

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