

Child Development Relevance Program
An Active Learning Professional Development Training
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Abstract

This paper discusses the implementation of an active learning professional development training, Child Development Relevance Program, within the professional setting of Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre. This program will be available to current PBT faculty and current participants in PBT's Teacher Assistant Program (TAP). The objective of CDR is to educate current teachers and TAP participants on relevant child development information in connection with teaching applications, within the specific context of participant personal experience. A review of CDR potential design follows a three-part program with individual training activities with a focus on an experiential learning method (Silberman, 2015; Smith, 2010). This paper reviews presentation, observation, and writing and reflection as effective strategies to achieving the active learning objectives of CDR. Additionally, this paper provides a look into active learning assessment of CDR as well as ways to combat identified potential problems with its implementation.

Child Development Relevance Program

An Active Learning Professional Development Training

Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre has a loosely structured teacher training program where High School and Graduate students of the pre-professional division are able to take part in learning to teach ballet by participating in teacher assistant roles for the children and student divisions of PBT. After my own participation and completion of this program, I am now on the faculty end of this learning development. This program is currently under evaluation and reorganization by myself and another faculty member as a newly structured teacher professional development program for aspiring teachers and current teacher assistants, TAP (Teacher Assistant Program). Current program design for TAP includes a heavy focus on experience building and learning in the classroom as teacher assistance. This design has loose structure of learning principles and in turn results as a heavy presence of self-directed learning on the part of the participant. One aspect I hope to bring into the TAP program is a time-limited program, accessible to all faculty (TAP participants as well as current faculty members) that would provide a 90-minute professional development training in child development and its connection to teaching in ballet. Entitled Child Development Relevance, this program is designed for faculty and TAP participants who work within the children and student divisions. As current teachers and teacher assistants, CDR participants already have an abundance of personal teaching experience where they have gained some general idea of the development of their age specific range of students and teaching strategies to develop the full person of each dancer.

CDR Design

In designing the active training of CDR, it is important to establish the need for individual training activities in three parts: the objective, method, and format (Silberman, 2015).

The objective of CDR is to educate current teachers and TAP participants on relevant child development information in connection with teaching applications, within the specific context of participant personal experience. The method employed includes an initial presentation followed by activities based on an experiential learning model (Smith, 2010), including observation (Silberman, 2015) and writing reflections (Silberman, 2015; Boud, 2001). Activities will be structured to suite the need for a complete instructional strategy with a beginning, middle, and end (Branch, 2009). Beginning activities will include a motivational task (introductory exercise). Middle activities will include the strategies of presentation and observation, and writing and reflection. End activities will include a debriefing time to summarize CDR learning and applications. The format includes lecture components paired with individual focuses. This design was selected to meet specific needs of individualized experience within the group. The progression of child development is essential to understanding the specific position of each age group being taught, thus making the general group lecture aspect on child development learning particularly effective to establish a baseline of knowledge. However, each participant has a different age group relevance, making the individualized focus of activity best suited for direct application to individual experience.

Child Development Learning through Presentation

Presentation, while individually a source of passive listening, is an essential first step of CDR as an active learning program. In establishing a baseline of conceptual knowledge, a program design to involve participants in active learning can benefit from the effects of “[maximizing] understanding and retention through participation techniques” (Silberman, 2015). However, to begin the presentation must capture the attention of participants which can be accomplished utilizing an introductory assignment connecting to the goal learning at the end of

the program (Silberman, 2015). Participants will be asked to partake in a short 5-min introductory exercise where they will describe one example from their own experience where they became frustrated in teaching their age group. They will be asked to identify where they may have found disconnect between the teaching process of student behavior, teacher response, and student learning outcome. The child development (CD) presentation will begin with a connection of CD understanding and its relevance to teacher applications. An opening summary will help organize participant learning and listening (Silberman, 2015). Utilizing headlines will highlight key points in CD information. Throughout the presentation, analogies will be provided to continue connecting back to teacher experience as noted in the introductory exercise (Silberman, 2015). This process will keep learning relevance on track to teacher applications, fostering motivation for the new information learning of CD. A brief CD handout will be provided along with power point slides as visual backups to aid in participate active learning and involvement (Silberman, 2015). Participants will be involved in the active listening role, where they will be asked to later apply CD information to the next two stages of CDR. Lastly, spot challenges will be utilized as periodic interruptions of the presentation, asking participants to continue adding to their introductory exercise to build understanding of information relevance to their unique experience (Silberman, 2015). Throughout this 30min session of CD presentation, participants will continue active learning by individual reflection of learned information to their introductory exercise, and continue their active learning process in their reference of the CD handout in application to the following two stages of this program as guided by an experiential learning model.

