

Examining a Traditional vs. Constructivist Approach for Helping Preservice Teachers Understand Educational Philosophies

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to interpret differences in preservice teachers' statements of their teaching philosophies using two different strategies of introducing existing teaching philosophies. Existing philosophies such as progressivism and essentialism have routinely been covered using the traditional approach of reading a textbook and having class discussions. Results from statements of teaching philosophy involving preservice teachers' use of a web-based module were compared to philosophy statements from preservice teachers who were exposed to the more traditional method. Results indicate that preservice teachers using the module were more likely to relate existing philosophies to actual classroom practices and were also able to clarify more explicitly and directly their own beliefs about teaching and learning.

Introduction: New View to an Old Task

Year after year, education programs instruct preservice teachers to write a personal philosophy of teaching statement or paper. This is not only a common assignment for students in an education program, but also expected as part of the mandatory components of an application process when attempting to secure a teaching position. It is an important task as teachers need to understand and articulate what they believe and why they teach the way they do. It is a reflective task that helps preservice teachers understand what teaching means to them and may even challenge them to consider new ways of teaching (Weber, 1997). Although the task seems valuable for a variety of purposes, it appeared that after direct instruction and reading about different philosophies of teaching, preservice teachers continued to struggle with developing a deep understanding of the

various philosophical perspectives exhibited in actual teacher behaviors.

Furthermore, preservice teachers did not appear to explain with conviction their own current beliefs regarding teaching.

A web-based learning module was built in order to help facilitate preservice teachers understanding of their own beliefs. It was designed using a constructivist approach (see myteachingphilosophy.com). Prior to learning about philosophies such as progressivism, essentialism, etc., participants using the module were led through a series of written and video cases which included prompts that were designed to raise awareness about their own beliefs regarding teaching and learning. After these self-reflective module pages, users took a Likert style inventory which categorized their answers into a ranked list of existing philosophies from most preferred to least preferred. Finally, various web links associated with each of the types of philosophies were provided.

Review of Literature

Previous research has supported the idea of creating a personal statement of philosophy. Additionally, research has been supportive of the use of case-based pedagogy and the use of technology to support learning. A brief review of the literature regarding teaching philosophies, case-based pedagogy and technology follows.

Brookfield (1990) suggested several purposes for developing personal statements of teaching philosophies including personal and pedagogical. Personal purposes

may include understanding the vision for why you are doing what you are doing. Pedagogical reasons for developing a personal statement of philosophy included knowing the effect you are having on your students. While research is limited regarding the effect of these statements of philosophy, it is commonly believed that developing these statements of philosophy end up informing one's practice (Merriam, 1982). Research also supports the notion that teachers have a dominant view of teaching. After over two thousand teachers took a teaching inventory, Pratt (2002) found that over ninety percent of the teachers held only one or two perspectives as their dominant view of teaching. It seems appropriate, therefore, that preservice teachers should begin to examine what perspectives they prefer in order to understand themselves as teachers and the way they view their students.

Several studies have recently supported the use of case-based pedagogy as a method to help preservice teachers' understand the realities of teaching and compare them to their own existing perceptions of teaching (Zeichner, 1999; Vhurumuku et. al., 2001). Case studies have become more and more common over the past ten years as "the content of educational psychology lends itself to authentic, active, and pragmatic applications of theory to school practices" (Sudzina, 1997, p. 199). Also, the use of technology has been recently viewed as a means of delivering a case-based approach. In their review of their own video cases, Smith & Diaz (2003) acknowledge the power of the "tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures of the teacher as well as the learners give color to the

starkness of black and white text detailing case studies” (p. 1). They suggest that the introduction of video into case-based teacher education was a great step towards more accurately portraying the complex, real life situations that characterize the realities of teaching.

In order to formulate and express one’s teaching philosophy should begin with immersion in the idea of teaching. Goodyear & Allchin (1998) recommend watching others teach, listening to what teachers say, and reading about teaching. The learning module used in this study incorporates all of these through a web based format which is becoming more and more ubiquitous and user-friendly. Current research has touched on the benefits of incorporating interactive multimedia with this problem-based learning approach. Albion & Gibson (2000), for example, found in their preliminary evaluation of their project that the strengths of interactive multimedia and problem based learning can be combined to produce a good effect.

The learning module incorporates several known principles that encourage higher level learning to occur: (1) it is user goal oriented in that it is connected to the learner’s personal agenda. i.e. to develop a philosophical framework for their future teaching (Goodyear & Allchin, 1998). (2) A major portion of the learning experience is case-based. Users will be asked to view and reflect on real classrooms, hence, the learning is set in a context that is meaningful to the user (Putnam & Borko, 2000). (3) It is designed to encourage High Level Transfer

(Perkins & Salomon, 1989) – the abstraction of knowledge from one context (theoretical knowledge) to the application of that knowledge in another situation (knowledge-in-practice).

