Chapter 16
Preparation for Future Teaching:
Authentic Activities in a Teacher Education Classroom

Michael P. Downton
St. John’s University, USA

ABSTRACT

Teacher education programs are tasked with a myriad of responsibilities to help improve the quality of future teachers. Despite the constraints of using non-licensed teachers in a public classroom setting in order for the pre-service teacher to gain experience, a Teaching Assistant (TA) program has been implemented in a university setting and thus removing the logistical obstacles pre-service teachers face. Using a preparation for future learning model, pre-service teachers enrolled in a human learning and development course engaged in activities that ranged from mentoring students, developing grading rubrics, and grading student assignments. Triangulation of qualitative data showcases the importance of assessment (i.e., feedback) and the pre-service teacher’s identity as emergent themes. Discussion of possible design iterations to the TA program and its potential impact are discussed.

BACKGROUND

In August of 2013, I was hired as an assistant professor at a university in New York City. My main area of expertise is learning and developmental sciences and I was specifically hired to teach educational psychology related courses to both undergraduate (mostly freshman and/or transfer) and graduate students in the university’s School of Education. When completing my first semester I had come to the realization that students were learning a great deal about teaching, becoming a teacher, and how to teach but were not able to practice what they were learning in their university classrooms. It is the common issue of knowing about vs. knowing how.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3068-8.ch016
As a learning scientist, I knew this was not enough. Pre-service teachers, regardless of where they are in their program of studies, needed the opportunity to participate in the community of teaching (e.g., to do what a teacher does) (Cruickshank & Metcalf, 1990). I also discovered that the amount of work that pre-service teachers – especially undergraduate students – had to accomplish prior to receiving certification was overwhelming. With regards to actual university course work, students studying to become elementary teachers (i.e., grades one through six) must complete 54 credits in education courses; this includes their foundational courses, methods courses, and student teaching. Students must also pick a content area (i.e., math) and complete 24 credits. Finally, 57 credits in a liberal arts core (i.e., social sciences, philosophy, language, etc.) must be completed. This 135 credit program roughly works out to be 18 credits per semester, which is the most a student is allowed to take. Those studying to be adolescent educators (grades seven through twelve) must complete a 130 credit program. The main difference between the two programs is that adolescent majors do not have to take multi-subject methods courses. However, they do have to complete 30 credits of a content area as opposed to 24 credits.

Additionally, undergraduate students in a traditional route to teacher certification are required to engage in pre-determined amounts of field-experience (e.g., classroom observation) that must amount to 100 hours over the course of their four-year program. These hours however, are built into certain education courses. Further, prior to engaging in 420 clock-hours of student teaching (usually lasting one full semester of four months), students must pass three exams and attend three mandatory workshops. A fourth exam, the edTPA, is to be completed during the student teaching phase of the program.

While workshops deal with topics including the safety, welfare, and dignity for all student are needed, issues around testing and field hours can be problematic. For example, testing that definitively assesses whether someone will be a quality teacher is near impossible (Berliner, 2005; Madaus & Mehrens, 1990) and may negatively impact non-white teachers (Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010). Furthermore, field observations are in place so that pre-service teachers can observe quality teaching and learning. However, “…a reasonable (and optimistic) average number of qualified cooperating teachers in a school of 25 teachers is three qualified teachers, approximately 12 percent in any given school” (Greenberg, Pomerance, & Walsh, 2011 p. 20). Also, due to constraints about how involved pre-service teachers can be in a classroom setting prior to gaining certification/licensure, these observations are often indirect (Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986) and may not be enough to engage future teachers in authentic practices.

Despite these constraints, it is still crucial to get future teachers involved in activities that they will use. Moreover, “…preparation must help teachers to both understand and move beyond their own personal knowledge and experiences to bring to bear a wider set of understanding on the problems of helping others learn” (Darling-Hammond, Schwartz, & LePage. 2007 p. 12). With all of these constraints in mind, I discuss in this chapter the development and implementation of a Teaching Assistant (TA) program housed in one of my undergraduate learning and development courses, the early outcomes of the program, and suggestions for further developing the program.

The Importance of Preparing for Future Teaching

As discussed, there is so much pre-service teachers must do in order to achieve certification. But where does this leave the faculty member(s) in teacher education programs. Research has shown that many teacher educators identify as being constructivist and using constructivist theories of learning to guide their teaching (Guyton & Rainer, 1996; Richardson, 1997). This means that teacher educators are advocates of promoting learning through active experiences (e.g., learning by doing). However, due to restrictions