Connecting CD to Teaching Applications Through Observation

Experiential learning model. Smith (2010) describes experiential learning as learning through the chance to “acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting.” He wrote that Kolb describes an experiential learning model with four elements: concrete experience, observation and reflection, creating abstract concepts, and applying those to new situations (Smith, 2010). CDR participants have immense concrete classroom experience from which they can observe and reflect. When working through their teaching experience, participants build their own combination of abstract concepts regarding teaching strategies to apply in their own new teaching situations. This process of learning cycle then builds as a “continuous spiral” from which the experiential learning model grows in CDR (Smith, 2010). Two specific experiential learning approaches will be utilized in CDR including observation and writing and reflection.

Observation. Observation will be utilized following the presentation aspect as a strategy to connect CD learning to generalized teaching applications. Although each participant will have experience, observation as an experiential learning approach can be utilized to isolation specific learning goals in a relatable context. Learning can be initiated in CDR by meshing two described observation activity designs (Silberman, 2015). Participants will be shown a series of clips of instructional strategies or behavioral management from a variety of age groups, ranging from 2 year olds to 15 year olds. These clips will begin with student behavior. During these clips, participants will be provided a series of questions to take note of focusing on the child’s behavior, instructor’s response, and child response. Participants will then be asked to provide constructive feedback in application of prior knowledge to explain what they would have done differently, and the student learning outcome they would have expected (Silberman, 2015). By employing the observation strategy is particularly relevant to the specific participants of CDR

because of their generalized experience working with different age groups. The full overview of CD provides the baseline of information, whereas the strategy of observation relates specifically to a key factor of learning within teaching. Observation of other teachers provides an external look into the applications of CD to teaching that is relevant for current teachers who do not regularly have the opportunity to see others teach and thus become too close to the situation involvement to identify areas of application. In building this connection between CD learning and generalized teaching applications, participants can then put themselves into that newly constructed idea of instruction. This process can be facilitated in CDR through the use of writing and reflection strategies.

Connecting CD and TA with Personal Experience Through Writing and Reflection

The combined strategies of writing and reflection offer an opportunity to connect CD and teacher applications with personal experience, providing the explicit and immediate relevance of newly learned information. Silberman states that another medium of experiential learning to utilize includes writing as an individual activity, providing opportunity for individual reflection of understanding and response to training (Silberman, 2015). In utilizing the short writing activity, CDR would implement a reflection strategy as described by Boud (2001). Boud writes about the use of reflection, identifying three elements of this reflection as: returning to the experience, attending to feelings, and the reevaluation of experience (Boud, 2001). Using journal writing, participants will return to the personal teaching experience identified in the initial introductory exercise. By reflecting upon their feelings of frustration identified from the experience, participants can use a stream of conscious writing to digest and sort through added feelings and other information (Boud, 2001). Through a reevaluation of experience, participants will revisit the initial description of their experience, looking for new ideas and connections to

learn from in application to the CD presentation (utilizing the handout as a reference point). Through these three aspects of journal writing in a reflective practice, this stage of CDR will be able to maximize the extent of learning from a single experience in relevance to the CDR objectives. This experience of writing reflection allows the participants to apply their child development learning to their own specific context of student and teaching experience. This strategy provides a tangible application of learning to specific teacher settings.