About the Module

Three main beliefs regarding educational philosophies were considered while building the module. First, although there are numerous existing philosophical orientations and many theories, five were chosen to be represented in the first phase of the module: Perennialism, Essentialism, Progressivism, Existentialism, and Reconstructionism. These five philosophies are based on a continuum from more teacher-centered (focus on subject) to more student-centered (focus on self and society). Each of them should be evidenced or experienced by candidates interested in becoming teachers.

Second, philosophical preferences should not be judged. Differing perspectives regarding teaching and learning are natural and should occur among people with different backgrounds and experiences. One philosophy isn't preferred over another and special care was taken to assure that all philosophies were presented positively through this module. The key here is that differences should be appreciated and learned from.

Finally, a personal philosophy of teaching consists of three components: curriculum, instruction (including assessment), and management. These components are not necessarily consistent from one component to the next. For

example, one can have a progressive philosophy for curriculum and instruction, while the management is predominately essentialist.

Learning Module Phases

As the experimental group of preservice teachers interacted with the module to develop their own philosophy of teaching, they went through the following three “module phases” In the first phase users connect their own understandings and perspectives of teaching to a variety of educational philosophies by reading and viewing classroom cases. There are a series of five video segments and five written cases that were chosen to illustrate lessons that have components in common with each philosophy.

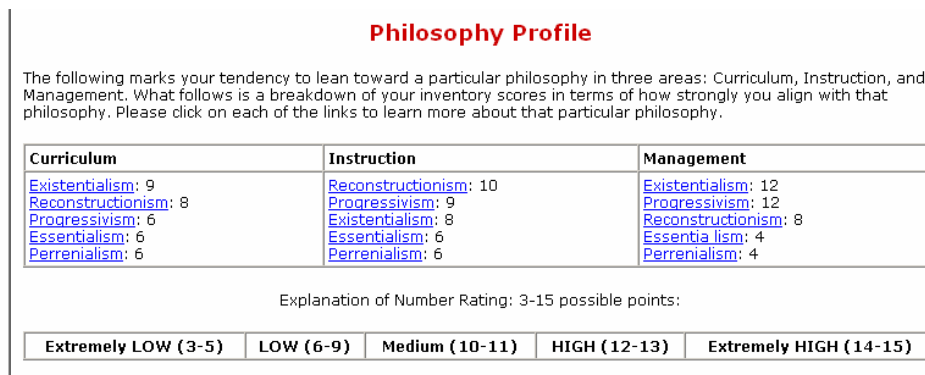
Each written and video case is fictitious and centers around one predominant philosophy. The video clips range from 1-4 minutes each while the written cases are brief three paragraph descriptions of teachers strongly exhibiting a particular philosophy. After reading or viewing each case, users respond to prompts that are designed to help them determine their own beliefs regarding teaching. Sample prompts include questions such as:

- 1) How much can you relate to this teachers' perspective on what is important about the content of what should be taught in schools?

- 2) To what degree are you able to envision yourself teaching the way this person teaches?

Phase two of the module involves taking an inventory of 45 Likert-scale survey items designed to provide the user with a profile of their teaching philosophy preferences. It may be important to note that up to this point, during phase one and two of the module, there is no mention of existing philosophies. The philosophy inventory includes statements such as, “Effective teaching establishes an environment to control student behavior and to measure learning of prescribed objectives” and asks users to respond from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. A Philosophy Profile like the one listed below (Figure 1) is provided to each user. Notice that the list is rank ordered from most preferential to least in the categories of curriculum, instruction and management.

Figure1: Screenshot of philosophy preference profile



Phase three of the module includes links to each of the five philosophies listed. Users can now read definitions and learn about the people who created and influenced each one. It is hoped that after learning about which preference they ended up with, preservice teachers would be more apt to want to understand the basic tenets regarding that philosophy.

The Study

This study involved 41 preservice teachers at a small mid-west university who all were in the beginning the teacher education program. All of the students were enrolled in the same Introduction to Education course and were requested to write the same teaching philosophy paper. In the fall semester, 17 of the students learned about the existing philosophies through the textbook and several class discussions. In the spring semester, using the same instructor, 24 of the students utilized the web module to learn about their own preferences and philosophies.

A rubric was developed to explore two dimensions of the personal teaching philosophy paper (see Table 1 below). Scores were calculated for each of the teaching philosophy papers and means for each group were compared (control vs. experimental).

