

Students' Voices: Excerpts from the final year e-portfolios.

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(Compiled and introduced by Martha Banfa)**

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Introduction

Reflective practice is a key component of teacher education and of teacher professional learning. The production of an electronic portfolio in the final year of the B Ed allows students to present the learning and development they have experienced over the four years of the program. Portfolios are rich assessment tools but they also provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning and to present that learning in meaningful and relevant ways.

This chapter documents the voices and reflections of two students about their experiences of the transformational nature of the Higher Colleges of Technology's (HCT) B.Ed program. Excerpts of the e-portfolios relating to students' philosophies of teaching with links to their best practice and professional development efforts are given in this chapter verbatim, with permission of the students. While we cannot claim that they are necessarily representative viewpoints of every student that went through the program, perhaps what stands out about these particular testimonials is the students' ability to plan, implement and reflect on their classroom behaviors and transform accordingly.

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Preface

Once upon a time, there was an adventurer who wanted to discover the magic of the educational world. It is true that she went through it as a student, but she wanted to experience the journey of constructing a successful teacher. Therefore, she made her decision to start her four years of adventure by joining the HCT B.Ed program.

In my e-portfolio, I would like you to live my educational adventure through the past four years. Here, you can take a look at my collection of knowledge, skills and achievements that I gained and accomplished during this adventure. Now, and after these four years of hard working and experiencing of successes and challenges, I can proudly say that this adventure constructed into me a new person who proudly identifies herself as a successful English teacher. To measure my success as a teacher, the five teaching competencies and the HCT graduate outcomes will be used.

Professional Introduction

I consider this section as a window into my life as a professional, giving highlights of my personal details, professional qualifications and accomplishments during the four years in the B.Ed program. It also includes my philosophy of teaching developed from the exposure to different teaching theories and methodologies and from my vocational practice in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) schools. Articulating a teaching philosophy is one indication for professional growth and part of the Professionalism and Understanding competency. I think I have acquired the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to become a promising English teacher in the UAE schools.

Teaching Philosophy

Introduction

As teachers, we need to construct our unique teaching philosophy. Indeed, having a philosophy would guide us through our teaching in order to be successful educators who can produce a well educated generation. As an English teacher, I developed my own teaching philosophy from the

exposure to different teaching theories and methodologies in the B.Ed. program and from the experience I got through my vocational practice in the UAE schools. My philosophy of teaching is illustrated in accordance with the following five teaching competencies.

Professionalism and Understanding

As I firmly believe that learning is a lifelong process, I consider that teachers are lifelong students who would continuously learn about teaching theories, strategies and techniques in order to educate themselves to be better teachers. This education could be acquired through our own:

- Experience in the educational field. Through applying new methods and by learning from our mistakes
- Readings of different print
- Attendance of educational conferences and workshops
- Conversations with other colleagues. By collaborating in problem-solving, sharing new ideas, and getting and giving feedback
- Observations and reflections on our teaching or through getting comments from others who observe us

Planning for learning

As I see it, planning for learning is an essential part of our jobs as teachers. Through planning effectively, we would help our students to reach their full potentials. Indeed, our main role as teachers is to plan lessons that achieve the expected outcomes for each student (Kyriacou, 2001). Therefore, while planning any lesson, I keep in mind my students' different levels and abilities to prepare activities that would suit them and would help them acquire knowledge. Further, setting clear objectives, deciding on language skills, using a variety of creative activities and resources, respecting the students' different levels and interests, as well as looking at the grouping and the interaction patterns are in my opinion the main requirements of a successful lesson.

Besides, it is important for the teacher to plan for assessments that would help to improve her students' performance. Replacing traditional assessment tasks such as written exams with performance assessments like portfolios would give the teachers more accurate information about the students' current progress, strengths, and weaknesses. Here, I use assessment-checklists as tools to accurately measure the students' progress. Also, through planning performance assessments, I would be able to use assessments during my normal classes and through using the lesson activities. Indeed, such assessments would engage my learners in real life activities that integrate teaching and assessment (Gipps, 1994).