CDR Active Learning Assessment

Active learning within the context of CDR would then be assessed through an evaluation of the program in terms of perception learning, and performance in association with instructional design (Branch, 2009). These three evaluations align with the four levels of learning evaluation identified in the Kirkpatrick model (Kurt, 2016). The first level, perception and reaction, the CDR leader would administer an evaluation of participant perception immediately following the conclusion of CDR in order to determine the participant perception of effectiveness and satisfaction of both content and leadership (Branch, 2009; Kurt, 2016). This would take place from a three-part survey each participant would complete upon the conclusion of CDR asking relevant questions regarding program content, leadership, and participant participation. The second level of assessment, learning, would be administered by the CDR leader measuring the knowledge and skill acquisition immediately following the completion of the program in order to determine participant's potential to apply knowledge to their teaching settings as well as the learning resource quality (Branch, 2009; Kurt, 2016). This would take place through a brief examination of relevant information. The third stage of assessment evaluation, performance (Branch, 2009), would be broken into two parts: behavior and results (Kurt, 2016) and administered by a supervisor measuring the actual learning transfer of participants in a teaching

setting to determine whether CDR met its objectives and closed the performance gap (Branch, 2009). In the Kirkpatrick model, behavior change evaluation would take place through a class observation and supervisor assessment three months after the training to evaluate the participants behavioral changes in terms of knowledge, mindset, and skills taught within CDR translated to the workplace (Kurt, 2016). Results evaluation would take place through a comparison of specific and participant-known aims focused on in the evaluations before and after the CDR completion. This process of evaluation would provide an adequate assessment of active learning in the context of CDR as well as provide a throughout look into the effectiveness of the CDR program.

Potential Issues in the CDR Active Learning Experience

Upon the perspective implementation and facilitation CDR, three specific potential issues arise in terms of the active learning experiences including fixed mindset, peer pressure, and CDR leadership. Beginning with fixed mindset, many established ballet teachers in this setting have demonstrated signs of a fixed mindset, because of which CDR would be met with resistance. Many of these teachers view their ballet instruction as a ballet priority over student growth, in that they are simply not interested in guiding students as young people, only in the predetermined aesthetic of ballet. This leads to their complete disregard for the students as young people. With this fixed mindset, it would be difficult for CDR to penetrate in their work with students, as the factor of child development does not inherently matter to them in their view of ballet instruction. Providing an introduction aspect of the presentation which lists the damages that these kinds of teacher mindsets have on children development would draw attention to the important relevance of this information. Additionally, including an exercise could be included where each teacher privately identifies one child whom they teach without the predetermined necessary physical

factors of ballet. The teacher would then journal a teaching interaction (either existed or created) with this student. A list of evaluation criteria would then be provided for which the teacher would have to go through the effects their current teaching mindset would have on the development of that child. This fixed mindset is easy for these teachers to maintain because they have removed themselves from the context of this student as a person. Recreating that, teachers are then forced to see the effects of their methods in action upon that child's development. This activity would create a motivation for being receptive to CDR. Along these lines, peer pressure is identifiable within the ranks of faculty in this setting. One teacher may not want to be honest about their effects on students if they knew their peers would see it as well. Additionally, higher ranking faculty tend to have more of a fixed mindset in this setting, and the desire to stay "on the good side" of one's supervisor leads to a collective effect of peer pressure to not be receptive to CDR. Ensuring that each individual's writing and recording of experience remains individual and private to them could help combat this aspect of resistance peer pressure. Lastly, another potential problem includes the CDR leadership. Currently, I would be the most qualified to lead this CDR, however, I am middle ranking, so dynamic between myself and upper ranking participants would not command the respect and attention that CDR leadership will need to be successful. It could be beneficial to seek outside individuals specializing in human resource development to lead the CDR program. This individual should show competency in knowledge and skills in leadership as well as an understanding of prerequisites of generalized concepts to be employed through CDR (Chalosfsky, Rocco, & Morris, 2014). In designing CDR, I could consult with this outside individual regarding specific applications of CDR, but having the information relayed and the program lead by a neutral party would increase participant reception and accepting of information through CDR.

Concluding Thoughts

Implementing the CDR program could provide current faculty and TAP participants the ability to reevaluate their current teaching practices within the lens of impact and relevance of child development applications. This program is designed to highlight issue relevance, and approach solutions through a generalized learning of child development in addition to a personal and individual connection of CD learning to specific instruction in ballet. CDR could prove to be a beneficial active learning professional development program allowing current teachers the opportunity to remain focused with a growth mindset. Additionally, participation in the CDR program could become a vital learning experience and component of TAP participant learning. Implementing a concept of child development relevance at the early stages of TAP teacher learning could provide a stronger foundation to build individual teaching strategies with respect towards specific targeted student age groups.

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