Encounters with engaging pedagogy: Arts education for the pre-service primary generalist.

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Abstract

The preparation of generalist primary teachers to teach the arts is an important role for universities in their teacher education programs. Preparation programs for primary generalist teachers in these settings usually include one or more specialised courses in the various art forms. These classes generally provide basic competency with skills as well as knowledge of instructional techniques, arts materials and content that are appropriate for use with primary school children (Jeanneret, 1996). It is intended that these arts courses will provide sufficient arts experiences, knowledge and skills to allow primary generalist teachers to successfully incorporate the arts into their classroom instruction on a regular basis, either through content integration or as discrete subjects (Imms & Lloyd, 2004). Most decisions regarding the content of specialised arts courses for pre-service primary generalist teachers are based on the professional wisdom of the lecturers and many of these opinions generally focus on what the discipline believes classroom teachers should know and use rather than on what knowledge and skills these classroom teachers will be likely to use (DeGraffenreid, Kretchmar, Jeanneret, & Morita, 2004; Jeanneret, 1997; McCullar, 1998). To date there has been little theorising about a framework or model for learning aimed at these particular students in the arts that takes into account their novice status as arts practitioners in the disciplines of drama, music and visual arts, and the need by the end of the course to be versed in the disciplines’ approaches to pedagogy for primary children. The arts education team within the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne is exploring a basis for a common teaching philosophy that can inform arts education for the primary generalist. Of critical importance is the acknowledgement within the team of the development of students’ confidence in engaging with arts education practices. Consistently positive feedback from students would appear to support the success of this arts education approach. This paper explores the common challenges and issues across arts form for the team and the beginnings of a model for the arts education of the pre-service primary generalist.

Preparation programs for primary generalist teachers in Australian university settings usually include one or more specialised courses in the various art forms. These classes generally provide basic competency with skills as well as knowledge of instructional techniques, arts materials and content that are appropriate for use with primary school children (Jeanneret, 1996). It is intended that these arts courses will provide sufficient arts experiences, knowledge and skills to allow primary generalist teachers to successfully incorporate the arts into their classroom instruction on a regular basis, either through content integration or as discrete subjects (Imms & Lloyd, 2004). Most decisions regarding the content of specialised arts courses for pre-service primary generalist teachers are based on the professional wisdom of the lecturers and many of these opinions generally focus on what the discipline believes classroom teachers should know and use rather than on what knowledge and skills these classroom teachers will be likely to use (DeGraffenreid, Kretchmar, Jeanneret, & Morita, 2004; Jeanneret, 1997; McCullar, 1998). To date there has been little theorising about a framework or model for learning aimed at these particular students in the arts that takes into account their novice status as arts practitioners in the disciplines of drama, music and visual arts, and the need by the end of the course to be versed in the disciplines’ approaches to pedagogy for primary children. There has also been little guidance for how the tertiary arts educators can accommodate the steady decline of time with these students over the last fifteen years (Stevens, 2003) as well as the enforced collaboration of the art forms, and still provide a quality teacher education that meets the needs of the profession.
The limited time allocated for pre-service programs can create certain tensions, with regard to content and approach to the curriculum. Do we sacrifice degrees of depth for breadth, degrees of skill development for expression? How do we balance arts theory with practice? How do we balance developing an understanding of arts curriculum and pedagogy with experiencing the art form? How do we balance teacher-directed and student-directed learning? Do we sacrifice strongly disciplined-based pedagogy for interdisciplinary? The recognition of these issues is documented in the education literature of individual art forms (for example, Wiggins, 2004) but little discussion seems to have taken place about how tertiary educators successfully accommodate a number of art forms in the time allocated within the generalist primary courses. How do we build discipline-specific knowledge and skills in each art form and also reinforce and deepen common skills across art forms so as to maximise student learning?

