Reflections of a Practicum Student

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On my first day walking into Northwest Career and Technical Academy, I was overcome with nervousness and fear. Knowing that one day I will be solely responsible for a classroom seemed a bit overwhelming. Fortunately for myself and for the students alike, that day has not yet manifested itself and will not for months to come. What I learned that first day and in the weeks that followed has renewed my sense of excitement to begin my teaching career. My years of education have become tedious and exhausting – but my time at NWCTA has brought new life to my education is the most practical of ways. I eagerly look forward to more hours in the classroom as I learn from future mentor teachers, and more importantly as I learn from my students.

On becoming a teacher

I have always enjoyed school. Growing up, I was considered a good student – not the top of the class, but I always did well with ease. Behaviorally, I was a model student. School was simply fun. I enjoyed the structure, predictability, and social aspect. I thrived on teacher approval. When I entered college right out of high school, I became disillusioned with school. It was no longer fun and I learned rather quickly that good grades do not come without effort – effort that I previously did not have to put in. After the first year, I dropped out of college. I used my new marriage and poor grades as an excuse. Finally, in 2011, I returned to school part-time.

Now, 16 years after my first attempt at college, I am a senior with more life experience under my belt than my 18-year-old self could have even fathomed. As a military wife, I have had the opportunity to move around the United States and world. Because of my experiences, some wonderful people have mentored me over the years. I am currently in a season of my life in which I am now the mentor and mentee. It is an interesting place to be in, as I seek to help those
younger than myself in their academic growth, while at the same time, I look up to experienced educators to guide me along the way. My personal, academic, and professional growth over the past couple of years has given me a sense of pride. Furthermore, the growth that I have experienced during the fall semester has catapulted me from being a student, to being an educator. This sense of pride and accomplishment is something that I want to pass on to my students. As I consider my life experiences, I reflect on how this will influence my teaching—because it will most certainly have an impact on my teaching style. Borg has stated: “Of course there are other factors which influence how people teach—for example, a teacher’s own experience of what works in the classroom, in addition to life and other non-teaching work experience, etc. (2004, p. 275). As a mid-30s adult, my life experiences outside of the classroom shape my classroom management style, political opinions, ideals surrounding social justice, and ideas for how I want to teach social studies.

In my time in the classroom this semester, my two greatest concerns have been content knowledge and classroom management. First, my content knowledge is strong in some areas, but lacking in others. Teaching world history has provided me the opportunity to increase my knowledge is this area. It has been a pleasant challenge. Additionally, because world history is so broad, there is a little more freedom in the instruction that can be delivered. I am able to tailor it to the students’ desires and needs, as well as bridge it to current events and other disciplines more readily than some other social studies disciplines.

Second, according to Arends (2015), “classroom management is possibly the most important challenge facing beginning teachers” (italics in original) (p.179). I surprised myself with the ability to have command over the classroom. While I certainly expect failure, or at least disappointment, in the realm of classroom management at some point in the near future, I have
had nothing but positive experiences during my practicum experience. I imagine that it helps that I have been managing 4 children, including 2 children in middle school, at home on a daily basis for years. In my personal experience as a parent, I have found preventive management works the best. This is also true in the classroom. An example of this can be found in the second lesson that I taught at NWCTA. The second lesson consisted of a whole class reading aloud, with student volunteers. Prior to beginning the lesson, I made it very clear to the students that we were in a safe place to read aloud, and that if someone were to mispronounce a word or stumble with the reading, that it was okay, and that none of the students would laugh or make a joke. I reminded all of the students to be respectful to their peers who read. Sure enough, there were some mistakes in reading, but not a single person made fun of another student. This was repeated throughout the day in all classes. I was very pleased with the maturity of my sophomores. I may have preemptively set up a safe reading space, but the students are the ones who deserve the credit for being so respectful. Moreover, I credit the students and my mentor teacher with maintaining a fun and positive learning environment, which greatly helped me in terms of classroom management.

