

Using a “Station Approach” to Evaluate Student-created Lessons in Teacher Education

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Abstract

The author describes and evaluates the use of the “station approach” as an authentic task for teacher education students. In a single session at the New York State Social Studies Convention in March, 2007, five teacher education students from Niagara University simultaneously presented constructivist-based lessons they had taught about the Underground Railroad in different stations. The audience rotated among the presentations and provided questions and feedback to the students. Each student’s presentation is described, and the use of the station approach is evaluated as a strategy for teacher education.

Introduction

At the New York State Social Studies Convention in March 2007, Niagara University’s Dr. Paul Vermette moderated a session in which five teacher education students presented separate, challenging, dynamic lessons or units for teaching about the Underground Railroad. They presented their lessons simultaneously at five stations in the large presentation room. The audience was divided into five groups and asked to rotate among the five stations to learn and evaluate how each student employed constructivist strategies to help young people learn about the Underground Railroad. Following that, the audience members were asked to debrief their experience at the stations. The use of this station approach provided a useful strategy for teacher preparation – requiring students to present their work to peers and professionals in an authentic setting and to gain feedback about their work. As the official summarizer and participant in one of the five groups that rotated from station to station, I present my

reactions both to each of the five presentations, and also to the use of the “station approach.”

Two presenters were graduate students who had used their lessons with great success in their classrooms. Of the three undergraduate presenters, two had used their lessons in student teaching while the third tested his lesson in his methods class. The station presentations were outstanding as each presenter demonstrated students’ active learning, the power of students’ choice, the power unleashed when hidden aspects of history are revealed, the discovery of applications for new skills, and constructivist methods to challenge secondary students.

But who am I to judge? As a college professor of social studies methods at another college and as a former veteran secondary social studies teacher, I believe that in order to have excellence in classroom teaching we should consider the following six factors: 1) write down your plans (Thornton, 2005), 2) know your content (Adler, 1982), 3) vary your strategies (Dewey, 1938; NMSA, 2003), 4) show you care (Noddings, 1984), 5) demonstrate flexibility (DuFour, R. Eaker, R. & DuFour R., 2005), and 6) engage in formative assessment (Black & William, 1998.) Each of the five presenters demonstrated these six characteristics admirably. I briefly review each station to describe its attributes so that readers may understand more about their lessons.

The Presentations at the Stations

Ed Voll, a graduate student and a teacher in the Caledonia-Mumford School District, displayed several student journals that resulted from his two week unit entitled, “The Freedman’s Journal: A Focus on Black History Before, During, and After Slavery.” He taught his 80-minute inclusion class every other day as he shared them with the English teacher who had showed the class “Roots” as background information to supplement their readings in the textbook. Students’ journals contained text (typed or hand written) and visuals (drawings or computer illustrations) that indicated strong content knowledge and emotional connections with the characters. Each student chose a character that reacted to historical events as they unfolded before and after slavery. The teacher’s planning, guidance, flexibility, and caring enabled his students to create remarkable products. Students’ writing and artistry were integral to the highly individualistic journals.

Katy Weeks Miller, a graduate student and a teacher in the Mount St. Joseph Academy in Buffalo, taught a five lesson unit on Black History to her classes. She helped students make connections between geography and spirituals. The teacher played spirituals that students sang and showed maps of the area to be able to see the places mentioned in the songs. Slaves escaped to Mexico and the Caribbean as well as to Canada and the North. Key connections in the spirituals’ lyrics were the code names like Canaan for Canada and One Last River for the Ohio River. Students collaborated in groups to create and sing their

own spirituals that continued the code names for places on the maps they had studied. Most students chose to perform rap songs that reinforced their geographical knowledge and the use of the code names. The strong interdisciplinary aspect revealed careful planning and varied strategies.

Josh Glaubitz, an undergraduate student, did a demonstration lesson in his college class. He created a unit based on the book, *The Road that Led to Somewhere*, a historical novel written by the descendant of a slave who had escaped to Canada. As students read the book they had choices for activities to complete for each chapter: search out vocabulary, create visuals, write song lyrics, write discussion questions, or create titles. The choices encouraged students to write and sing an original song as this undergraduate student demonstrated in his college class. He provided examples of each of the assignment possibilities. Choices based on rich content properly planned can work as a teaching strategy to get students excited, involved, and learning!

Michelle Strasser, a graduate-level student teacher, came up with a lesson plan (or Planned Lesson Experience – PLE) in which she looked at several pictures with students to determine whether or not each represented slavery. Thus the question that she asked was: “Slavery? You decide.” She started her lesson by asking students to draw their idea of slavery before she presented her nine pictures. Each group reacted to each picture, whether it was or was not an example of slavery. Based on their thinking about these visuals they had to come

up with their group definition of slavery. Students engaged in a case study of American slavery before they discussed the evidence for the continued existence of slavery today in the world. This challenging visual activity was open-ended and thought-provoking because various individuals saw different things in the pictures. Students could choose to add pictures to the nine. Opportunities for student-centered involvement were numerous due to her careful planning and dynamic collaborative learning strategies.

Katie Kocsis, an undergraduate student, spoke about Henry Bibb as an example of a primary source during student teaching in high school. Students read a chapter from his autobiography that she had found. His life was heroic and successful but also tragic. He escaped to Canada where he became the first Black Canadian editor, but he was never able to get his enslaved wife and children out of the South. In fact, he knew that his wife was married off to another man. Each student chose an African American to research and created a biography worksheet, designed a coin of the person, and created a song or poem about the person which was performed for the class. The teacher's careful planning encouraged students to use different learning modalities as they demonstrated their understanding of the effects of slavery on African Americans.

Analysis and Evaluation of the Station Approach

It was clear that the station approach itself holds enormous value as a way for audience members to work collaboratively to gain a lot of information in a variety

of ways from multiple sources (Kellough, R. and Kellough, N., 2003.) As a seasoned social studies teacher I was none-the-less overwhelmed by the huge amount of material that I confronted with as I moved from station to station with my group. Personally, it was valuable to experience the classroom as a “student” once again, however briefly, in order to realize the difficulties and stresses that secondary students face in every class, especially one as challenging as any of those presented. In addition, while it would be expectable that each station would reinforce a limited amount of information from other stations, in this case more and more information was amassed in novel ways. For that reason the session was superb in meeting two of my prime criteria: rich content and varied strategies.

Each presenter had put in an inordinate amount of work planning each of the lessons, including ongoing formative assessment activities. The teachers in each case knew if the students understood the material well before the day that the grade went into the grade book. The teachers showed themselves to be caring and flexible to watch over, guide, advise, and support their students as they learned the material that was so carefully planned for them. In addition, the teachers were caring and flexible with those of us during the conference session as they patiently answered our numerous questions.

To implement this station approach strategy, Dr. Vermette put this group of students together to demonstrate to the audience the importance of working

collaboratively and creatively. His students demonstrated their ability to work collaboratively with all of us. They shared their lesson ideas, risked talking to peers, showed what they value, and allowed themselves to be questioned. This is no easy task for most teachers, even among the best, who are reluctant to speak before their peers. These young professionals' superb presentations speak volumes to their training and individual achievements. During Dr. Vermette's de-briefing after the students' presentation, each educator beamed with excitement and a strong feeling of accomplishment, having shared and helped fellow educators, just as we all try to help our own students learn.

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