Within the pre-service primary teacher programs offered at The University of Melbourne a number of compulsory arts subjects are taught. These generally include short, 6 – 9 week cycles running across three art forms including drama, music and visual arts. Whilst our group of arts educators are accustomed to working together in multi-arts subjects the individual lecturers determine the content and goals of each art form. Nevertheless ongoing ‘corridor conversations’ and passing observations of each others’ work help to inform each other of shared beliefs and have provided a starting point for a more considered sharing of reflections upon the kinds of activities we were doing and the responses we were receiving from students across the arts forms. These discussions have revealed many shared beliefs about the kind of outcomes we wished to achieve with our students and perhaps these shared aspirations were the core of our teaching approach. We want these pre-service teachers to be arts advocates in schools and support arts education for all children in part due to their positive experiences at university and the obvious value of these experiences in their own educational journey. We want them to be expressive and reflective practitioners who are willing to take risks in the classroom and encourage their students to do so. We also want our graduates to be creative thinkers and confident learners who are comfortable with engaging their own students in arts learning. In short, we want to engage our students’ as learners, teachers and artists and we want graduates who embed the arts in their daily generalist teaching. The question we were interested in was how are we going about this in our individual classrooms and, again, did we share similar approaches?

We agreed that a common challenge to achieving our goals for the students was to overcome their initial fears and uncertainties to each art form. Knowledge of the background and learning styles of the students is an important factor that can shape the nature of the instruction when time is so precious. It is frequently assumed by teacher educators that when students are provided with theoretical aspects of teaching and discuss the practical implications of these theories, they will automatically adopt this knowledge as a basis for classroom practice. Students come to tertiary study with hundreds of hours experience of models of teaching, both positive and negative, and strongly held beliefs about particular disciplines and the nature of teaching and learning in these disciplines. Although they may have demonstrated an understanding of theories presented at university, they frequently ignore much of this knowledge and “teach as they were taught” once in the autonomy of their own classroom (eg Korthagen & Kessels, 1999), or in the case of the arts, not at all if they can avoid it.

From our observations it had become clear that “unpacking baggage” brought with the students is almost as important in some cases as acquiring knowledge and skills associated with the discipline (Jeanneret, 1995). Many pre-service primary students have had negative prior experiences with the arts (Smith-Shank, 1993) that effect their general disposition that includes their beliefs about their self-efficacy and self-concept in the arts. This in turn effects not only their motivation to learn in the subjects but also the amount and quality of arts instruction in their classroom once they are in-service (Duling, 1998, Beauchamp, 1997, Hanna & Van Rysselberghe, 1996, Jeanneret, 1995). It is naive to assume these students don’t have established values and beliefs about the arts and many
have some apprehension about attending these arts classes. They have a variety of prior experiences and subsequent perceptions about what they will be expected to do, and a lack of confidence is an obvious problem at the beginning of these sessions. As one student noted, “In my view I saw the teaching of art as being about achieving a particular skill and art product”. To move the students beyond these established conceptions we had to acknowledge their diverse prior experiences and engage students in critical reflections on their established values to the arts and arts education. We each, in different ways, worked to instil in students a preparedness to explore each art form openly acknowledging the importance of the art process, individual learning styles and personally relevant content. We are mindful that the development of confidence is critical in this context and the way in which we build students’ confidence, knowledge and skills in the arts is also a pedagogical model for the way in which we would hope these students will approach the arts in the primary classroom.