My time at NWCTA was a wonderful learning experience that has boosted my confident in teaching. Out of all my studies this past semester, my time in the field at NWCTA was the most enjoyable. I would rather be teaching my own class, than sitting in one as a student. Furthermore, it has brought an incredible amount of pride and excitement into my life as I prepare to enter the workforce. As I walked the corridors of NWCTA or greeted students at the door, fellow teachers often asked me if I was a substitute or a new hire. Getting mistaken for a new faculty member always brought a smile to my face.

Planning
Because of the need for consistency between classes, my mentor teacher Mr. Christensen and I felt that it would be in the best interest of the students if I mirrored his learning activities and methodologies as close as possible. For all three lessons, I was able to tailor the delivery of content in a way that was most comfortable to my teaching style and personality.

For the first lesson, I used the presentation method. This is the teaching style that I have the most experience with, and because I was incredibly nervous the first time, I wanted to stick with what I was most comfortable doing. Another reason being, that the lesson material was most effectively delivered using this method, as there was a considerable amount of DOK 1 learning taking place.

For the second lesson, again I followed Mr. Christensen’s prescribed plan. By this time in the school year, I had grown much more comfortable with the students. As such, I was more relaxed and excited to try something that stretched me beyond my teaching repertoire. For this class, I pursued three different teaching strategies. The first was a short review in which I wrote on the white board. This helped visual learners recall what had previously been taught, while at the same time introducing new material. The second learning activity that the students participated in required tactile/kinesthetic learning. I facilitated the activity, but the students took a more active role in their own learning experience. The final, and most time intensive learning activity was guided reading. All three of these activities, along with the demands of classroom management, bolstered my confidence in my ability to succeed in new endeavors.

The final lesson was collaborative learning. Again, I followed Mr. Christensen’s lead by implementing his lesson. I am not a fan of “reinventing the wheel”. If there is an effective lesson that has been tested, works well, and holds student interest, I am not going to change it. Furthermore, I was excited to implement a collaborative leaning model, since that was new for
me. I personally do not enjoy group work, but I see the need from an educator’s perspective of the benefits of collaborative learning.

While there are pros and cons to the various teaching methodologies, I saw first hand the benefits of student-centered learning. Prior to Practicum I, I favored a more teacher-centered methodology – because that is what I knew. Now that I have learned how to effectively write a student centered lesson plan, and to implement it, it is certainly a methodology that I would like to incorporate whenever possible.

In planning appropriate instruction, it is important to be cognizant of the sequence of instruction that is to be administered. For example, in a world history class, it is generally accepted that an educator will progress chronologically – which is presently done department wide at NWCTA. Additionally, I was to identify the Nevada Academic Content Standards for Social Studies that aligned with the content to ensure that the standards were being met. The wonderful thing about standards is that it is written broadly enough for an educator to have the freedom to tailor instruction, to include breadth and depth to meet the needs and interests of the students, while at the same time capitalizing on the strengths of the instructor. At least, this is my observation regarding the world history standards. In the field of social studies, this is incredibly important because even though social studies teachers must meet minimum educational requirements in a large number of subjects, it is common knowledge that an educator has a “favorite” subject or certain level of expertise that is more developed that other areas. My niche is in 20th century United States history. Being placed in a world history class has afforded me the opportunity to grow in my content knowledge, since world history is not a strong suit of mine. Because of this, I have grown to love world history. In considering the standards and pacing found in world history, it seems that there is a considerable more amount of freedom in the
content and activities that can be administered to the students that may not be as readily present in other social studies disciplines.

It should be noted that it is acceptable practice to fuse other standards into a lesson. For example, in the final lesson that I taught about 15th century world explorers – a vital theme in world history – multiple geography standards were additionally met. As an educator, I think it is important to not limit the standards that I am utilizing to facilitate instruction for only that particular subject. Using multiple subjects in a lesson can be beneficial for students to see and be cognizant of the intersectionality of various academic subjects. We do not live life in a bubble, and as an educator, I need to model a diverse and integrated classroom to prepare my students for 21st century real-world life experiences. Methodologies that model real-world experiences in the classroom can be found in two teaching models presented in EDSC 323, Collaborative Learning and Project Based Learning (PBL).