Implementing and Managing Learning

Language and delivery

As teachers, we have to make our language suitable for the students' levels. According to Lightbown and Spada (2004), teachers need to provide students with a comprehensible input that is modified and understandable. Indeed, while delivering the input and while giving different instructions, we must consider that we have students of different levels. Also, to help the students acquire language, we need to employ a range of efficient techniques during the lesson such as clarifying, modeling, drilling, questioning, and eliciting. Moreover, a vital step in any lesson is to have a smooth transition between the activities. Indeed, moving from an activity to another in an organized manner is a key to a successful learning environment.

Classroom management

Through my years in the B.Ed program, I experienced the significance of setting rules for my students. Through these rules, I will maintain discipline in my classroom. Reminding the students of these rules and putting them in the class will make them obey. Brewster, Ellis and Girard affirmed that "children generally like to work within a framework where the boundaries of

acceptable and unacceptable behavior are reasonable and consistent so that they know where they stand” (2002, p.220). Also, using other strategies like a behavior chart and a stop sign to manage students’ behavior and to establish clear routines for their behavior is essential. This in my opinion would make teaching easier. Moreover, we need to use different strategies in the classroom to encourage the students and to motivate them to be active participants. Using complements or giving rewards will encourage the students to work harder and will motivate them to participate and to take risks and to try to challenge themselves.

Time management is also a very important factor to manage the classroom. Dividing the lessons into stages and setting exact times for each activity would help the teacher to manage the time successfully throughout the lesson. Furthermore, creating a language rich environment in the classroom is necessary to promote language acquisition. For instance, using different print such as displays and having a small library in the classroom would support the language acquisition process. Besides, I see that making the students setting in groups would make the learning sessions less demanding for them. Indeed, setting in groups would reduce the stress on the students of being on their own as well as it would reduce the teacher work by having the stronger students assisting the weaker ones.

Communication skills

As ESL/EFL teachers, we need to be expert in using verbal and nonverbal communication. Since we do not want our students to get the wrong message, we need to be careful when sending it. We can be skilled in this area by using appropriate body language, eye contact, gesture and clear intonation.

Monitoring and Assessment

Assessment is a very important part of our teaching. We need to use it either formally or informally to know about our students’ current level and to diagnose their learning needs in order to help them progress. Here, it would be more efficient to focus on performance assessment as it employs authentic tasks that stimulate real life situations to assess our students. In fact, performance assessment imitates students’ response to real life situations as it requires them to use their knowledge and skills to perform the assigned authentic tasks (Airasian, 2000). In addition, for student assessment, the teacher can use a variety of tools such as checklist and rubrics.

Further, it is necessary to involve the parents in their child’s education. As mentioned by Linse, “parents’ involvement in schools can help children develop socially, emotionally, cognitively, and academically” (2005, p.167). The teacher can achieve this through sending reports to the parents or by conferencing with them to discuss the child learning, behavior, progress and to come up with ways to improve his/her performance. Additionally, I encourage the use of self-assessment as I believe in its important role in the students’ education. Actually, through self-assessment, the students would get a better idea of what is required from them. As stated by Brewster, Ellis, and Girard “the more the pupils are encouraged to be responsible for their own learning and assessment, the more they will understand what is expected and try hard to achieve it”(2004, p. 256). Therefore, this may improve the students’ performance as they would try to improve themselves in the areas that they are assessed through it. Here, using simple checklists would be very appropriate to have our students assessing their own performance.

Reflection

As teachers, reflecting on our teaching is an essential step for our improvement. Indeed, it is necessary to identify our strengths and weaknesses in teaching as this would help us to advance in our profession. Also, getting the chance to observe each other would be a great opportunity to expand our experience regarding different teaching techniques and methods. Indeed, having the teachers observing and appraising each other is very effective technique that helps the teachers to reflect upon their teaching and to be able to improve it (Kyriacou, 2001).

