DEVELOPING TEACHING SKILLS OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT: This article describes one teacher education course designed to provide prospective teachers with opportunities to practice essential skills of teaching. With the aim to prepare the students for their own authentic practice in schools experience, we created an environment for collaborative team teaching, where small groups of students taught their peers about different educational themes. The study engaged the students through three different learning experiences: planning the team teaching, teaching the team topic, and reflecting on the teaching. The views of these study participants on the effectiveness of collaborative team teaching were collected through survey and observation. This experience allowed the prospective teachers to try and to improve teaching and team work skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

The goal of most universities is to prepare students for the workforce. To fulfill this task, the university should attempt to provide their students with the skill sets required to become viable candidates for positions in their chosen careers (Snyder, McNeil, 2008).

Teachers are expected to have a wide range of knowledge, skills and competences, and to respond to a diversity of tasks they carry out in schools. The profession of teaching is becoming more and more complex. A high quality of initial teacher education is crucial for the possibilities of teachers to face the demands they confront with, in terms of knowledge of academic subjects and pedagogical skills. In order to prepare the students better for the demands of their future profession, the teacher education program offered at universities (which are usually theoretical, abstract) should promote more opportunities for students to apply the skills involved in a professional teacher activity. This is also important for reducing "reality or practice shock" (Stokking, Leenders, De Jong & Van Tartwijk, 2003), that many prospective teachers experience in their first lessons.

Collaborative skills are a critical requirement for most employees. Learning to work well with others should not be an on-the-job experience (Snyder, McNeil, 2008). Students need to develop group work skills before they face the real work world. These considerations inspired us to develop an instructional context where prospective teachers could benefit from practical preparation and collaborative working, in order to prepare them better for the demands of their future profession.

2. THE CONTEXT

The Pedagogy II course (Instruction and Evaluation) is part of the 3rd semester curriculum for second year students enrolled in the teacher education program at the Teacher Training Department, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. It includes 2 hours of theoretical lectures as well as 2 hours of seminars per week. The course's main objective is to provide students with the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to future teachers. The participants in the study (56 undergraduate students organized into two cohort groups) undertook the Pedagogy I course (Education and Curriculum), which is a prerequisite for Pedagogy II in the second semester of their first year. During both courses and seminars these students had been exposed to a wide range of interactive teaching and learning strategies, including those that helped them become familiar with the concept of working cooperatively with others. We considered this experience as a background for developing a peer teaching process.

Convinced by the idea that having more practice before graduating has a crucial role in the improvement of practitioners' professional skills, we provided a medium for teaching practice within the 2 hour per week seminars. Our approach was intended to provide the 2nd year students with an experience of teaching practice, as preparation for their own authentic practice in schools experience, which will take place in the 3rd year.

We created an environment for collaborative team teaching (CTT), where students' teams taught a specific content to the same students' class at the same time. This model combines selected aspects of microteaching, which is a common practice in teacher education that originated in the United States in the 1960s (Fernandez, 2006) and team teaching, which can be defined as a group of two or more teachers working together to plan, conduct and evaluate the learning activities for the same group of learners (Goetz, 2000). The main CTT activity commenced in academic week five of the semester and continued on a weekly basis until the final week and served as a significant percent of their final grade. The model we promoted covered three phases:

- **Before teaching** – during this phase a few actions happened:
- The students organized themselves in teams of three to five members (team members were given the chance to choose each other) and they elected a topic (from a list with topics related to instruction or teachers' work issues). Some students also suggested topics and we took them into consideration in the sense of incorporating them in the topic list.
- Each team had a leader who was in charge of internal operations of the team (setting up meetings, coordinating schedules) and who served as a liaison between the team and the teacher.
- The teams were asked to plan and do a 30-40 minute collaborative team teaching on the chosen topic using the methods and skills they acquired. In order to help the planning of the teaching, the students were given a three-phase teaching and learning framework: Evocation, Realization of meaning and Reflection (ERR), developed inside the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking program (Steele, 2001).
- Students were encourages to equally distribute the roles between the members of the team (the principles of

cooperation and division of labour were reinforced during both lectures and coaching) and promote an interactive teaching and a student-centered approach.

