Chapter 20

Process vs. Product: What Are Preservice Teachers Learning from ISL Projects?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to determine if the common practice of Impact on Student Learning (ISL) projects, such as those found in the edTPA and TK20 systems, is adequately preparing preservice teachers to engage in the kinds of action research that are necessary for continuously improving classroom practice. In these projects, teacher candidates administer pre- and post-tests, then determine the efficacy of the lessons between by comparing the scores. While ISL projects provide exposure to assessment for planning, it leaves preservice teachers underprepared for the types of action research that are required for continuously improving classroom practice. Preservice teachers would benefit from additional experiences with research during their undergraduate education programs in order to increase their efficacy, and interest, in classroom research practices.

INTRODUCTION

Though the focus of this chapter is teaching action research skills and processes to preservice teachers, there is evidence that the underdeveloped research experiences of our preservice teachers are rooted in a cycle that begins in P-12 educational experiences. The teaching of research begins in P-12 classrooms, and the authors of this chapter recall similar limitations, such as the framing of research as product-oriented and formulaic, during their P-12 careers. As secondary English, Language Arts, Reading, Social Studies, and middle level Science educators, we began teaching our students the basics of research, but
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the process was frequently more of a checklist approach than an inquiry approach; similarly, much of
the assessment was grounded in the organization and reporting of findings, with little emphasis on the
application or interpretation of the findings. Like us, many teachers, and subsequently their students,
are so focused on the product that the importance of the process and application of research is obscured.

In pursuit of learning how to properly cite and record findings, the importance of intellectual curios-
ity and exploration is neglected, as is the problem-solving aspect of research. Projects are less about
cultivating meaningful learning experiences and critical thinking, and more an exercise in following
directions. Organization, documentation, and presentation are important, yet they shouldn’t become
the focus. Even the project rubrics reflected the assumption that formatting and organization were as
important as discovery and application. The problem with this model was that very little of the research
process occurred. Yet, these projects mirrored the types of research and writing we had done in our own
undergraduate programs of study.

BACKGROUND

It is not unusual to focus on the product instead of the process, along with teaching research methods
exactly as we were taught. As Lather (2002) says, we continue in our research practices not “out of
some sense of the great sufficiency of what we have done, but rather out of our puzzlement as to how
to proceed differently” (p. 209). We see the limitations of our current models, but are unsure as to how,
or where in the educational process, to change. Educators know that research is a tool for engagement,
emphasizing “process, method, correction, [and] change,” based in lived experiences and in pursuit of
solutions to practical problems (Diesing, 1991, p. 75). In many ways, the way we currently teach re-
search, a product-oriented approach, limits its applicability to practical problems encountered in our daily
lives. For teachers and teacher educators, these practical problems frequently focus on how to increase
student learning (Sagor, 2000). One of the ways in which teachers investigate how to increase learning
and achieve desired student outcomes is by engaging in action research in their own classrooms. Action
research, that which is conducted by practitioners for the purpose of improving their performance, is
useful to educators because it can be done in their classrooms with a focus on the needs of their unique
situations (Sagor, 2000). Educators who engage in action research are “more skilled at reflecting on
and evaluating the consequences of their practice for children” (Colucci-Gray, Das, Gray, Robson, &
Spratt, 2013, p. 142), and as such, is an important component in the training and development of our
teachers of tomorrow.

The training of preservice teachers is now at the heart of the authors’ professional focus; after sev-
ceral years in P-12 education, we have transitioned to teacher education. Many of the methods courses in
our Educator Preparation Provider Program (EPP) include a field component in which our preservice
teachers apply their coursework with P-12 students in Professional Development Schools. As part of
program requirements for assessing student-learning outcomes in a standards-based environment, pre-
service teachers participate in various forms of data collection as they engage in assessment for plan-
ning. During their clinical teaching experience, preservice teachers in our EPP complete an Impact on
Student Learning (ISL) project, in which they administer pre and post unit assessments to determine
the efficacy of planning and instruction. While ISL projects, known by various names across EPPs, are