In planning the lessons, I found the standards and self-created objectives to be the most helpful in staying on task in the delivery of my instruction. In considering the difficulty of planning for new teachers, Arends (2015), succinctly stated: “Planning skills can sometimes be difficult for beginning teachers to learn because the process itself cannot be directly observed” (p. 101). I found this to be true for myself, because my mentor teacher was already so organized and complete in his planning, I was not able to observe how he operates. He was able to describe to me how he plans, but that still lacked the observational component. As I consider the lessons I planned, even though I followed the same objectives and formative assessments that my mentor teacher implemented, I still found that my time writing the lesson plan and mentally preparing was very time consuming. Finally, in the course of planning, I was to consider the role of assessments for my students. All three lessons had differing assessments, although all would be
considered formative assessment. The planning and assessment cycle is important for educators to be cognizant of too, because both should be used in conjunction with each other. While planning my lessons, I reviewed each unit exam to ensure that I did not leave any critical information out of my lesson, and so that the students would not be penalized on their unit exam for a potential omission of information on my part.

Even though I used the ACSP Phase 2 template as a post-lesson reflection tool, the chart is very helpful for educators to see the “big picture” of a lesson and to stay focused on the essential questions, objectives, and standards used. It is good to remember to stick with the basics, so that learning objectives can be met. Furthermore, as I used it as a post-lesson tool, it can inform my future lessons, as it relates to planning and the use of standards.

**Delivery of Instruction**

On my first day of taking over the classroom and teaching my first lesson, I was very nervous. I was afraid that I was going to forget the material that I studied so hard to memorize, not be able to adequately respond to student’s questions, or finish the lesson too quickly. Because of the level of preparation that went into preparing my first lesson, none of my fears materialized. I was able to successfully teach a detailed and accurate history lesson. The biggest “mistake” that I made was not moving about the room in a natural way. I was physically too rigid. Since that first lesson, I have been able to improve on my physical movements to be more relaxed and accessible to the students.

During the second lesson, I found myself more relaxed and able to focus on the students more diligently, as opposed to the first lesson in which I was thinking about my own potential success or failure. During the second lesson, the students were able to warm up to me and we were able to engage in a little playful banter towards the end of the lesson. I felt that my
interactions with the students went a long way in building trust for the remainder of the semester. During the lesson, I was also able to move about the room more effortlessly, which enabled me to monitor student work progress and assess their understanding of the material that was covered. At one point in the lesson, I had the students all hold up their papers so that I could see their progress. This was encouraging to the students, because they knew I was serious about them getting their work done in a timely manner.

The final lesson was my most enjoyable. Because it was a collaborative assignment, I provided five minutes of instruction at the beginning of class, while the students worked in groups for the remainder of the block. When the students worked on the creation of a world map, I circulated the room to provide context, help, clarification, and encouragement. This was, by far, my most favorite day of teaching because I was able to interact with the students much more intimately. I was able to have personal conversations, build rapport, and gain greater insight into my students. During the collaborative portion of the formative assignment, I was able to monitor student progress, provide immediate feedback, and help some students who were struggling with the assignment. If I were to remain in Mr. Christensen’s class for the remainder of the year, I believe that I would be able to increase my differentiation for various students and tailor instruction more effectively for their benefit.

Overall, in considering the use of formative and summative assessments while I taught, I directly implemented formative assessments – such as having the students fill in a feudalism chart with notes from the reading, and creating a world map depicting 15th century European explorers. The formative assessments, in turn, were utilized by the students to study for their summative assessment at the end of the unit – which is solely written and implemented by Mr. Christensen.
In *Learning to Teach*, it is suggested “that instructional objectives are like road maps” (Arends, 2015, 112). This was helpful to understand in my planning processes, because it helped me focus on what was important, and to not get distracted in the delivery of my instruction with the students. By sticking with the “road map”, I was able to direct my students to their final destination – which was acquiring content knowledge for whatever standards and objective that I was using that particular day.