• Lectures assisted the students in guiding to/or even providing the theoretical material necessary to complete the task. Teams were encouraged to meet with the lecturer once or twice, before the teaching, in order to discuss/ask question/review their coming presentation.

• **Teaching** - each team was given 30-40 minutes for teaching the topic, by contribution of all its members; the student teachers teams shared the instruction of content and taught the same cohort group of approximately twenty five students.

• **After teaching**- at the end of each CTT teaching episode, time has been allocated for reflection on the teaching process (completed by the peer who participated to that session, by the instructor, the member of the teaching team).

Through this model we intended to provide the students the opportunity to develop experiential knowledge of professional action in a controlled way.

3. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

At the end of the semester we offered the students involved in this program the chance to reflect on their CTT experience. Data was collected via methods of a questionnaire conducted at the end of the course. Two questions guided the investigation:

1. How do student perceived the CTT process, in terms of benefits and difficulties?
2. What do students feel about the CTT experience?

Student-teachers involved in this study were asked to list their own benefits and difficulties in practice teaching. All survey responses were kept both confidential and anonymous. The questions were open-ended, so that the student stated the benefits and difficulties in their own words rather than ticking items given in a list. We proceeded like that because we tried to avoid some imposed ideas. During the analysis phase of the questionnaires, the benefits and difficulties were coded into categories and the results were listed according to frequency of occurrence.

The students' perception on the CTT process showed the benefits of this experience. Figure 1 summarizes the benefits indicated by the participant about CTT application ranked from the highest to lowest:
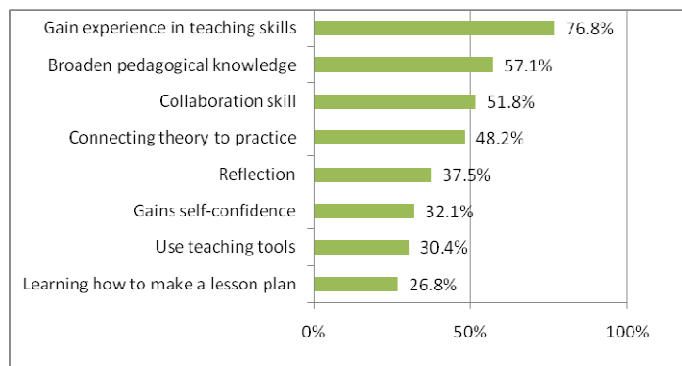

Figure 1. Students' perception on the benefits of CTT teaching application

The students' answers showed that they benefited a lot form the CTT experience. The prospective teachers recognized the relevance of the CTT experience for their future teaching, both in learning to teach (76.8%) and pedagogical knowledge (57.1%). To support this, we selected some positive students comment, as follows:

"*Being a teacher, even for a short time, was a very useful experience for me. I had to establish a relation with the class, to explain things as clearly as possible and to ask my classmates questions, as a real teacher does. I believe this experience was a good exercise for my future occupation because I gained some experience of real teaching.*"

"*I learned so many things during this semester about different issues from the educational field. Of course, I remember better my team topic, but I also learned much from my colleagues' presentations.*"

The data indicated that student felt they were broadening their pedagogical knowledge through this experience. Through the process of planning and teaching a topic the students have got a deeper understanding of that topic. Before helping others understand, the team teaching students had to develop their own understanding of the content. On the other side, teaching a topic may be one of the best ways to remember it.

From the survey, developing the collaboration skills was revealed to be very important to more than half of the participants.

"*Working in groups we confronted different views. This experience helped me to open my eyes, accept more than one opinion and to act more cooperatively with others.*"

"*In my team each member contributed to our project. We plan together our activity and then we share the tasks*".

In a CTT experience the students were exposed to more views, to a variety of learning styles and approaches. The team members shared planning and the work involved within this process.

According to the participants' view, this experience was an opportunity to apply and better understand the teaching methods. A prospective teacher expressed this as:

"*We had the opportunity to try out things we learnt about, for instance using cooperative learning methods within class and to understand how they function*".