Professional Development

Professional development is a continuous process of improving on one's skills and competencies for the teaching profession (Wallace, 2006). For me as teacher of English in the context of my country, I am committed to lifelong learning and ways to keep abreast of the latest development in teaching English.

Working on a Professional Development Plan (PDP) and implementing it helped me achieved the Professionalism and Understanding competency by demonstrating my commitment to on-going development and improvement to promote my growth as a competent teacher.

To demonstrate my ability to plan for my own professional growth, I designed a PDP which is focused on using assessment portfolios to improve the students' performance in an EFL context. The summary of my PDP analyzes the results of my implementation giving the evidence of how I achieved the B.Ed competency areas.

Attending conferences and workshops is another sign of commitment to professional development. Indeed, I was able to expand my knowledge about teaching through making contact with other professionals in order to communicate and to exchange teaching experiences, strategies and ideas that helped in improving my teaching of English. I also developed a commitment to carry on attending conferences, workshops, and joining different internet forums and websites to keep myself updated about what is new in the teaching world of English.

Best Practice

This section consists of a collection of artifacts that reflect the essential knowledge and skills that I mastered regarding teaching of English effectively. It is true that deciding on my selections was not an easy task. However, I eventually selected them critically to give a clear evidence of how I achieved the five B.Ed teaching competencies. I also selected artifacts that show how my work is linked to my teaching philosophy.

Thematic Unit

The thematic unit was done in year three of the B.Ed program as a part of the integrated project of the first semester. I worked together with two colleagues to draw a thematic map to teach the theme "Let's Eat" for fifth graders. The purpose of the assignment was developing a unit framework, lesson outlines, a print media text, and resources for teaching writing and grammar. I chose this project as one of my best practice seeing that it shows how I achieved the Professionalism and Understanding competency as I collaborated with other colleagues to generate new ideas in order to plan the unit. It also illustrates how I achieved the competency of Planning for Learning through designing a unit plan that includes a selection of different teaching strategies (implementing and managing learning) to support. The story sack is a group effort of two colleagues and me.

Story Sacks

We developed the story sack in year three as a part of the integrated project mentioned above. The purpose of the assessment is to design a media source that can be used to support teaching and learning of writing and grammar. This project is one of my best practices as it shows how creative as teachers we can be. In our group, we cooperated in writing the story, designing the story book and drawing the characters and the scenes, constructing non-fiction book, creating puppets, designing a range of interactive activities and resources with a teacher's guide and lesson plans. Besides, designing this story sack helped me to accomplish the competencies of Professionalism and understanding, Planning for learning, and Managing Learning (see teaching philosophy for more details). The project also indicates that I achieved one of the HCT graduate outcomes which is "Teamwork and Leadership" as I worked collaboratively with my others colleagues. I have also developed the skill of book writing and will use that in the future to produce English textbooks for UAE schools.

Interactive Webpage

The interactive webpage named “*A Trip to the Zoo*” was also a group effort that developed in the second semester of year three. The aim of this webpage is to present a variety of assessment tools that are designed by our group to assess third graders in the theme Food.

In fact, there is a move by educators to change from traditional assessments, which focus on “ranking” students in the end of the learning processes and to assess their separated parts of information and separated skills, to better formative and summative assessments that integrate all the learning activities that we would like our students to practice (Murphy, 1997). Therefore, alternative assessments like the ones in this webpage are a better approach to be used in our classes. Through them, we can improve both instruction and learning.

Conducting this project gave me the privilege to use the theoretical knowledge about assessment in a practical manner. I also was able to achieve a number of competencies such as the Professional and Understanding competency through showing knowledge and expertise about EFL/ESL needs, the Planning for Learning competency by planning an interactive pattern of assessment, integrating the four language skills, and planning assessment for different grouping style, and the Monitoring and Assessment competency by designing both formal and informal assessments, by showing evidence of the usage of record keeping and feed backing tools, and by using technology to monitor and assess learning. Besides, I achieved one of the HCT Graduate Outcomes which is using technology (Information Technology) to produce the interactive webpage.

