A Revision through Active Learning and Reflection-in-Action Approaches:

Teacher Assistant Training and Professional Development Program

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Abstract

This paper discusses the improvement of Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre's teacher training program. With a goal to maintain the overall set up of this program, it was decided to follow an active learning approach by Silberman (2015). In a review of the initial problem being a lack of focus and structure to guide young teacher assistants towards becoming teachers, factors were regarded such as the group participants and experience levels. The effects of utilizing a reflection-in-action approach, along with inspiration from three different adult learning theories: self-directed learning theory (Baumgartner et al., 2003), Rogoff's guided participation (Wertsh & Tulviste, 1990), and Mezirow's transformative learning (Merriam, 2004) are examined through Silberman's active learning approach (2015).

Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre has a loosely constructed teacher training track for select high school and graduate students to follow in addition to their ballet training. In this program, students assume the role of teacher assistants, shadowing teachers of different age groups, helping facilitate classes aside the main teacher. This program is selective, as interested students must provide background experience in working with children before acceptance. Within this program, students are hired, and perform their role as teacher assistant with pay. The ultimate goal of the teacher assistant program is to set the student up for success in running their own class, either as a substitute for the current teacher, or to eventually provide them with their own class to teach long term. However, this program is currently incomplete. With much potential to produce qualified, capable, and unique teachers, this program currently has turned out several capable assistants without the full ability or confidence of running their own classes. A lack of structured design or approach to this program has limited its efficacy. More focus needs to be placed on the transition from assistant to teacher though a collaborative, active approach, facilitated by a focus of reflection in action as pertaining to immediate experiences in the teaching setting. The training and professional development program I aim to implement would establish a connection between assistant to teacher by providing participants with the essential knowledge to plan and conduct their own class. Not only would this program provide participants with the tools to develop into capable teachers, but would also enhance their abilities and performances as teacher assistants.

Participants

The intended target audience for my TPD program includes all current PBT teacher assistants. In this group are 6 individuals, three high schoolers, two graduate students, and one company member. There are 5 females, and one male.

Participant 1 is male, a 1st year company member, and has 4 years of internal experience assisting, 2 of which include experience teaching some children's, student, and adult classes as a substitute. Participant 2 is female, a 3rd year grad student, and has 2 years of internal experience assisting, 1 of which includes experience teaching some student and adult classes as a substitute. Participant 3 is female, a 1st year grad student, and has 3 years of external prior experience assisting. Participant 4 is female, a senior high school student, and has 3 years of internal experience assisting. Participant 5 is female, a senior high school student, and has 1 year of internal experience assisting. Participant 6 is female, a junior high school student, and has 2 years of internal experience assisting.

Participants 1, 3, and 5 are currently working only with children's division students. Participant 2 and 6 are currently working only with student division students. Participant 4 is currently working with both children's and student division students.

Reflection-in-Action Approach

Schon identifies two key concepts, technical rationality and reflection in action as two opposing constructs of how we structure a learning experience as linear or non-linear (Schon, 1983). Following the Technical Rationality Model, a "hierarchical separation of research and practice" is identified (Schon, 1983). This construct follows that first theory and research should be studied and learned, then the "skills" of application are learned secondarily (Schon, 1983). This approach creates a separation between learning and practice that is not so easily extracted within the teacher assistant program training. In this program, participants are

training through maintaining a hands-on, in the classroom approach. Assistants watch their shadow teacher for direction in how to correct behavior and make technical corrections in the classroom, then make this judgment for themselves in the moment. This more closely resembles Schon's discussion of reflection-in-action. According to this approach, reflecting in action is the idea that "not only [can we] think about doing but that we can think about doing something while doing it" (Schon, 1983). While it is important to gain outside the classroom background knowledge regarding child development and ballet technique curriculum, learning to be a teacher requires on the spot thinking, reflection within the practice of teaching a class. A teacher's reactions are guided moment by moment according to a number of factors including child behavior, emotional states, learning capabilities, physical capabilities, and unique group dynamics. A teacher can plan a class, come in to the room, and have to completely abandon their original plan on account of student readiness or behavior. Especially when working with students in early childhood development stages, your class as a teacher is conducted as a moment by moment reaction to child response and behavior. Schon states that "much reflection-in-action hinges on the experience of surprise" (Schon, 1983). The ability to learn how to react in these "surprise" situations is learned through experience, by developing reflection-in-action reactions to new situations as they arise in the classroom. By taking a reflection-in-action approach to the learning in this training and professional development program, participants will develop their own learning for spontaneous reactions in the classroom.

Theories of Adult learning

An integration of three adult learning theories can be utilized to best explain the backbone to the approach to training and professional development for the PBT teacher

assistant program. Self-directed learning theory as described by Baumgartner et al. offers discussion of Grow's 4 stage instructional model. He states that learners move through stages of learning beginning at a low self-direction, moving through moderate, intermediate, and finally finding a high self-direction of learning responsibility, at which points teachers play different roles in the learning process (Baumgartner et al., 2003). A beginning teacher assistant with limited information would begin at a low self-direction stage, awaiting guidance from the lead teacher, to observe and learn how to move forward. As the teacher assistant becomes more informed and more confident, he or she moves through these stages, finding his or her self at a stage of high self-direction in learning responsibility. Guided participation, as presented by Rogoff. is one way that lead teachers can guide assistants in working through reflection-in-action decisions. As Wertsh & Tulviste quote from Rogoff, she focuses on a concept of "shared understanding based on a common focus of attention and some shared presuppositions that form the ground for communication" (Wertsh & Tulviste, 1990). The Rogoff approach is affected by the dynamics between the relationships of the teacher-student or between peers. This concept becomes increasingly relevant as the following approach to this training and professional development becomes apparent. Lastly, the concept of Mezirow's transformative learning as described by Merriam, states that the active process of dialectic thinking "allows for acceptance of inherent contradictions and ambiguities, alternative truths, and different worldviews" (Merriam, 2004). Transformative learning through the process of dialectic thinking comes about as self-directed relationships and discussions of immediate situations are fostered between peers. As these three learning theories interact within the context of a reflecting-in-action approach to teacher learning, the result gives way to the Silberman approach to program development.