Indeed, the students had the chance to put into practice the instructional methods covered within the course curriculum. During the teaching sessions, many instructional methods were applied: debates, role play, study-case, lectures, thinking hats, brainstorming, gallery tour, jigsaw, Think/Pair/Share, reciprocal teaching, games and so on.

Another benefit from this experience, according to the 32% of the prospective teachers, was that they gained self-confidence. One of the students wrote:

"*Even though before teaching I was a little bit nervous, at the end I felt so satisfied because my team presentation went so well. This experience helped me become more confident about myself.*"

Prospective teachers exploited teaching aids to the full, because they considerably facilitate and promote the teaching-learning process. The students used video projector, films, created Power Point presentation, cassettes, posters, questionnaires, used costumes. One of the students wrote:

"Thanks to this application I learnt to make a well structured Power Point presentation and to use it during the teaching process".

The student-teachers were very good at preparing visually attractive, colourful, and creative instructional materials. The students had the chance to better understand the instructional methods because they applied so many: debates, role play, study-case, lectures, thinking hats, brainstorming, gallery tour, jigsaw, Think/Pair/Share, reciprocal teaching, games and so on.

The prospective teachers also valued the opportunity to reflect on their teaching experience and to receive feedback from fellow students, in a supportive environment. Here are two students' points of view:

"Reflection on my teaching experience helped me realise my strong and weak areas."

"Receiving feed-back from my classmates and my teacher was beneficial. I understood that some aspects of the lesson were great and others not so great. I got useful ideas for improving my teaching skills."

The teacher also gave feedback immediately following the teaching session. During the feed-back sessions, we had a tendency to focus on what went well and what went not so well in the classroom, with the purpose to help the prospective teachers with a realistic picture of their actual strengths and areas for improvement. We did it in an optimistic and constructive manner, in order to give students the confidence to work toward improvement.

The participant pointed that taking part in others' lesson help them to consider numerous ways of teaching. We think that encouraging student teachers to reflect critically on their teaching experience, before they have even graduated, can have a strong and positive impact on professional development.

Overall, positive student comments revealed that many students enjoyed this experience. Although student-teachers did not mention motivation as a benefit, it was easily to observe that manifesting in their creativity and effort regarding the materials and activities preparation.

Besides the benefits, the students were asked to think on difficulties they faced during this teaching experience. Their comments helped us to identify the most frequently difficulties associated with the CTT experience as follows:
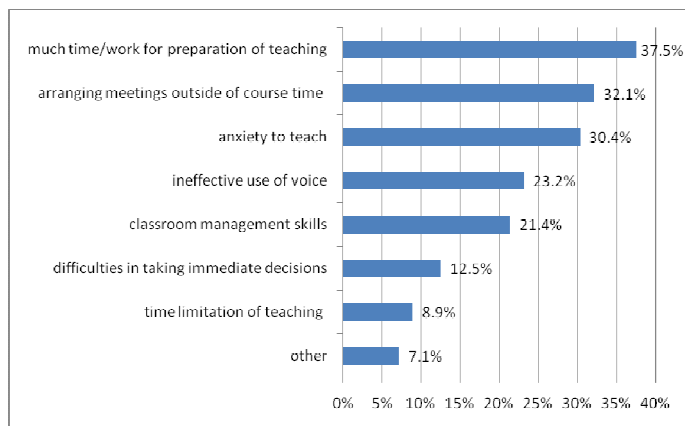

Figure 2. Students' difficulties in CTT

The primary disadvantage to CCT appeared to be the element of time required beforehand for the implementation (37.5%). The students indicated the great amount of time and work for research and teaching preparations which was cumulated with the presence of other about six to seven subjects in their schedule that they had to attend to. CCT was completed partly during class sessions (teaching and reflection) and partly outside of class (lesson planning). 32% of the students reported difficulties in meeting the members of the teams outside of course time for planning the teaching activity.

"Our schedule was so loaded. It was a real problem for our group to find time to meet and to plan the teaching. Until now I did not realised that a teaching activity required so much time for planning."