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Teaching Philosophy

Nowadays, English has become the main language which is used broadly in the UAE by different people from different nationalities. This is because of the rapid development in the economy, technology of the country and because the country needs to keep up internationally. The government and the Ministry of Education are trying to implement English everywhere because they believe that all people in the country need to be proficient in using oral and written English to help them in their future and to keep up with the modernization in the country. Additionally, parents are encouraging the English language for their children because many parents now believe that “having English as a tool benefit their children greatly by giving them more opportunities to gain economics, cultural or educational advantages” for their future (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2004, p.1).

My personal philosophy of teaching and learning in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is based on socio-cultural views. In the view of Vygotsky, children develop language from social interaction with their peers and in a “supportive interactive environment, the child is able to advance to a higher level of knowledge and performance than he or she would be capable of independently” (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p.23). Vygotsky called the process in which the child develops language by interacting with their peers or with a more knowledgeable adult as the child’s zone of proximal development (ZPD).

I believe the role of the teacher in the learning and teaching process is that of prompter who “often prompts students to speak English rather than using their mother tongue” by suggesting some words and phrases so students can complete their work (Harmer, 2001, p.60). She also facilitates learning by designing group work activities which provide students with more opportunities to speak and practice the language together than they have as a whole class. As an English teacher I agree with Edelsky about the best way in which children develop language. She believes that “what children learn is learned as part of the social process of doing things

with other human beings” (in Emmitt, Pollock & Komesaroff, 2003, p.192). This is why I like to include activities which allow students to communicate for real purposes in order to provide an effective communicative environment where students use the language and are fully engaged in the activity.

Moreover, I believe that stories have a considerable effect in students’ learning and language development. Teachers have to have stories when introducing, revising and recycling language because this allows students to remember the language for a long time and in an enjoyable way. According to Brewster, Ellis & Girard, “listening to stories allows the teacher to introduce or revise vocabulary and structures, exposing the children to language which will enrich their thinking and gradually enter their own speech” (2004, p.187).

Furthermore, I believe that a print rich environment is significant for second language learners and it provides students with a great opportunity to learn the language in which displays are used in the classroom. Generally, according to Neuman, Copple and Bredekamp, “a literate classroom offers abundant opportunities for children to make use of print and practice literacy habits and skills throughout the environment” (2000, p.42).

As a teacher, I think that the most important factor which leads to professional growth is reflective teaching. This is why I always plan lessons and create activities according to my personal philosophy about teaching and learning. Therefore, when I apply the lesson and observe how my students react to the activities and methods, I reflect on what occurred with relation to my philosophies so it helps me in planning the following lesson.

Commitment to professional development

It is essential that teachers always strive to develop themselves professionally as I believe that this is the main feature for the success of a teacher. Being a reflective teacher helps to improve the educational environment because I think deeply and logically about my teaching and I always provide changes to my teaching process. As a pre-service educator, I fully believe that teachers should always try to think about their students as complete individuals not just about their learning, so this leads to a successful learning environment.

Reflective Practice

Reflection is an important strategy that helped in improving my teaching skills. During my teaching, I followed the (Plan-Do-Reflect) method where I first thought about my teaching and learning strategies and methods, then I implemented the strategy in the classroom, after that I observed and reflected on my performance. This helped in the planning of the following lessons and the changes I needed to perform according to my students’ needs.

My original plan was for semester one, before the Internship, after implementing that plan, I identified some changes but the goals stayed the same. I had to adopt and change some strategies and methods used with this plan according to my students’ level, attitudes and some incidents that occurred in the classroom.

Conclusion

The two edited student portfolios presented in this chapter provide snapshots of the HT B Ed program through student eyes. The portfolios are represented here as text without the richness of the electronic environment, yet they still provide a valuable insight into the student learning journey. They show the developing engagement with educational theory and how that theory is related to practice in the school setting. The portfolios are powerful tools and represent an assessment activity that the students themselves value highly. The richness of the learning and the depth of student engagement are clearly apparent in the writings of these two young women.

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