Student confidence in any art form also requires a level of competence with the ‘basic’ discipline-based knowledge and skills that they would be likely to use in the classroom (Duncum,2000). With the awareness that the contexts in which students will be placed are many and varied, the model for learning moves beyond specific basic skills and knowledge to engage them as both teachers and artists with personal art practices that enable the self-generation of their own curriculum. The approach to the curriculum is strongly constructivist with a foundation in Vygotsky’s psycho-social theory of cognitive development. We adhere to the idea that cognitive development in the arts should be enhanced when students work cooperatively or collaboratively with the lecturer and other students and we endeavour to help this learning proceed from other-regulated to self-regulated during the course. We also believe that Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development is highly relevant with these adult students who are largely arts novices. We, as arts specialists, are the more “knowledgeable others” who provide the intellectual scaffolding to assist the students’ construction of learning in the arts and through modelling, meta-commentary and the co-construction of meaning we stimulate encounters with engaging pedagogies. Through active engagement with the personal artistic process student responses indicate developing confidence in arts pedagogy and general teacher attributes such as empathy, critical reflection, and classroom management. Student confidence in any art form requires a level of competence with the ‘basic’ discipline-based knowledge and skills that they would be likely to use in the classroom (Duncum, 2000). With the awareness that the contexts in which students will be placed are many and varied, the model for learning moves beyond specific basic skills and knowledge to engage them as both teachers and artists with personal art practices that enable the self-generation of their own curriculum.

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The courses are designed in such a way that the activities grow in complexity and become more challenging in the expectation that students will become greater risk takers as their confidence and skills develop. For example, in the final class of a six week series of workshops, students are required to present a performance as part of one of their assignments both for drama and music. The purpose of these tasks are to assess students’ ability to plan and bring to fruition a performance
piece and reflect on the process as primary school educators. In groups of four or five, students are asked to create a piece of up to a maximum of five minutes in length for performance in the final class. For music the work could be based on stimuli such as a poem, a picture book, a mural or a painting. The groups also provide a 1,000 word reflection on the process that responded to the question – What would you as a teacher have to do to facilitate this performance outcome in the classroom? In one class the four performances were all quite different but very carefully planned and very musical. One group chose to add a sound track to an excerpt from a “Pingu” animation – not an easy task to match a musical commentary to what was happening on screen. Another group had chosen to add sound effects and musical commentary to a picture book, “Tortino Tremelo: The Cursed Musician” and in their reflection they noted, “Composing involves decision making and problem solving. Students need to be able to select and reject, and have flexibility of work patterns”, which they highlighted as being part of their own process during the task.

Through our conversations we have begun to articulate a teaching and learning framework strengthened by a shared philosophy that moves beyond a narrow focus on discipline-specific skills and knowledge to an awareness of an artistic process that assists students to develop the capacity to generate curriculum that meets the needs of diverse school communities. As a group of arts educators we each give emphasis to establishing confidence and agency in students and then through ‘engaging pedagogies’ encourage students to become risk-takers and reflective practitioners who are cognisant of their own learning processes and preferences. By drawing the students’ attention to elements of the learning process through active engagement they are more able to empathise with children both in terms of challenges and excitement involved in art practice. As one visual arts student states, “The special place project was very worthwhile. It allowed students to express themselves through their artwork. This piece allows educators to see and feel what a child might be seeing and feeling. It’s a way to see into a child’s mind and find out what is important to them.”

Working with reduced time and within a climate that continues to require ‘evidence’ of the value of arts education to pre-service primary teachers, we as a group are now making more explicit what we understand as engaging pedagogy and the relevance of such a teaching and learning approach potentially to other learning areas and to ‘generic competencies’ (Hunter, 2005). In doing so we are also beginning to understand the generic teaching and learning skills that we each promote in our workshops and the potential to reinforce and extend these skills across multi-arts subjects. Throughout this process a number of questions have arisen including: Can the explicit focus on common generic skills across art forms maximize student learning? Would this enable students to more fully comprehend and value arts based teaching and learning? What emphasis is given to the assessment of such generic skills and how could/should the acquisition of these skills be monitored and evaluated across a sequence of linked units in discrete art forms? These questions and others have stimulated us as a group of arts educators to come together in our differences and to reflect on shared understandings and in doing so enhance and strengthen the pre-service primary programs we

References


Smith-Shank, D. (1993) Beyond this point be dragons. Pre-service elementary teachers’ stories of art and education. *Art Education*, 34:2, 45-51


