

Critical reflective evaluation of the overall Professional Teaching Experience, which this portfolio applies to including any pastoral care / learner welfare duties or actions undertaken, including a critical review of your use of assessment of and for learning during your teaching practice experience.

In this critical reflective evaluation, I will be focusing on the issues I faced whilst completing my professional teaching experience placement at Coleg Sir Gar on the Ammanford Campus.

I will be giving an overview of the duties I undertook whilst working as a student teacher and also how I navigated the placement, and any other issues pertinent to my professional teaching experience. I will be discussing how this experience has shaped me, and how it has made me a more successful and reflective teacher.

I think it would be fair to say that I was overwhelmed at the beginning of my professional teaching experience. It could almost be compared with being thrown over a cliff, albeit far less dramatic, nevertheless, emotionally and mentally, it was one of the most scary and nerve wracking undertakings I would ever begin. I think it was almost as scary as an emergency caesarean (I have had one of those). The sense of responsibility, vulnerability; the “putting myself out there” type of scenario almost made me queasy. Without becoming too emotive, it is normal for student teachers to feel this way, and I knew I was not alone in terms of feeling the heavy weight of responsibility which I now had on my shoulders. I did not want to make a mistake, whatsoever, but I acknowledged that this was an unreasonable standard of perfection,

and I came to realise pretty quickly that I would invariably make some mistakes, and that the most important aspect of this was that I would learn from reflecting on these mistakes.

There are many challenges to be faced when teaching in further education, particularly as you are teaching adolescents and adults with sometimes complex issues which perhaps teachers in maintained schools may not face. Whilst on my placement, several students made a disclosure which I had to pass on to the pastoral team. Some of these disclosures were rather disturbing. In one particular lesson I did with a class of level two childcare students, I did an ice breaker activity called peaks and pits. Peaks and pits is similar to circle time, but without being condescending to the adults learners. It is a way for a teacher to assess the holistic wellbeing of the students, and an opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences. During peaks and pits, the participants have to share (voluntarily; they are under no obligation to take part and this is stressed at the beginning of the activity) one “peak” of their week or day, and one “pit” of their week or day. Essentially, this is an ice breaker and not really a way of sharing complex issues. During this activity, as I went around the classroom, some of the students chose to participate, and others refrained. When I came to the last three students, one decided to share that his girlfriend was about to have an abortion, and that he had depression, while other students chose to share she had been sexually abused and had attempted suicide. This was rather surprising, strangely because they had observed all of the other students who chose to participate and had heard what their peers had shared (which was not anything as dramatic), and yet still chose to share rather intimate and distressing information. I expressed empathy and some sympathy which I felt proportionate and discussed the matter with them quietly after I had set the class a

task so as not to draw any more attention and potential distress to the students who chose to share this information. After the lesson, I passed the information onto their personal tutors. Reflecting on this experience, I wondered whether I had made a mistake in conducting this icebreaker activity, however, with all things considered, these learners were over eighteen, and chose to share the information voluntarily despite having heard their peers share experiences far less dramatic. I then thought that this may have been because they felt that the environment was a safe place for them to share their problems, and perhaps this was a success on my part. Whatever the reason they chose to share, it was a stark eye opener to the vast role a teacher has; not just delivering a curriculum and a learning experience, but also to advocate for our learners, and to provide a holistic and caring environment too.

Arguably, it is important not only to provide teaching and learning experiences, but if learners are to learn anything at all, they need to have emotional and psychological needs met. You could say Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs comes into play. This is what a holistic approach is. A tired, hungry or emotional student will likely not benefit from that amazing lesson with the outstanding introduction, riveting development, and jaw dropping plenary planned by the teacher, if the basic needs are unmet. Maslow argued strongly that learners must feel that they are respected and valued members of the classroom, and that it is imperative that the teacher should facilitate optimum learning environments, with particular attention on students with low self esteem. Maslow states that creating a positive learning environment can help learners to develop into people who are "stronger, healthier, and would take their own lives into their hands to a greater extent. With increased personal responsibility for one's personal life, and with a

rational set of values to guide one's choosing, people would begin to actively change the society in which they lived", (Maslow, 1970, p. 195).