"I have a part-time job and it was so hard to fit my team partners' schedule".

Anxiety to teach was an obvious obstacle for almost one third of the students involved in CTT experience, which made direct comments about their anxiety. Here is one of these comments:

"The most difficult part for me was the overwhelming emotions. Standing in front of the class made me very nervous. My voice was trembling and the blood come into my cheeks."

They experienced anxiety during the teaching sessions and they were not able to use their voice effectively while teaching. Some students didn't speak loud enough to be heard by the class. The students also complained about losing control of the classroom and dealing with unexpected situations.

"During my team teaching session the electricity broke down. I felt so disorientated. We were in the middle of our Power Point presentation and we didn't know what was to do. Fortunately, the situation lasted only a few minutes and we came back to our teaching."

Because of teaching time limitation, some students felt they cannot give full commitment towards the subject. The participant appreciated that a 30-40 minute period for practice was too short. *"It should have been almost one hour",* suggested one student.

"We could not cover some of the most important issues of the topics because the teaching time was so short. I suggest the extension of teaching period to 50 minutes, like in real class."

Besides these, we also observed three weaknesses related to this experience:

- the prospective teachers' tendency to stand in front of the classroom and not move around the classroom during class teaching;
- difficulties in classroom management (monitoring group work, losing control of the students, giving feed-back)
- Too much visual contact with instructional materials in detriment of class eye contact.

We consider that these aspects need improvement and they can be overcome in the course of time as teachers gain in experience.

In addition, students were asked to identify how they felt about participating at CCT experience, using a five-point scale (1-strongly disagrees to 5 - strongly agree) relating to variables such as: usefulness, challenging and so on. Table 1 outlines the mean responses to mentioned variables.

Table 1. Students' feelings about CCT experience

Collaborative team teaching was ...	Means
Useful for my future	4.5
Challenging	4.3
Interesting	4.1
Easy to do	2.4
Positive experience	4.4
Boring	2.1

In general, the mean values indicated that the respondents showed a high level of perception towards the CCT model. Students considered CCT experience helpful for their future jobs. They were given the chance to teach and to act like a teacher, before becoming ones. CCT can be considered as an important model to prepare the students for their teaching practice. The student perceived the CCT experience as challenging (mean = 4.3) and interesting (mean = 4.1). For the prospective teachers we worked with, the first teaching experience was not perceived as an easy one (mean = 2.4) or boring (mean = 2.1). The students responses evidenced a positive perceptions of CCT experience (mean = 4.4).

This finding provides an excellent feed-back for us. Through the engagement in the CCT task the students experienced a positive and worthwhile activity.

Within this survey the students became aware of the benefits, difficulties, and feeling associated with the CTT experience. In the lights of the students' perceptions on benefits and difficulties they encountered during the CTT process, we considered some things we would like to keep the same for a prospective similar teaching and learning experience: a preliminary and explicit modelling of students skills needed to succeed in groups, small group size to facilitate communication and even distribution of work, offering the students the chance to set up the teaching teams, and ongoing communication within the teams and the teacher. We also considered some measures for improving this experience, such as: include some class time for team meetings (as arranging meeting time appears to be a problem), complete planning teaching or at least a part of this process within the seminar time, narrow the dimensions of topics in order to make it possible to cover them during a time limited teaching session, extension of teaching time related to the number of the team members, offering the team the opportunity to teach more than one time, in order to gain more experience and to overcome the teaching anxieties, alternate individual and team teaching activities.

4. CONCLUSION

Within the provided instructional context the prospective teachers had the opportunity to begin practice teaching in an initial course on learning to teach and to develop team work skills. CTT was intended to be a preparatory experience for the real pedagogical practice in schools, where prospective teachers could begin implementing what they were beginning to study about teaching. With the prospective teachers' implication and a careful coaching provided by the lecturer, CTT proved to be an effective learning environment. Participants perceived the CTT as a worthwhile experience and its components as beneficial in their development as teachers. The difficulties they encountered during the whole process inspired a newly designed cycle of CTT experiences for the next students cohort we will work with.

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