Prior to teaching, I did not know what to expect from the students. I simply assumed that they would not take me seriously or not treat me with the same respect as my mentor teacher. Prior to teaching, I opened myself up to the students and shared with them some of my concerns and fears, within reason, regarding my first lesson. I am glad that I did, because they treated me with the utmost respect and kindness. Because of my concerns, and honesty with the students about my concerns, I believe that it impacted my instruction positively. My students had a very positive and caring attitude during my instruction, which gave me the encouragement to keep on going.

**Assessment of Learning and Teaching**

At the end of each lesson, I reflected on my successes and areas needing improvement. This was done in collaboration with Mr. Christensen. I taught each lesson three times, throughout the entire day. Reflection occurred after each period was over, not simply at the end of the day. This was helpful because I could adjust instruction to better meet the learning needs of the students, and to improve the effectiveness of my teaching skills. It has been said, “learning takes place not in passive classrooms but in learning communities characterized by high levels of participation and engagement” (Arends, 2015, p. 17). I have found this to be true for my students as well as myself. For me to learn to become an effective teacher, I need to be proactive in my
participation level and remain engaged in even the minutest details of teaching. Furthermore, by remaining engaged with the students directly, I am able to check their understanding of the material for each lesson. By being in tune with the students, I was able to slow down or speed up instruction, depending on students’ understanding and comprehension of material. Checking for knowledge acquisition was done in several ways; it was done verbally, circulating the room as they worked, and behavioral observation.

Looking Towards the Future

Looking back to my introductory course to secondary education, EDU 202, I remember vividly learning about the various teaching philosophies. I most align with two teaching philosophies – Social Reconstructionism and Essentialism. I believe that by blending teacher centered and student centered learning, students will be able to learn what they need while at the same time taking ownership of their education. Some students need to be taught how to take ownership over their learning. This is particularly true when one considers the achievement gap that is pervasive in America today. The “education debt” that Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) writes about is rather startling. As I consider how the achievement gap will present itself in my classroom, I am reminded about the importance of equity within my classroom and to set high standards for my students to strive for. I know that I cannot force anyone to learn. What I hope to achieve in my classroom is a thirst for knowledge, the desire to learn on one’s own, and to teach the students the skills necessary to be life-long learners. As an “older” student, I know from personal experience that one cannot remain stagnant in life. If we are not progressing, we are falling behind. In consideration of ever increasing cultural diversity within the United States, and Clark County in particular, as an educator I must always be on guard against discrimination, favoritism, and stereotypes. Conversely, I need to actively seek cultural pluralism in my
classroom. In my mid-20s, I lived in Japan, and I hope to return overseas someday and teach. That experience has directly helped me be more attune to other cultures and to be sensitive of differences. Cultural sensitivity is vital to the success of any classroom as it impacts learning in a variety of ways. If I am not culturally sensitive, it can be off-putting to the students who may in turn shut down and not learn. Or, if I am not culturally sensitive, I may inadvertently perpetuate cultural misconceptions and historical mistruths, which will be passed on the subsequent generations. Social studies education is a great way to actively engage in cultural mindfulness and teaching students of all backgrounds respect for all cultures.

Looking beyond the mechanics of academic learning, it is also imperative that teachers maintain strong classroom management skills. I believe it is vital that I create a safe and respectful learning environment where students will be able to thrive. This will impact instruction positively, so that students and educators alike can have meaningful experiences, day in and day out.

In my personal life, I try to live by the Cub Scout motto – Do Your Best. This is how I run my household, parent my children, approach my education, and ultimately will put it into practice for my students to follow, and myself as an educator. When I measure my successes and failures at life, I reflect on the whole person – myself. I will put this into practice in my own classroom. I need to consider the whole child to effectively engage with him or her. I cannot guarantee success, but I can do my best.
References


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