What I have learned from my professional teaching experience is that what I do in the classroom today, has the potential to significantly impact the lives of those I teach not just tomorrow, but in the future. It has to be more than a good lesson plan, and hitting HEA standards. The social capital involved with creating a positive learning environment for my learners has the capability to shape the outlook they have on life. I can either influence them positively or negatively. I have come to realise that as a teacher, I have a unique sphere of influence, and it is a privilege I do not take lightly.

The professional teaching experience also taught me that assessment of and for learning is an essential part of the teacher's role. The assessment for learning strategies I learned to use effectively was encouraging active participation in the learning and the assessment by the learner themselves. I believe the role of a teacher is to create independent learners. The learner should be aware of their own goals and objectives, because this is vital in aiding the student to be responsible for their own results and metacognition. Essentially, the argument in favour of this is that the learner gets out what they put in. The results they want to achieve depends on the effort and enthusiasm they put in to their own learning. The way in which I incorporated this into my teaching was by using a number of strategies, including observing, listening, discussing and reviewing work in progress, and questioning.

Black and William (1998) state that the term assessment refers to the activities that are undertaken in the classroom that should provide the student and teacher alike with information and feedback which should aid in the learning and teaching process by showing what works and what needs modification.

Ultimately, collaborative learning between the learner and the teacher is essential in order to identify any gaps in the learning, this could be viewed as the process model (Neary, 2003).

I feel that during my professional teaching experience, I made every attempt to use the process model where possible by ensuring I facilitated active participation in the lessons, and gave the learners the relevant guidance on what the learning outcomes for the particular unit was and the quality needed to be. One of the ways I did this was by putting the course specifics on the whiteboard for them to be exposed to what was expected, and then I was ask how we could achieve the outcomes together. I would then give them research tasks to do where possible so that they became more responsible for their own learning and took ownership of the process, rather than be spoon fed information from me for them to splurge onto a page and achieve a criteria. This is described well by Ornstein and Hunkins (2004) when they stated that:

“Subject matter tentatively selected in the development process has importance only to the degree that a student can find meaning in it for himself or herself”, (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004, p207).

Learners need to take back ownership of their own learning, and this is something I learned progressively during my time on my professional teaching experience.

As much as I wanted the learning journey to be as process model based as possible, the eventual need to produce a written product at the end was unavoidable because that is what was required by the CACHE programme. I developed my collaborative and constructivist teaching style gradually as the professional teaching experience progressed. I took valued feedback from my observed lessons. Reflecting on the feedback I received from my mentor, it was apparent that I was working hard from the front of the classroom, and that I should not be giving the learners too much information, but should hold back in order for them to be more independent. I learned so much from this comment, and it has since shaped me to such an extent that I have learned to stand back and assess and observe more than I used to.

On reflection of my time on the professional teaching experience, I learned invaluable experiences. I put into practice what I learned in the classroom during my PGCE and I feel that I have had the opportunity to concrete and consolidate my own learning as a student teacher. I learned how important assessment strategies are, and the many creative ways a teacher can assess the learning that has and is taking place, and how and why it is vital that learners take responsibility for their own learning process. I learned also that assessment can be through a variety of sources and ways, including observing and fun and inventive ways, not just portfolios and written work. I also learned about the incredibly important pastoral element of teaching, and the holistic way in which teachers can support their learners.

Essentially, my two penneth on my experience as a student teacher and from what I have observed is that if learners are enjoying the learning process, they are far more likely to put the

effort and time in, and if they feel valued, included and in control of their learning, their success is far more assured. The teacher should be the one cheering the learner on, and should be the happy to see their learners achieve their goals. What a privileged position.

References

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