Table 1: Rubric used for analyzing personal teaching philosophy papers

| Criteria | Needs Improvement | Basic | Excellent |
|---|---|--|---|
| Description of personal philosophy of teaching | Description of personal philosophy of teaching is extremely general or unclear. | Personal teaching philosophy is stated generally. | Philosophy of teaching extremely clear and personal. It is evident that writer clearly understands his/her own philosophy. |
| Philosophy is described through the use of specific strategies or examples from teaching. | There is a philosophy mentioned with no description of it evidenced in practice or just a list of strategies. | Philosophy not fully developed or few examples/ strategies or unrelated to philosophy. | Clearly articulated underlying philosophy with enough examples/strategies to give reader a clear picture of philosophy in action. |

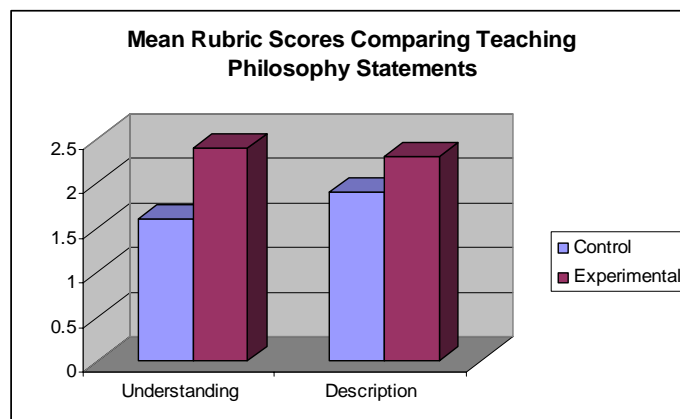
Also, papers were coded using an inductive analysis technique similar to Constant Comparative Analysis in order to uncover possible categories that would not be detected by analysis of the rubric data (Dey, 1993).

Findings

Preliminary findings suggest that using the web-based learning module assisted preservice teachers in helping them describe more specifically their own teaching philosophy and certain practices associated with it (Figure 2). While the control group scored an average of 1.6 on the clarity of their personal teaching philosophy, the module users scored an average of 2.4. Additionally, preservice

teachers without the use of the module scored a 1.9 compared to 2.2 for the experimental group.

Figure 2: Mean rubric scores comparing control and experimental groups on philosophy of teaching statements.



Specifically, while non-users represented philosophies in general terms, module users explained clearly where they fit in with the particular philosophy. For example, Jane, a non-user mentions in general that “Social reconstruction is very important to the philosophy of teaching.” Betty, on the other hand, after using the web module describes her philosophy this way: “I believe in the Progressive philosophy to teaching where learners are active, self-motivated, and responsible for their own learning. The teacher serves as a facilitator in this type of classroom.” Many module users, in fact, referred to the inventory as a foundation for supporting their statements. This appeared to provide them with the support they needed in order to be more confident regarding their beliefs.

Inter-rater reliability was conducted to help determine whether there was bias in the scoring of the rubrics. A different faculty member scored ten of the statement papers using the same rubric. The two separate raters agreed with .78 of the scores.

Next, papers were coded in order to determine if there were any other differences regarding preservice teachers' statements of philosophy. One slight difference was found in the module users including more references to the philosophy being something that was continually changing. Four out of 24 module users (17%) compared to one out of 17 (6%) mentioned that the philosophy was something that would probably change with growing experiences. Another interesting difference was found in the number of "textbook" definitions provided. It turned out that the control group included more "textbook" definitions of philosophies than users of the module did. The control group used an average of 1.8 definitions each paper, while the experimental group only included an average of 1.2 definitions per paper.

Conclusions

While much more work needs to be done to improve the validity and reliability of the study, results comparing teaching philosophy statements with those who used a web-based learning module to those that didn't showed a slight overall difference in quality of their reflective statements. Particularly, the level of understanding module users had regarding their own personal philosophy of teaching was greater than those that did not use the module.

Perhaps the video and written cases allowed for enough reflection for users of the module to consider their own beliefs adequately before engaging in the assignment. Also, the inventory provided a specific result of their philosophic preferences and this may have led to a more unambiguous sense of themselves as teachers. Users of the module also increased in their ability to connect existing philosophies to practice. While it is not understood exactly what contributed to the gains in statements regarding the connection of philosophies to actual practice, it makes sense that after viewing more examples rather than reading the textbook, preservice teachers have a better understanding of those practices as they relate to philosophy.

Using a web-based learning module to take preservice teachers through video and written cases, and taking a philosophy inventory and learn about existing philosophies may be something teacher education programs might consider. This may be helpful for preservice teachers as they continue on their journey to understanding what their own philosophies will look like as they begin to “practice” them.

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