Approach and Rational

Silberman takes an active approach to learning, utilizing the group of learners to form deeper connections and new interpretations of learned concepts or experiences. He describes that the digestion of information learned that happens as a result of relevant peer interaction and discussion through active training provides opportunity for "increased participation, enlivened learning, deepened retention, and encouraged application" (Silberman, 2015). Participant manipulation of information through group collaborative activities or discussions provide increased understandings, retentions, and deeper higher-order thinking. Silberman describes eight unique qualities of an active training program that when viewed within the perspective of the three discussed learning theories and Schon's reflection-in-action approach create the approach best suited for determining the aims, scope, and content of the teacher assistant training and professional development program (Silberman, 2015).

The first quality is including a moderate level of content. Learning is "concentrated on critical learning areas – those elements of the subject that provide the essential basis for building later," providing the scaffold for participants to reflect upon basic general understandings within their own specific context of experience as found by the use of Schon's reflection-in-action concept (Silberman, 2015). While ballet teacher assistants will need to learn general information such as child development and the specific ballet curriculum being used, including a moderate level of this content enables the focus of the program to be the development of qualified and capable teachers utilizing the specific provided school curriculum. Being able to regurgitate the curriculum is not an identifying aspect of successful teaching. Being able to understand the curriculum and use it as a guide through the process of learned teaching in response to individual student experiences builds a foundation of strength in teaching, applicable through any future curriculum.

The second quality is the ability to maintain a balance between cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning. "You want them to look at themselves in relation to what you are teaching and to consider how it works for them" (Silberman, 2015). This quality encourages a high self-direction of learning responsibility as described by Grow's 4 stage instructional model (Baumgartner et al., 2003). As the participant finds the ability and interest to look inwards at their own experience with what is being taught, they are developing learning autonomy in their direction of growth. This individual autonomy can grow to inspire active dialectic thinking between peers which builds transformative learning. This quality creates and aligns with the aims of the teacher assistant training and professional development program. The goal of the program is to create individually capable teachers of each person, not to create a single branded or like style of teaching. The self-reflection allows participants to integrate the general information learned with their own uniqueness, building autonomy in the creation of their style of teaching.

The third quality the provision of variety in learning approaches. "Another and even more important argument for variety is that adults learn in different ways" (Silberman, 2015). This concept of variety in learning approaches fosters unique learning experiences between participants and subsequently creates the opportunity for deepened discussion amongst peers. Providing opportunities for group participation is described by Silberman as being able to create active learning in the fourth quality. "Involving the group moves training from the passive to the active. Group activity engages participants in the in the learning process and makes them working partners with the trainer" (Silberman, 2015). This idea of becoming partners with the trainer is reflective of learners' participation in the reflection-in-action approach during class instructional time. This also requires the built self-direction of learning autonomy, as the teacher

assistant begins to make individual in-action decisions and subsequent discussions with other peers and the teacher.

The fifth discussed quality of active training refers to the utilization of the participants' unique expertise. This is specifically relevant to this training and professional development program because of the small number of participants we have with varying backgrounds and experiences. Specifically relevant to how Silbernman's approach matches the scope of this program, each participant is in a different place in their own artistic training as well as in their own teacher training. These unique perspectives influenced by the diversity of each participant and their experience provide the opportunity for participants to learn from each other through group or peer collaboration. The sixth quality of recycling earlier learned concepts and skills allows "participants [to] get the chance to review what they have already learned and apply it to more challenging tasks" (Silberman, 2015). This aspect is crucial to the success of such a small numbered program. It would not be practical to separate learned information into segments by year with so few people. Instead, the idea that basic general information is reemphasized as the tasks become more challenging allows individuals in different points of their journey to absorb different amounts or aspects of learning from the same or similar experiences. This allows not only for a review of learned information, but also for the individualized process of learning through the participants' autonomy of participation.

At the seventh quality, Silberman discusses the importance of real-life problem solving where participants learn the most when they are focusing on their own examples and cases, allowing for information immediacy and providing opportunity for participants to assess utility of information in the moment (Silberman, 2015). The final quality is described as allowing for future planning (Silberman, 2015). In reaching this stage, participants have reached a high self-

direction of learning responsibility as according to Grow's 4 stage instructional model (Baumgartner et al., 2003). In this stage, participants understand their next steps with awareness of potential obstacles in the way of their implementation of new skills and ideas (Silberman, 2015).

The eight unique qualities of Silberman's active approach to learning align with the aims, scope, and content of the teacher assistant training and professional development program. This connection makes Silberman's approach well suited to the current framework of the program, allowing only more specific structure and organization.

Conclusion

Looking to increase the structure and provide more guidelines for learning within the current teacher assistant training and professional development program with PBT, the Silberman's active learning approach fits along with the goals, breadth, and content of the program. Looking at Silberman's approach though the combined lenses of several adult learning theories as well as a reflection-in-action approach, provides a full picture of how to guide the changes necessary in the current training and professional development program. As this structure begins to implement, the program should begin to grow through a heightened specificity towards adult learning and instruction with a focus of self-directed learning, group collaboration, and reflection in action.

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